

PERCEPTIONS OF RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN  
DISTRICT AND SCHOOL LEVEL ADMINISTRATORS ON STUDENT  
ACHIEVEMENT

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## Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to assess the extent to which perceived Using a case study of an urban school district, serving 40,000 students in the Midwest region of the United States, this study investigated district and school administrative leaders' perceptions of how their interactions influenced the achievement of black students. Methods of research included an analysis of documents and interviews.

The study identified perceptual differences between administrative groups regarding the influences their relationships have on the academic achievement of students. District administrators perceived that they influenced student achievement indirectly and the major impact resulted from their direct support of school level leaders. School level leaders perceived that student achievement was influenced by their strategic efforts related to instructional leadership with minimal direction or support from district level leadership. Neither administrative group targeted the achievement of black students and indicated that their efforts were directed toward all students.

A notable finding from the study was the school level administrator's inability to utilize a broadminded view of the district as a whole rather than a myopic view of their individual sites. Further research on the application of reflective practice within administrative groups, for the purpose of increasing the learning of the greater organization, is recommended.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Statement of the Problem

In the last decade or so, many social scientists have maintained that the U.S. desperately needs to attract nontraditional students, such as African Americans, into technical and advanced coursework (science, technology, engineering, and math) at all phases of their education in order to meet the need for a highly skilled workforce (Flowers & Moore, 2003; Hrabowski, 2003; Maton, Hrabowski, & Schmitt, 2000; Moore, 2006). According to Moore (2006), underrepresented students' academic performance at the various stages of the educational pipeline (elementary, middle, and high school), and choice of academic majors at the college level, have broader social and economic implications in the United States. In other words, the future success of our nation depends on ethnic minority students' level of educational attainment (Mau, 1995). According to Brown and Trusty (2005), career success is intertwined with academic success, and others (Jackson & Moore, 2006) have argued that educational attainment, in large part, determines the degree of advancement one will have in American society.

In American society, public schools are central to the educational socialization process for many students. They not only develop students' academic literacy but also provide opportunities for enhancing social mobility (Flowers & Moore, 2003; Hrabowski, 2003; Maton, Hrabowski, & Schmitt, 2000; Moore, 2006; Smith-Maddox, 1999). Unfortunately, Blacks have been one of the most educationally disenfranchised members of our society and consistently underperform academically in comparison to

their White peers (Jencks & Phillips, 1999). In the field of education, this phenomenon is most often referred to as the black-white achievement gap or simply the achievement gap. The achievement gap between White students and Black and Hispanic students is long-standing and tenacious, and the gap is larger for African-American students than for any other minority group (Ogbu, 2003; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). Black students are often unsuccessful in public schools.

As an administrator in the public school setting, I am faced daily with the reality that urban black students are marginalized academically. I attend meetings, workshops, and hear how black students are underperforming on state tests. I hear from community newspapers, local newspapers, and other media venues that the achievement gap between Black and White students is growing (Ikpa, 2003). I hear from parent organizations, churches, and activist organizations that the schools are failing “our” children. I walk through the school building and I am reminded of the fact that black students in the urban school setting struggle. Their struggle is manifested in their performance on state tests, academic performance during the school day, and an overall disconnect with the public school system (Ikpa, 2003). The results are low academic output, low graduation rates, high suspension rates, and apathy related to school success. Statistics show that nationally, black students make up 17 percent of the population and 33 percent of school suspensions. Urban black adolescents experience a disturbing number of disciplinary infractions which in turn jeopardizes their academic achievement and prospects for the future (Bireda, 2000).

The disproportionate number of black students referred for suspension and expulsion and who also suffer from academic underachievement, subsequent school

dropout, unemployment, and encounters with the penal system provides educators a compelling reason to consider the symbiotic relationship between culture and discipline, as well as school performance and school success (Bireda, 2000). Significant racial gaps are found for graduation rates. Students from historically disadvantaged minority groups (American-Indian, Hispanic, and Black) have little more than a fifty-fifty chance of finishing high school with a diploma. By comparison, graduation rates for Whites and Asians are 75 and 77 percent nationally (Swanson, 2004). Swanson (2004) further states that graduation rates for students who attend school in high poverty, racially segregated, and urban school districts lag from 15 to 18 percentage points behind their peers.

#### Purpose of the Study

Some researchers have blamed factors beyond the school's control for student failure. For example, Ogbu (2003) asserted that low-effort syndrome inhibited black students from reaching high academic achievement. He stated that the majority of black participants in his study demonstrated a lack of desire to work hard and believed working hard would make them less popular. Consequently, these students exerted little academic effort, hence the term low-effort syndrome. Based on his conversations with black students in the Shaker Heights community of Ohio, Ogbu suggested that low-effort syndrome developed from minimum effort typically exerted by these students. Poor study habits, the inability to focus, and choosing other priorities that took time away from academics also contributed to this syndrome. He also noted that black students blamed teachers for their poor performance instead of taking responsibility for their inaction (Ogbu, 2003).

New (1996), however, emphasized that research does not support the idea that black students do not want to learn or that they do not want to exert academic effort. Leroy Lovelace, in *Black Teachers on Teaching* (Foster, 1997), urged teachers not to misinterpret students' resistance to learning as a lack of desire for learning. In fact, Lovelace stated that students who perceived they were not being pushed by their teachers, often believed their teachers did not care (Foster, 1997). Wilson and Corbett (2001) further elaborated on this idea with evidence from their study on the pedagogical needs and wants of middle-school students. Their research included interviews with more than 150 students over three years and their findings suggest that students representing a variety of levels of academic achievement and motivation repeatedly asserted that they wanted teachers who made sure they completed all assignments, helped them until they fully understood a given concept, and controlled behavior so all students could learn.

Researchers (Boykin, Tyler, & Miller, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1994; New, 1996; Perry & Delpit, 1998; Rios, 1996) have argued that students' intrinsic motivation or lack thereof is only part of a more complex problem. They have found that many factors contribute to the low academic achievement of black students in public schools. Some researchers (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Ogbu, 2003; Perry & Delpit, 1998; Rios, 1996) have pointed to institutional and societal factors to provide an explanation for low academic performance among black students. Within the school, teachers tend to interact less with students of color and reprimand them more. They also often give less attention to students of color during classroom discussion (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Perry

& Delpit, 1998; Rios, 1996). Researchers (Kozol, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Ogbu, 2003; Perry & Delpit, 1998) also have found that teachers often hold lower expectations for black students in the classroom. Hilliard (2002) suggested that teacher behaviors toward the language and culture of black students could hinder academic success, even if the behaviors were embedded within effective teaching strategies.

Other researchers (Kozol, 1991, p. 128; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003) have argued that the structure of classrooms and schools foster (or fail to foster) effort in students and consequently have focused on what schools can do to benefit the academic success of black students. For example, Nieto (2000) concluded that school environment and teaching practices have much more to do with student success or failure than student background. Similarly, Crawford and Aagaard (1991) found the major factors that contributed to high achievement growth in urban schools primarily fell within the school's control. The factors included: (1) principal as an instructional leader, (2) positive climate, (3) high expectations, (4) instructional focus, (5) parental and community involvement, and (6) data driven decision-making.

School leaders have more control than they realize over the above-mentioned factors contributing to high achievement growth. Strong instructional leadership affects the climate and school administrators have the power to create a positive climate within their schools, and need to hold high expectations for students (Louis, 2006). In addition to instructional leadership and overall school climate, there must be strong relationships between administrators at the district and school levels and these relationships must affect the performance of all students, especially black students. School leaders must be committed to the academic success of black students and their actions and behaviors

must be deliberate in order to fulfill their commitment to this student group. This commitment and drive must take place on all levels of administration. However, most salient to the impact on student achievement is the relationship that occurs between district and school administrators.

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the relationships between district and school level administrators and the ways in which these relationships are perceived to influence the performance of urban black students. This study will provide a description of the relationships between administrators at the district and school levels.

#### Significance

The achievement gap between white students and black students is long-standing and tenacious, and the gap is larger for black students than for any other minority group (Ogbu, 2003; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). In their review of current statistics, Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2003) found that a high percentage (42% to 78% depending on the subject area) of black students performed below basic on five of the seven subject tests of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessment between 1998 and 2000. Specifically, in 1998, black students scored, on average, 30 points below white students in reading regardless of educational attainment of their parents. On both the NAEP science and math assessments in 2000, black students whose parents did not finish high school scored, on average, 18 points below white students and, black students whose parents graduated from college, scored 34 points below their white counterparts. Further, the NAEP scores of black students



peaked in 1988 and have not increased over time (Hoffman, Llagas, & Snyder, 2003; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003).

While the racial gap in academic achievement is widely documented and generally undisputed, some researchers have suggested that it is primarily a consequence of the larger issue of low academic achievement among black students across socioeconomic levels (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). In fact, Thernstrom and Thernstrom suggested that while black students from higher income families' outperformed black students from low-income families, they still demonstrated lower academic achievement than white students of comparable socioeconomic status. Other researchers, however, have focused not on low achievement across socioeconomic status, but on the inadequate preparation of teachers who enter urban schools that serve low-income families. Foster (1991), for example, found little agreement in the literature on teacher education describing how to prepare teachers to facilitate academic achievement among students of color from low-income families. While socioeconomic status and teacher preparation are considerable factors to the academic achievement of black students, other factors influence the performance of these students in public schools including that of administrative leaders.

This descriptive case study examined the interactions between district and school level administrators and the ways in which these relationships are perceived to influence the performance of urban black students, recognizing the limitations of a small-scale study. More specifically, this study examined the roles of shared decision-making and sensemaking within the relationships between administrative groups. This description of administrative relationships, while not able to be generalized, adds

valuable information to the current discussion of the achievement gap, transformational leadership, and educational administration.

### Research Questions

The following question will guide this study:

How do administrative leaders at the district office and school buildings perceive the role of their relationships in the performance of urban black students?

1. What is the nature of the interactions between elementary school principals and district level administrators?
2. In what ways are the interactions considered to influence teaching and learning at the level of school and classroom?
3. Are the interactions viewed as effective and successful by each of the respective administrators and how do the interactions influence students?

### Limitations

To ensure the quality and rigor of qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1986) recommend that researchers consider the following four issues: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Further, it is important to consider the limitations identified above as well other limitations that do not fit within the four descriptions (Cooper, 2000; Hatch, 2000; Merriam, 1998). Limitations are presented more descriptively and thoroughly as they relate to this study in the methodology section of the paper.

## Definition of Terms

The terms used within this proposal assume the following definitions.

### *Black students*

Black students are those born in the United States who identifies themselves as having a black ethnicity. Data from this group will not include information on students with special needs or who speak a language other than English in the home as the primary language.

### *Transactional leadership*

The core of transactional leadership lies in the notion that the leader, who holds power and control over his or her employees or followers, provides incentives for followers to do what the leader wants.

### *Transformational leadership*

Transformational leadership is the process whereby an individual engages with others and creates a connection that raises the level of motivation and morality in both the leader and the follower.

### *Shared decision making (SDM)*

SDM is a process of making educational decisions in a collaborative manner at the school level. It includes a leadership style that is participative as it encourages employees to be a part of the decision-making. The collaborative leader keeps his or her employees informed about everything that affects their work and shares decision making and problem solving responsibilities. This style requires the leader to be a coach who has the final say, but gathers information from staff members before making a decision.

### *Sensemaking*

Sense-making is the process by which individuals and groups evolve shared understandings of their setting.

### *Administrators*

An administrator in the field of education handles the leadership and administration of a school or district. Essentially, administrators are responsible for managing and supervising school faculty, education programs, and staff development. Administrators usually have the same bottom lines as teachers: student achievement. The title of an administrator usually depends on the type of school in question.

Superintendents head districts that are made up of several schools. They set and administer policies on hiring and curriculum management and carry out their school boards' decisions on such matters as budgets and expansion of facilities.

Elementary Executive Directors (Assistant or Area Superintendents) directly work with principals and their schools to implement and monitor policies, curriculum, budgets, and personnel issues at the school. They also communicate and work with families around educational programs, issues, and concerns. The duties fulfilled by the person holding this position may be identified by a different title in other school districts.

School principals have responsibility for individual schools. They draw up their schools' budgets and see that policies on curriculum, teaching, and discipline are carried out. However, their most important function may be student achievement. Maintaining communication with students, parents, and their schools' neighbors is crucial to their success.

Superintendents and Elementary Executive Directors fall into the category of district level administrators and School Principals are identified as building level administrators for the purpose of this study.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### Introduction

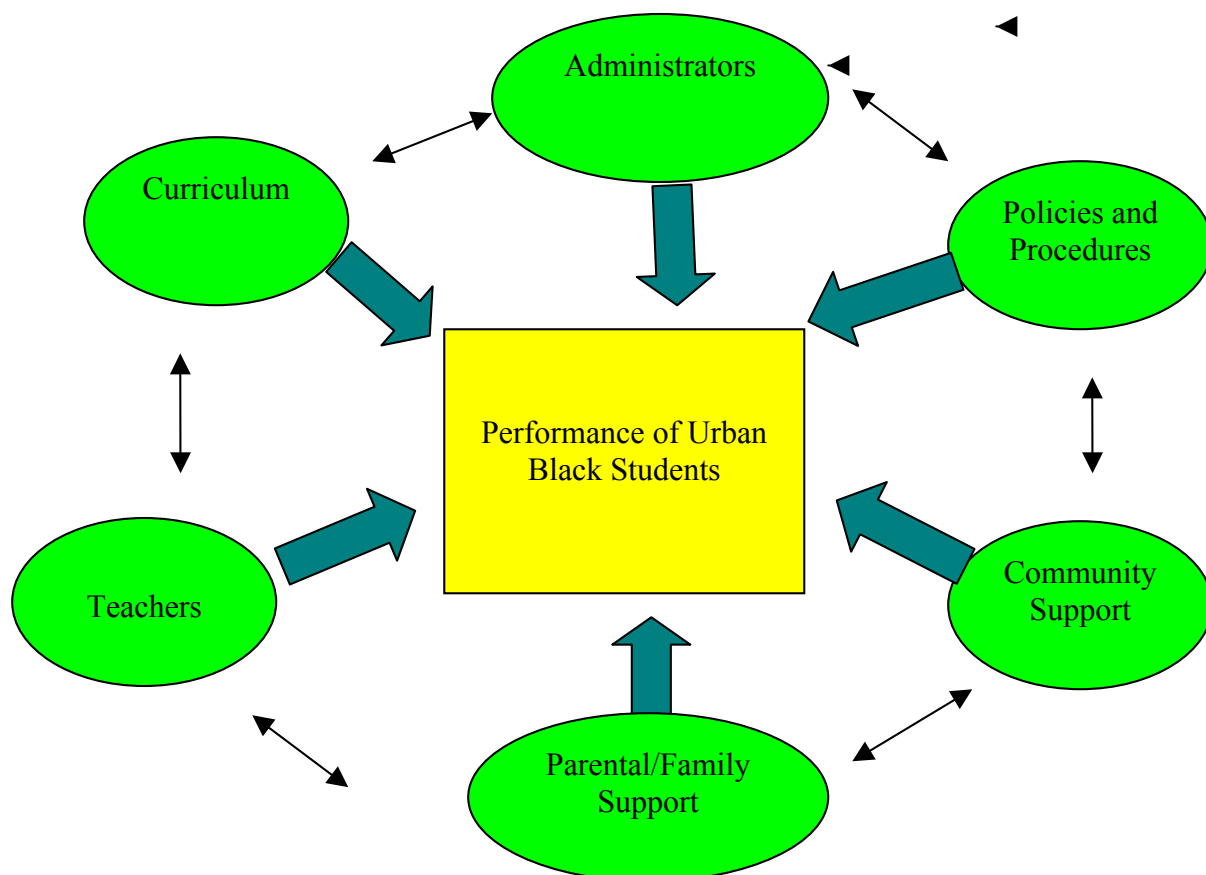
The review of the literature looks at factors that contribute to the education of urban black students in public schools. It begins with a conceptual map that identifies and defines variables that impact the American public school system. Following the description of the variables is a look at the variables through Burrell and Morgan's (1979) sociological paradigm which serves to ground the literature review. The researcher will provide a description of the four sociological perspectives presented in the paradigm and how the variables the performance of urban black students. The literature review will also look at the relationships between key stakeholders and how these relationships affect urban black students, and specifically how school administrators' leadership is posited to have an impact on achievement. A description of transformational and transactional leadership is presented in the review and serves as a basis to view the relationships between administrative groups. The review concludes with a description of shared decision-making and sensemaking and the significance of both administrative functions. In this literature review my intent is to challenge readers to assess the literature and conclude that the public education system is not meeting the needs of urban black students.

The conceptual graph (Figure 2.1) identifies key variables that impact the public school system and/or influences the educational outcomes of urban black students. These variables take on different roles in their impact on the public school setting and are often inter-related. There are 6 key factors that influence the performance of urban

black students: 1) curriculum, 2) teachers, 3) parental/family support, 4) community, 5) policies, and 6) administration.

### Conceptual Framework

**Figure 2.1: Key Variables that Impact the Students in the Public School System**



**Source: Created by researcher based on literature review**

Curriculum is what is taught to students attending schools. Many political, economic, and cultural structures outside of school are unequal, and teaching practices in the day-to-day life of classrooms and schools can preserve--if not generate--these inequalities. Tatum (2001) asserts that some students receive a socially efficient model of teaching that allows teachers to get through the day, while others receive a curriculum of possibilities. Black students living in poorer communities

disproportionately receive the former (Tatum, 2001). In an attempt to meet minimum standards, many black students receive an indoctrination of basic skills that does not encourage them to achieve their maximum competency level in the public school system. Understanding how curriculum orientations render certain groups powerless and redirecting these orientations are major challenges for those who want to combat the underperformance of black students.

Teachers directly influence students and have the capacity to have the greatest impact on student performance. They bring their own values, beliefs, and experiences to the education system and are assigned the task of providing instruction to the students in the public school system (Harmon, 2002). Teachers are directly connected to every variable listed above as they are in front of students daily, delivering the curriculum, following policies, and communicating with parents.

Parent and family support is important to what is being taught, as well as who is delivering and receiving the instruction. The support of parents and family strengthens the relationships between the school and the students. When parents show interest and support in school their children show huge gains (Howard, 2004). The relationship between parents and the school directly and indirectly impact the performance of urban black students as well as the school personnel providing the education to students.

The community is directly and indirectly connected to the public school system. It is comprised of parents, businesses, formal and informal community leaders, support organizations, and faith groups (Bulkley, 2007). All of these key stakeholders hold expectations of the public school system and count on schools to produce future employers, employees, and citizenry to maintain the history, traditions, and practices of



the community. The stakeholders understand the significance and role of the public school system and often work alongside school leaders to ensure that schools carry out their duties. The community is also reflective of the problems, issues, concerns of the community that spill over into the public school system.

Political influences encompass policies and procedures that govern the public school system. This variable includes policymakers who are responsible for the laws that guide public schools (Macpherson, 1998). Governing agencies provide the enforcement of the policies and procedure guiding the public school system (Macpherson, 1998). They include state departments of education, the federal government, and district school boards. The impact that policy has on the performance of urban black students depends on how stakeholders from the other categories (based on Figure 2.1) understand and implement the policy.

The final variable identified in Figure 2.1 is administrators. They also bring their values, beliefs, and experiences to the public school system (Harmon, 2002). Coupled with their training through educational programs, they take on the responsibility of managing the stakeholders involved in the public school system. Administrators include principals, central administrators, superintendents, and program managers. Some members, such as school principals, directly impact students while district administrators, such as central office administrators and superintendents indirectly impact students. It is critical that this group have a strong working relationship so that student performance is maximized. The relationship between district or central office administrators and school level principals need to be examined

to determine the level of impact this stakeholder group has on the performance of urban black students.

### Variables and Sociological Perspectives

When looking at the functions of schools and their input into society, the use of a sociological paradigm is helpful. Slater (1995) offers a useful sociological perspective in organizing the relationships between variables impacting the public school system and the performance of urban black students. He presents four key ways to view the relationships: (1) Functionalist; (2) Interpretive; (3) Radical Humanist; and (4) Radical Structuralist.

**Figure 2.2: Sociological Paradigm**

<b>Radical Humanist</b>	<b>Radical Structuralist</b>
Critical in nature and challenges current power structures that exist in school	Radical change; over throw the current power structure
<b>School viewed as hegemonic and racist</b>	<b>Schools viewed as unfit</b>
<b>Interpretive</b>	<b>Functionalist</b>
School employees behaviors are sought for understanding	School systems are seen as objective and follow a prescriptive procedural regiment
<b>Schools viewed as legitimate and necessary</b>	<b>School viewed as legitimate and necessary</b>

**Source: Created by author based on research data**

#### *Functionalist perspective*

From a functionalist perspective, the factors impacting the public school system are seen as objective. This perspective is the dominant framework for the conduct of academic sociology and the dominant perspective for organizational study. It is firmly

rooted in the sociology of regulation and approaches its subject matter from an objectivist point of view. Not only does this perspective seek to provide rational explanations of human affairs, but it is pragmatic and deeply rooted in sociological positivism. Relationships are concrete and can be identified, studied, and measured via science. The functionalist perspective views the variables impacting public schools as being efficient and effective. Academic progress made by students is believed to be linear and progressive as long as existing systems remain in place (Conrad, 1993). Teachers and administrators are viewed as necessary and effective as long as they follow the prescribed policies and procedures. Political influences serve the interest of all stakeholders involved, and governing agencies are deemed as necessary to provide supervision and enforcement of policies (Conrad, 1993). A functionalist perspective supports perspectives of the dominant social groups in society and elevates these views to the status of universal norms. It dominates administrative theory (Blot, 1998).

Schools operating from this perspective would promote the status quo and continue to operate in their current state. Doing so would equate that urban black students' academic performance will remain behind their white peers. School would continue to be viewed as necessary and legitimate, but would not meet the needs of black students.

### *Interpretive perspective*

The interpretive perspective views the social world as an emergent social process which is created by the individuals concerned (R. Collins, 1985). Social reality is little more than a network of assumptions and inter-subjectively shared meanings. It seeks to explain human behavior from the viewpoint of all stakeholders. An interpretive

perspective is mostly interested in understanding the subjectively created world as it is in terms of ongoing processes (Slater, 1995). It seeks to understand the variables impacting the public school system, particularly teachers, administrators, and the community. These stakeholders are sought out for understanding in regards to their relationship with one another and how these relationships impact the public school system. This perspective views power as being shared and schools as legitimate and necessary (Conrad, 1993). It also seeks to understand behaviors without taking action once the behaviors are understood. Schools operating from this perspective seek to understand behaviors from stakeholder groups and often leave out the perspective of the students. For change to happen student voices have to be heard.

#### *Radical humanist perspective*

The radical humanist perspective has much in common with the interpretive perspective; however, its frame of reference is committed to a view of society which emphasizes the importance of overthrowing or transcending the limitations of existing social arrangements (R. Collins, 1985; Foster, 1986). In this view, the consciousness of humans is dominated by the ideological superstructures with which she/he interacts, which causes a cognitive wedge between himself and his true consciousness (Slater, 1995). This perspective is critical in nature and highlights imbalances in power among subgroups (Foster, 1986). It seeks to provide an attitude, a way of conceptualizing reality, and a way of addressing social change through individually formulated actions (Blot, 1998). The radical humanist perspective attempts to explain how those in power consciously and/or unconsciously influence those not in power (Foster, 1986).

The variables impacting the public school system would be viewed based on power relationships, particularly the imbalance of power between racial groups. A radical humanist would view schools as hegemonic and racist and maintains that it perpetuates the status quo through unequal power relationships (Conrad, 1993). For change to occur, the public school system would have to balance the power relationships between teachers, administration, and students. A radical humanist perspective requires students and teachers to engage in a dynamic form of dialectic reasoning to uncover ideological roots (Nelson, 2004). This requires students to become critical of their own actions, thoughts, and beliefs as well as the actions, attitudes, and beliefs of others (Fecho, 2000).

#### *Radical structuralist perspective*

A radical structuralist perspective believes that social world is hierarchical, and measurable, however it sees society as having conflicting interests and inequalities directed at fundamentally different ends (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). This perspective is committed to radical change, emancipation, and potentiality, in an analysis which emphasizes structural conflict, modes of domination, contradiction and deprivation (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). A radical structuralist perspective concentrates upon structural relationships within a realist social world (Slater, 1995). A theorist operating from this perspective would view all variables impacting the public school systems as needing to be radically changed or taken apart. Knowledge is socially constructed based on structured parameters based on the most recent researched practice (Slater, 1995). This perspective would look to shift the power structure in the school setting totally. Those currently possessing the power would not have any power and currently

marginalized groups would gain power, even if taken abruptly (Collins, 1985). This approach would maintain an oppressive system, with a role reversal between the dominant and dominated groups; hence a power differentiation would still exist.

My intent is to challenge the thinking of the readers to view the present public education system as not meeting the needs of urban black students. I am looking at how administrators directly and indirectly affect the success of urban black students. I begin with a look at the relationships that exist between stakeholders and how these relationships impact the performance of urban black students. The review then describes the current form of leadership taking place in public schools, which I view as transactional leadership. From this description the review then looks at factors that should be in place to support the relationships between school leaders and that would assist administrators at both levels (district and school) that would impact the performance of urban black students. I am only highlighting the deficits of the public school system in regards to urban black students and am not calling for a dismantling of the system, and I recognize my perspective aligns with the perspective describes above as interpretive.

### Relationships

Critical to the success of urban black students in public schools are the relationships that exist between the variables outlined in Figure 2.1 (pg. 22). Administrators advocate excellence in student performance by building a system of relationships with stakeholders in their schools. These relationships help create positive environments where all students learn (Hallinger and Heck, 2000). Relationships must not only exist, but they also must be strong, and serve the purpose of a common vision.

For urban African-American children to find success in the public educational system they will have to have a strong reliance on the relationship between the stakeholders involved in the education process (Ford, 1996).

School administrators, teachers, and parents have the ability to help black students. They can help by setting high expectations, becoming culturally competent, and by intentionally striving to increase the self concept of the urban African-American children they teach (Harmon, 2002). This section of the literature review will look at relationships of school administration with teachers, teachers with students, and school with community. It highlights the importance of these in relation to the performance of urban black students.

#### *Principal –teacher relationships*

Effective principals must create environments where trust is felt and taking a risk can occur with high levels of comfort (Rude, 2005). For teachers to feel appreciated and to operate as instructional leaders, principals must spend time and effort developing this trust. Effective principals display caring attitudes toward staff members, students, and parents. Most importantly, effective principals expect and help teachers to design and facilitate learning experiences that inspire, interest, and actively involve students (O'Donnell, 2005). Effective principals and teachers directly benefit urban black students and improve their performance in public schools.

Principals who are able and willing to exert their influence with superiors on teacher's behalf are respected and valued by teachers and are likely to earn the confidence, support, and loyalty of their teachers (Hoy, 1997). Principals' supportive actions are fundamental to effective learning and can influence teaching through

administrative support and collegial leadership. When teachers are supported by their superiors they are likely to experiment and take risk to improve the quality of instruction (Hoy, 1997). A confident teacher that feels supported is more likely to enable success for urban black students through effective instruction.

Principals and teachers have a direct influence on the success of urban black students. This influence must be accompanied with cultural competence. Ford (1996) defines culturally competent educators as ones that possess self-awareness and self-understanding, cultural awareness and understanding, social responsiveness and responsibility, and use appropriate teaching techniques and strategies. These educators are aware of themselves as cultural beings, knowledgeable about their own cultural heritage, as well as the influences of their culture and/or the dominant culture on education (Harmon, 2002). They are also comfortable with the differences between themselves and the students they serve. Culturally competent educators strive to remain nonjudgmental when interacting with students of other cultures (Harmon, 2002). Armed with an understanding of how cultural differences and conflicts influence and affect their students' learning, they are able to provide their students with an inclusive curriculum addressing issues of inequality and confronting injustices that are often present within classrooms and schools (Boykin, 1994; Ford and Harris, 1999). For culturally competent and effective principals and teachers, holding high expectations for all students is critical. It is equally critical that central office administrators, possessing the same characteristics of cultural competence, have strong relationships with these school level administrators.



*Teacher-Student Relationships*

Students' perceptions of a caring, supportive relationship with a teacher and a positive classroom environment are related to their overall school satisfaction (Baker, 1999). All children, regardless of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or intellectual capacity, need access to learning environments that nurture confidence in their ability to learn. Students also need teachers whose actions are consistent with their beliefs in students' abilities to learn. This is especially true for urban black students in the public school system, as they benefit most from this opportunity. They will find the inner resolve to increase their self-concept and become more successful in the public school environment (Collins 2000).

Teachers' level of expectations for urban black students is critical to the success of these students. Collins (2000) says that high expectations for students, good teaching, and positive teacher-student relations are critical for helping urban black children who are at risk for failure. Teachers have a powerful influence on what students learn. More importantly, teachers have a powerful opportunity to continue learning with urban black students. Collins states that by raising the standards for urban black students, we raise the bar for ourselves. Lower the standard for our students and we lower what we take in as well (M. Collins, 2000).

For teachers to provide an effective education for urban black students, it is necessary for teachers to become culturally competent (Harmon, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Cultural competence requires that teachers demonstrate knowledge in a variety of areas including the history of minority populations, societal racism, language, affirmation of minority students, multicultural education, and the role of community

and family (Boykin, 1994). Boykin (1994) suggests that educators who understand the cultural beliefs, values, norms, and traditions of their students are able to recognize and affirm diverse cultural styles of learning, which in turn, impacts their teaching and communication with students and their families. This is necessary for urban African-American students to feel accepted, respected, and to realize success in public schools (Longwell-Grice, 2001).

A huge mismatch occurs when educators lack the knowledge, understanding, and acceptance of their students' language and culture, especially when it differs from their own (Ford, 1996). Teachers who are knowledgeable about the cultural histories of their students and are responsive to their needs contribute to higher achievement among culturally diverse students (Ladson-Billings, 2000). The literature reveals that culturally competent teachers make a difference in the performance of urban black students in the public school system. However, the literature does not inform as to the degree of competence the teacher must attain to make the difference, nor does it indicate if these teachers remain competent over time.

Whether teachers remain culturally competent over time, and continue to have high expectations for urban black students, falls on the shoulder of administrators at both the school and central office levels. Administrators must work with teachers and other staff to ensure urban black students' success in the public schools. In order for this to happen the relationship between central office administrators and school level administrators must be in place and there should be an intentional focus on this student group.

### *School-Community Relationships*

Educators who seek to educate beyond the schoolhouse are more successful working with urban black students than educators who do not participate in this practice, and their students' demonstrate a higher degree of academic success in the public school setting (Ladson-Billings, 2001). These educators develop meaningful relationships with their students that extend beyond the classroom, and reach out to include the students' families in the education process (Harmon, 2002). While many of their students' communities may be beyond those of the neighborhood school, these educators are involved in their students' communities, often as advocates for students (Ford, 1999). Their demand for respect of individual differences and intolerance for discriminatory behavior facilitates the development of cultural awareness in their students and encourages them to become proactive (Harmon, 2002).

Culturally competent educators are aware of the institutional barriers which prevent minority students from obtaining an equal education (Harmon, 2002). They have an understanding of the traditional practices of education and how they may conflict with the values of minority students (Ladson-Billings, 2001). Given this, educators seek to incorporate the assistance of community members and organizations to assist urban black students. Working together for the common purpose of affecting change in the lives of urban black children, community and school leaders must create and maintain strong relationships. Relationships critical to the lives of urban black students served in the public schools include the relationships between central office and school level administrators.

To increase the performance of urban black students', educators can apply an educational humanist approach and operate from a critical standpoint to accomplish the goal of increased performance for all student groups. A humanist seeks to challenge and change the lives of the students with whom they work. Humanists must be critical because they need not be satisfied with the current status of all student groups, especially marginalized groups such as urban black students (Foster, 1986). The charge is to have effective relationships between all stakeholders and to provide effective strategies that reflect an understanding of the dynamics involving students of color in the urban setting. In executing practice from theory (or vice-versa), the school leader must become immersed in the charge of forging viable, lasting relationships at all levels involving all stakeholders. Importantly, there must be a strong relationship between administrators at both the district and school levels.

### Leadership

For urban black students to be successful in public schools, they must have leaders at different levels in the school organization working on their behalf. Foster (1986) called for moral leaders that are willing to stand up for equality for marginalized groups of students. Leaders must be willing to challenge the status quo and move from the functionalist perspective to a more critical perspective, which has been identified as a radical humanist (Slater, 1995). Accomplishing this task will require leaders to incorporate attributes of different types of leadership. This section will focus on leadership, beginning with a description of transactional leadership. This style of leadership dominates the practice of most American public schools and districts. Following the section on transactional leadership, attributes necessary for leaders in

order to have an impact on school success for urban black students is described. These attributes are shared decision-making and sensemaking. The section concludes with a description of transformational leadership, which encompasses shared decision-making.

### *Transactional Leadership*

Transactional leadership assumes that people are motivated by rewards and punishments. It is comprised of three styles: 1) contingent reward; 2) management-by-exception (active); and 3) management-by-exception (passive). The underlying assumption of transactional leadership is that social systems work best with a clear chain of command. A requisite of this leadership model is that people cede all authority and are subordinate to their manager (Harms and Knobloch, 2005). The early stage of transactional leadership is in negotiating the contract whereby the subordinate is given a salary and other benefits, and the company (and by implication the subordinate's manager) gets authority over the subordinate.

Contingent reward leaders are leaders who engage in a constructive path-goal transaction of reward for performance, clarify expectations, exchange promises and resources, arrange mutually satisfactory agreements, negotiate for resources, exchange assistance for effort, and provide commendations for successful follower performance (Harms and Knobloch, 2005). The transactional leader works through creating clear structures whereby it is apparent what is required of their subordinates, and the rewards that they get for following orders. Punishments are not always mentioned, but they are well understood, and formal systems of discipline are usually in place.

Active leaders who manage by exception are leaders who monitor followers' performance, take corrective action if deviations from standards occur, and enforce

rules to avoid mistakes. When the transactional leader allocates work to a subordinate, the subordinates are considered to be fully responsible for it, whether or not they have the resources or capability to carry it out. When things go wrong, the subordinate is considered at fault and is punished for their failure just as they are rewarded when they succeed. The transactional leader often uses management by exception; the principle that if something is operating as defined and expected then performance does not need attention. Exceptions to management by expectation require praise and reward for exceeding expectations while at the same time corrective action is applied for performance below expectation. In the public setting this approach is found in a hierarchical structure where subordinates report to a person in position above their authority.

Passive leaders are leaders who manage by exception and fail to intervene until problems become serious and wait to take action until mistakes are brought to their attention (Harms and Knobloch, 2005). This passivity is apparent in the school system when public attention turns to the achievement of marginalized student groups and is highlighted. It also becomes evident when the federal government institutes laws that require states, districts, and individual schools to disaggregate assessment data by categories, including race and socio economic status. This is also evident when district level leaders group schools based on their performance on standardized tests.

Transactional leadership is based on reward or punishment contingent upon performance (Harms and Knobloch, 2005). The irony here is that the school system reacts to the public awareness and/or state and federal laws with punitive actions for

low performing schools and media highlights for high performing schools (Harms and Knobloch, 2005).

Despite an abundance of research highlighting its limitations, transactional leadership is still a popular approach with many managers. The primary limitation of this style is the assumption of “rational man”, a person who is largely motivated by money and simple reward, and hence whose behavior is predictable. The underlying psychology is behaviorism, including the classical conditioning of Pavlov and Skinner's Operant Conditioning (Harms and Knobloch, 2005). These theories are largely based on controlled laboratory experiments (often with animals) and ignore complex emotional factors and social values that are inherently present in public schools. These factors, especially the emotions and values, are present in school leaders and impact how they interact with one another.

School leaders in the public school system have traditionally operated in a top-down hierarchical structure in which decisions are passed down to the school level from the district's central office. The relationships between school leaders and other stakeholders, mainly teachers and students, have reflected transactional leadership styles. To change the existing structure and incorporate a more flattened organizational structure, school leaders must apply shared decision-making and use sensemaking in their practices. Shared decision-making and sensemaking are not often attributes of transactional leadership and do not represent that type of leadership model.

### *Shared Decision Making*

Shared decision making (SDM) represents a flattening of the typical hierarchical organization structure by involving workers in decision making. This concept is not

novel to the organizational theory literature. In public schools, staff participation in shared decision making originated at least as far back as the mid-1950s. School districts implemented measures to include school stakeholders in decision-making. As a result of the current reform cycle's advocacy for decentralization, districts in 44 states practiced some form of shared decision making in schools by 1993 (Leithwood and Menzies, 1998).

Early research on the effects of shared decision making on school organizational structure focused on teachers and principals rather than on outcomes, such as student achievement. Researchers studied, for example, how schools were implementing shared decision making and how it affected teachers, such as teacher job satisfaction, and role stress and ambiguity. Researchers (Wohlstetter Malloy Chau and Polhemus, 2032003) have identified key elements of successful shared decision making. These include: 1) vision, which focuses on teaching and learning that is coordinated with student performance standards; 2) decision-making authority that is conducive to influencing the teaching and learning; 3) power distributed throughout the school; 4) development of teacher knowledge and skills oriented toward school change, professional learning, and shared knowledge; 5) incorporating mechanisms for collecting and communicating information related to school priorities; 6) providing monetary and non monetary rewards to acknowledge progress toward school goals; 7) shared school leadership among administrators and teachers; and 8) providing resources from outside the school. These key elements are necessary for leadership to have an impact at the student level and must fluidly move between stakeholder groups. Each group must have a keen



understanding of the elements and operate from a shared understanding that learning is at the heart of the combined efforts.

The implementation of an administrative-control form of shared decision making increases school-site administrators' accountability to the central district or board office for the efficient expenditure of resources. These efficiencies are realized by giving local school administrators authority over such key decision areas as budget, physical plant, personnel, and curriculum. Advocates of this form of shared decision making reason that such authority, in combination with the incentive to make the best use of resources, gets more of the school's resources into the direct service of students. To assist in accomplishing that objective, the principal may consult informally with teachers, parents, students, or community representatives (Leithwood, 2000). The relationship between district level administrators and school level administrators are equally as important and critical to bringing about change for student success, particularly black students.

Central to the concept of shared decision making are (1) learning from past experience; (2) acquiring knowledge; (3) processing on an organizational level; (4) identifying and correcting problems; and (5) organizational change. An organization that learns works efficiently, readily adapts to change, detects and corrects error, and continually improves its effectiveness (Leithwood and Menzies, 1998). This attribute of leadership calls for reflective practice. Reflective practice must take place on multiple levels, district level and school level, and must be a structural part of the relationship between administrative groups at both levels. In addition to shared

decision making, school leaders must develop shared understandings and create shared meanings in their daily decision making and interactions with stakeholders at all levels.

### *Sensemaking*

Sensemaking is the process by which individuals and groups evolve shared understandings of their setting (Coburn, 2001). In education, the nature of professional communities and dialogue has emerged as a powerful factor determining collective understanding of external initiatives as well as teaching practice and organizational learning (Coburn, 2001). This study will focus on the relationships between key stakeholders, the collective sensemaking of school-based professionals, and the willingness of these professionals to change their practices for the purpose of enhancing the performance of urban black students. I apply the definition of sensemaking as a process by which the interpretations of external demands by teachers' and administrators' culminate in formal or informal decisions about how they collectively respond to externally initiated policies and daily procedures (Spillane Diamond and Burch, 2002).

Sensemaking is not an event but is ongoing, focused on extracted cues driven by plausibility, and tied to identity construction (Weick, 1993). On an individual level, it occurs when people notice a situation that does not fit with their usual routines and use their experience to find patterns that help to explain new situations. Similarly, collective sensemaking is rarely part of a deliberate activity (such as strategic planning) but emerges from frequent informal communication that leads to common actions or agreed-upon activities (Coburn, 2001; Weick, 1993).

Sensemaking is generally understood to be the cognitive act of taking in information, framing it, and using it to determine actions and behaviors in a way that manages meaning for individuals. Weick (1993) pointed out several tenets important to the concept of sensemaking. First, sensemaking is socially constructed, negotiated, and contested through a shared process. Thus, individuals' sensemaking emanates from the interplay of meanings and actions between one's self and others. Second, sensemaking is context specific and value-laden. The ways in which people make sense depends on the cues they receive from multiple, overlapping contexts. Furthermore, the ways in which they interpret the cues depend on the embedded values, beliefs, and assumptions, of the context, as well as their own beliefs, expectations, and interpretations. In other words, individuals realize their reality by reading into their situation patterns of significant meaning (Weick, 1993). Finally, Weick suggests that sensemaking is situated within the broader institutional context that provides a framework for socially acceptable actions and behaviors.

School leaders shape and influence the interpretation of issues and events in their schools. However, school leaders must first interpret the meanings of the issues and events for themselves (Spillane et al., 2002). To make sense of things, leaders draw from various individual, social, and institutional contexts to read meaning into the situations they must interpret. From this, leaders determine what to emphasize, downplay, or ignore in their words, actions, behaviors, and decision making. School leaders' own history and background, beliefs, work history, role identities, and group affiliations figure prominently as they frame and interpret issues and events and construct their roles in the manner they do. Moreover, the myriad of organizational and

institutional contexts surrounding schools provide school leaders with ideological, social, and political cues that signify patterns, filter information and experiences, and guide actions and behaviors (Evans, 2007). It is the actions and behaviors of school leaders that directly impact the lives of urban black students. Being able to understand the sensemaking process will allow school leaders to be decisive in regards to efforts and practices that are having a positive effect on the achievement of students.

Leadership that can increase the performance of urban black students in public schools and encompasses the attributes of shared decision-making and create a better understanding of the sensemaking that occurs will be transformational.

#### *Transformational leadership*

Transformational leadership is defined as the process whereby an individual engages with others and creates a connection that raises the level of motivation and morality in both the leader and the follower (Northouse, 2001). It aims at empowering followers through collaboration with leaders and working collectively to complete tasks. Although transformational leaders play a pivotal role in precipitating change, followers and leaders are inextricably bound together in the transformation process (Northouse, 2001). It is through the collective work, collaboration, and deference between the leader and followers that characteristics of the leader become more salient. If leadership is viewed as having influence, motivating others, and mobilizing the strengths of members, then transformational leaders are the epitome of leadership needed to produce positive results for urban black students in public schools.

Transformational leaders must be adept at monitoring their capacity for both strategic and traditional thinking. Strategic thinking is a learned skill that enables

individuals to make deliberate consideration of all possible options for achieving desired outcomes (Wells, 1998). Traditional thinking is typically institutionalized in many organizations as a means of sustaining the culture and traditions of the local community, and does not invite opposing viewpoints or ideologies. Individuals who think and plan strategically are capable of leading organizations and communities to achieve a desired future that is inclusive of all students regardless of their ethnicity (Rude, 2005). This will be equally important for improving the performance of urban black students.

The development of a compelling vision and priorities for action that promote understanding of student needs is enhanced by healthy relationships with stakeholders. The guiding principle represented by these commitments takes the structure of collaborative partnerships that promote the "none of us is as smart as all of us" ideal (Rude, 2005). Collaborative partnerships and organizational change are complementary processes that serve as implementation and mobilization facilitators for transformational leaders. These leaders recognize that solutions to adaptive challenges frequently emerge from shared leadership across organizations that inspire the respective members to work towards a common vision with equitable sharing of power and responsibility. Transformational leadership in this context involves the use of all stakeholders to help address the conflicting values that emerge in rapidly changing social environments and social cultures within the school setting. This change is more complex for urban black students who work to balance school and non-school norms (Blanchett, 2006). This student group must operate within the public schools' value system while simultaneously remaining true to themselves.

In transformational leadership, leaders move followers from a hierarchical approach to a transformational approach. There are four interrelated components in the process: 1) idealized influence; 2) inspirational motivation; 3) individual consideration and 4) intellectual stimulation.

Idealized influence is where genuine trust is established between the leader and followers. In the public school system this can be exemplified through an establishment of trust between principal and teacher, or between district level administrator and principal, or between the district and the school. This trust is built upon high moral and ethical standards agreed upon by parties involved. The leader can be thought of as a role model for subordinates. Followers admire the leader and tend to respect the leader at this level. To earn this respect the leader must consider the needs of the followers over their own personal needs. The leader share risks with followers, is consistent rather than arbitrary, and does not use power for personal gain.

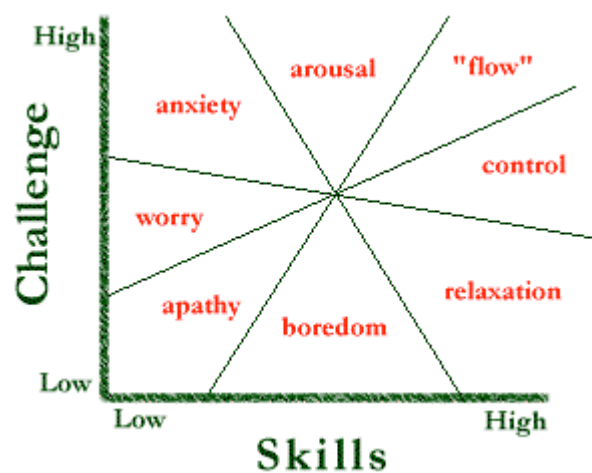
This type of influence must be transparent between principal and teacher, teacher and student, as well as between district level administrator and school level principal. Leadership and followers go hand in hand as leadership is shared and power is distributed based on needs. The needs of the students should drive the relationship between the adult stakeholders. The leader-follower regime that is accustomed to the top down hierarchical relationships must be abandoned for flattened relationships to take form. Organizations that have a flattened or shared hierarchical relationships often are successful in their respected fields (Honing and Hatch, 2004).

Inspirational motivation allows the leaders to provide followers with challenges and meaning for engaging in shared goals and undertakings. Team spirit or group

interdependence is valued. The leaders' appeal to what is right and needs to be done provides the impetus for all to move forward. Enthusiasm and optimism are shown regularly. Clear expectations are set and the leader demonstrates commitment to the goals and shared vision. These characteristics enable change for marginalized student groups and afford such groups success in the public school setting. Motivation is an essential step in the growth process that central office leaders employ in their efforts to reach the student level to affect change, and it must be intrinsic for all stakeholders. This motivation comes from having a common vision and the skill set to move the vision forward. When this is in place, leaders and followers are able experience flow.

Csikszentmihalyi (1998), the creator of Flow Theory, stated that when persons are highly skilled and are involved in a task that is a high challenge they get into a "flow". This state is reached as a result of leaders and followers possessing a determined high set of skills coupled with a high challenge.

**Figure 2.3: Flow Theory**



Source: Flow Theory: Csikszentmihalyi (1998)

*Flow Theory*

Figure 2.3 identifies that when the skills are high and the challenge is low, apathy sets in. Leaders and followers facing a high challenge and not possessing a high skill level to meet that challenge will experience anxiety. Both skills and challenges exist on a continuum ranging from high to low and Csikszentmihalyi identified states of being along that continuum. The model is appropriate to apply when studying the relationships between district administrators and building principals, given the hierarchical structure in which they operate. District administrators are identified as leaders, while building principals are identified as followers.

The first symptom of flow is a narrowing of attention on a clearly defined goal. Leaders and followers are involved, concentrated, absorbed. They know what must be done, and desire to get immediate feedback as to how they are doing. When leaders and followers reach this level, the result is an overwhelming increase in task completion. The reality is that leaders are all over the diagram in Figure 2.3. Flow is rarely reached but often desired. Leaders have a tendency to spend a lot of time in the control element or the boredom element. Leaders and followers possess the skills but are not always up to the challenge of changing their existing practices.

The status quo in public education is the underperformance of urban black students. If flow can be reached between district level administrators and school level administrators, by way of common vision and strong relationships, then urban black students will achieve at higher levels. Once flow is attained and the motivation is present to improve the performance of all students, especially urban black students,



leaders and followers can then move on to the additional components of transformational leadership.

Intellectual stimulation is when the leader helps followers to question assumptions and to generate more creative solutions to problems. The leader's vision provides the framework for followers to see how they connect to the leader, the organization, each other, and the goal. Once they have this big picture view and are allowed freedom from convention they can creatively overcome obstacles in the way of the mission through new approaches and open ideas and not criticized because they are different from the leader. This is very important when building synergy within a group in the public school setting. When stakeholders realize the big picture, understand that they are interconnected, and work in their respective roles under a common shared vision, results are more likely to benefit all students. It is even more critical that district level administrators and building level administrators operate with intellectual stimulation (Foster, 1986).

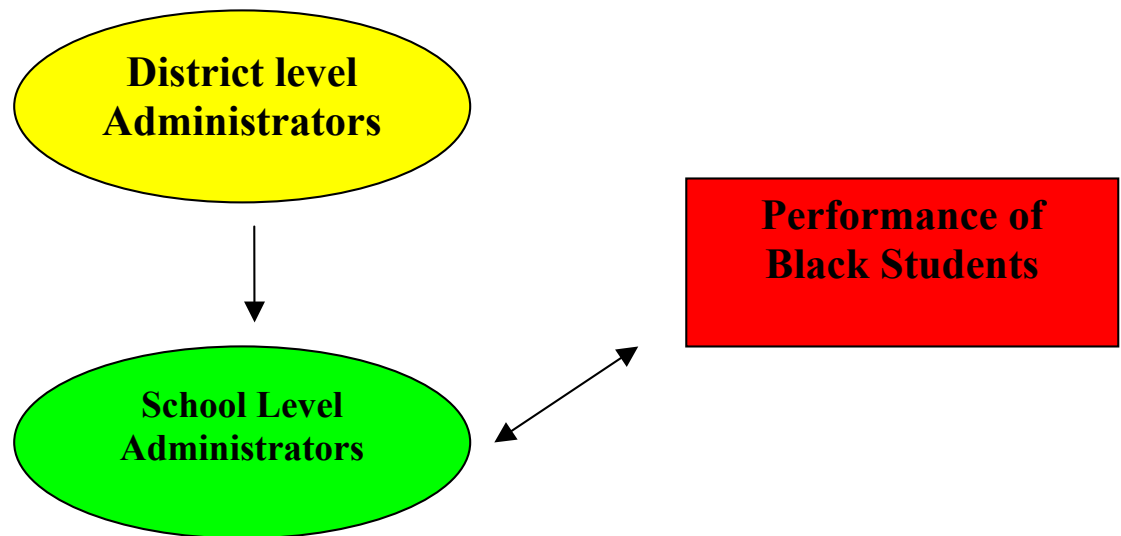
Individual consideration allows the leader to treat each follower as an individual and provides coaching, mentoring, and growth opportunities. Here the followers' needs for self-actualization, self-fulfillment, and self-worth can be satisfied through a supportive climate. The leader assigns tasks as a means of developing followers and followers do not feel that they are being micromanaged. Transforming leadership ultimately becomes moral in that it raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both leader and follower and thus has a transforming effect on both (Bass, 1997). This is pivotal for school leaders at the district and building levels to understand. When school leaders experience self-actualization the confidence that

accompanies it will create positive energy that can be absorbed by all teachers, students, and parents. This level serves as a target for school leaders at both levels to work toward reaching.

This literature review has looked at factors that contribute to the underachievement of urban black students in public schools, particularly relationships between different groups of stakeholders. The review also examined transactional leadership and how this leadership style does not meet the needs of stakeholders, particularly those in middle management leadership roles in education. As a result, the performance of urban black students is mediocre. The review also considered attributes of shared decision making and how this collaborative model enhances the relationship of district and school level administrators, through their application of sensemaking. The review concludes with a description of transformational leadership, which encompasses shared decision-making and an understanding of the process of sensemaking. This leadership approach has the potential to better serve school leaders at all levels.

Research supports that relationships help create positive environments where high academic achievement is in place for all learners, given external and internal impediments. Administrators are vital to setting the tone for school climate and identifying priorities for overall school growth. This is critical to the success of urban black students.

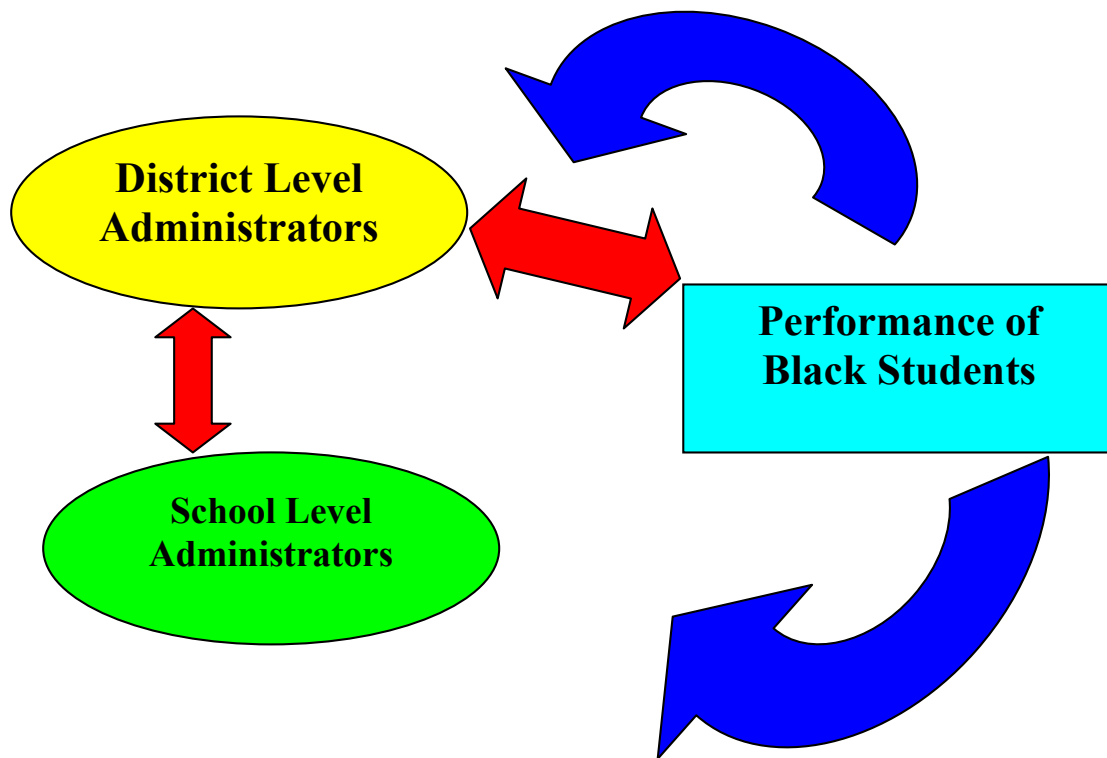
**Figure 2.4: Typical Relationship between District and School Level Administrators**



**Source: Created by author based on literature review**

Figure 2.4 illustrates the relationship between district and school level administrators and how this relationship impacts the performance of black students directly and indirectly. The figure shows the relationship as being one directional or top down with district level administrators at the top of the hierarchy (Honing and Hatch, 2004). School level administrators have a direct impact on the performance of black students. The figure also shows that black student performance also impacts the school level administrators. Figure 2.4 illustrates that school level administrators do not have a symbiotic relationship with district level administrators. This student group affects the decisions of district level administrators, and that affect is primarily how black students perform on standardized tests.

**Figure 2.5: Ideal Relationship between District and School level Administrators**



**Source: Created by author based on literature review**

Relationships and leadership attributes can be studied when looking at how district level administrators and school principals impact the performance of urban black students. Ideally there would be bidirectional arrows between the administrative groups (see Figure 2.5). School level administrators should influence district level administrators as much as district level administrators influence school level administrators. This bidirectional influence should be comprehensive and include shared decision-making and sensemaking, within the structure of transformational leadership. This symbiotic relationship would positively impact the performance of black students.

The literature on relationships between key stakeholders, including relationships between district and school level administrators, and how they affect urban black students is limited. Few studies document the impact of this relationship on student achievement. This study adds to the field by examining how the relationships of administrators influence the performance of urban black students. It poses the following questions:

How do administrative leaders at the district office and school buildings perceive the role of their relationships in the performance of urban Black students?

From the overarching question come 3 sub-questions:

1. What is the nature of the interactions between elementary school principals and district level administrators?
2. In what ways are the interactions considered to influence teaching and learning at the level of school and classroom?
3. Are the interactions viewed as effective and successful by each of the respective administrators? What is the basis for that perspective?

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

Hallinger and Heck (2000) state that relationships help create positive environments where all students learn, regardless of ethnicity and/or household income level. This proposed study assumes that administrators are key to the school environment and critical to the success of urban black students. This chapter will provide a plan for exploring relationships between district and school level administrators. It assesses how administrative relationships are associated with the performance of black students in Saint Paul Public School, an urban school district in the Midwest region of the United States. The chapter begins with a statement of the purpose of the study followed by research questions which will guide the study. Next, a description of the setting will be presented, providing a rationale of why Saint Paul Public Schools is a good location in which to explore these relationships. Following the description of the setting, the decision criteria will describe the process used to select school sites and personnel. The section will conclude with a rationale for using qualitative research methods, a description of emergent theme analysis, and a discussion of limitations.

#### Purpose of Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the relationships between district and school level administrators and the ways in which these relationships are perceived to influence the performance of urban black students. This study provided a description of the relationships between administrators at the district

and school levels. The insight gained from this study will add to the field of educational policy and administration by illuminating the significance of shared decision making between administrators at different levels of an educational organization. To reiterate, the research was guided by the following overarching question and 3 sub questions:

How do administrative leaders at the district office and school buildings perceive the role of their relationships in the performance of urban Black students?

1. What is the nature of the interactions between elementary school principals and district level administrators?
2. In what ways are the interactions considered to influence teaching and learning at the level of school and classroom?
3. Are the interactions viewed as effective and successful by each of the respective administrators, and what is the basis for that perspective?

#### Setting

##### *Minnesota*

Minnesota's public school students are among the most successful in the nation on numerous scales and indicators (Pugmire, 2004). For example, Minnesota ranks second in the nation for academic achievement (behind Massachusetts), according to the 2006 Report Card on Education from the American Legislative Exchange Council (*From Cradle to Career*, 2007). Education Week's new Chance for Success Index ranked Minnesota third on a variety of indicators, including family income, parent education, high school graduation, and adult educational attainment (*From Cradle to Career*, 2007). Minnesota is ranked the sixth smartest state based on twenty factors

from Education State Rankings 2005-2006, an annual reference book that compares the fifty states in hundreds of elementary and secondary education categories published by Morgan Quitno Press.

Unfortunately, the statewide averages mask a different reality for some students of color. Black and Latino students consistently score far below their white peers. This difference in academic performance is a national problem, but particularly wide and persistent in Minnesota. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Minnesota's Black students continue to achieve at levels behind their white peers in reading. The data in Table 3.1 shows that fourth grade black students increased their performance in this assessment as did white students. The table provides the average scale score for both student groups as well as the gain for each student group over a two year period. The scale scores for each group increased. While this is good, the performance of black students has to accelerate at a faster rate than white students.

Table 3.1 shows the national rankings for both student groups, which indicate a significant gap between the performances of the two groups. Minnesota black students ranked 38<sup>th</sup> in average scale scores on the NAEP while white students ranked 7<sup>th</sup>. The state as whole has performed well, and black students continue to perform significantly lower than their white peers, and the achievement gap prevails.

Addressing the academic achievement between different student groups is a top priority for many educators and state officials (Benson, 2004). Benson goes on to say that schools in high-poverty areas, with many students of color, are at a distinct disadvantage. One way to reduce the gap is to increase the performance of black students, who tend to - perform poorly on achievement tests.



**Table 3.1: NAEP Data on Grade 4 Reading (2005) for Minnesota Students**

<b>Group</b>	<b>2005 Average Scale Score</b>	<b>2003 Average Scale Score</b>	<b>Percent Proficient</b>	<b>National Rank</b>
Black	192	184	11	38
White	229	224	43	7
Minnesota	225	219	25	8

**Source: Education Trust**

While many urban schools are struggling, others appear to be defying the odds, making huge academic gains, and closing the achievement gap (Pugmire, 2004). There are schools in Saint Paul with a significant population of black students that are achieving at high levels (Pugmire, 2004). It is critical to determine how these schools are being successful so that others may replicate their efforts. This study examined 5 elementary schools in Saint Paul Public Schools that have above average performance on the part of their black students. The study will explore how the relationships between their principals and district level administrators contribute to that success.

#### *Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS)*

Given the schools, students, and culture of Saint Paul Public schools, it was chosen as the location for the study. Saint Paul supports a large network of publicly funded primary and secondary schools. It is the state's second largest school district and serves approximately 40,000 students. The district runs 68 different schools including 47 traditional elementary schools, 1 non-traditional elementary (grades 1-8), 8 middle schools, 7 high schools, 3 alternative schools, and 1 special education school. The

district is extremely diverse, as 73.91% of students are students of color; the average for the state is 23%. In Saint Paul, black students make up 29% of the total student population, Asian/Pacific Islander students comprise 29%, and 26% of the student population is white. At the state level the demographics for these same student groups are: 1) black, 9%; 2) Asian/Pacific Islander, 6%; and 3) white, 77%.

### *SPPS -Organizational Relationships*

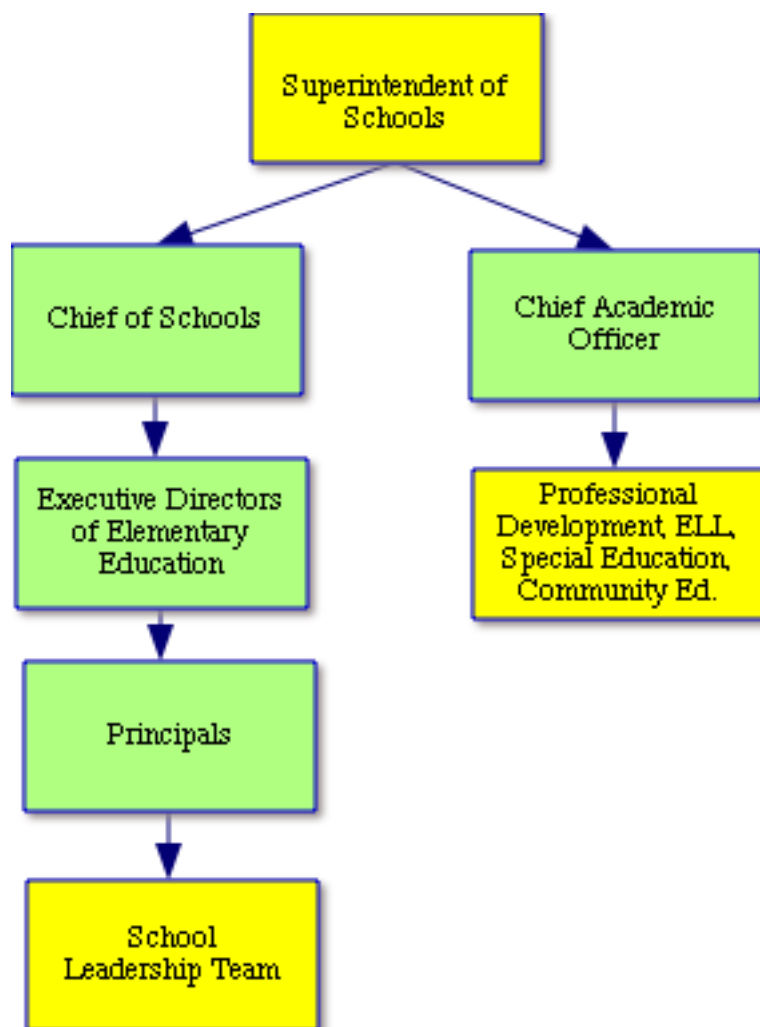
Saint Paul Public Schools has participated in shared decision making for twenty years. Despite district efforts to mandate shared decision making, the organizational structure of Saint Paul Public schools is arranged hierarchically. Figure 3.1 outlines the hierarchical structure for the district.

At the top of the hierarchy is the superintendent. The role of the superintendent is to provide governance over the entire school district, work alongside the school board to creating and manage policy, and work with the community around relationships and funding. The superintendent directly supervises the chief academic officer and the chief of schools. The role of the chief academic officer is to monitor professional development at the school and non-school levels, implement district strategic plans at the non-school levels, and monitor schools' support programs such as English language learner programs, special education, and community education.

The role of the chief of schools is to monitor achievement in all schools and implement district strategic plans at the school levels, encompassing development, planning, launching, and transitions. The chief of schools directly supervises the executive directors. The executive director's role is comparable to that of an area superintendent. The primary function of this position is to support the principals,

instruction, and families. This group of central office administrators directly supervises school level principals of the 47 elementary schools in the district.

**Figure 3.1: Organizational Chart for SPPS District Leadership**



**Source: Created by author based on knowledge of district**

### *SPPS –Student Performance*

The data shows that black students attending Saint Paul Schools perform about the same as their state peers when comparing the results of state assessments, when the

cumulative average is taken. Table 3.2 compares the district average scores to the state average scores for math and reading of black students in grades 3 - 6. The respective numbers for the performance of black students are 53% (SPPS) and 56% (MN). Given the performance of black students at the state and district level, it is imperative that this study focused on schools where black students performed at achievement levels better than the state and district averages. The decision criterion lays out the process for school identification for selection and criteria.

**Table 3.2: Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment Results -2006 for Grades 3-6**

	Reading	Math	Cumulative Average
All MN Students	74%	61%	67%
MN Black Students	64%	49%	56%
SPPS Black Students	54%	52%	53%

**Source: Minnesota Department of Education**

#### Criteria for Selecting Participants

The decision criteria section is broken into two parts: (1) a description of the participants for the study; and (2) discussion of the rationale of why these participants were chosen. Participants include schools along with their selected personnel and district personnel. The schools for the study were chosen based on two criteria: a) the population of black students attending the school; and b) the school's performance on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment Series Two (MCA II).

### *Selection of Schools*

When identifying schools for the study, I began with a list of all the traditional elementary schools and then identified the total number of students enrolled in each of the schools. Next, I disaggregated the ethnic breakdown of the student population for each school and calculated the percentage for each major ethnic group based on each school's enrollment. Once the ethnic percentages had been derived, I then calculated the average percentage of black students for all 47 elementary schools listed. The average equaled 30%, and I identified all schools with a percentage above the average which came to 19 schools.

**Table 3.3: Schools chosen for study**

Schools	Percentage of Black Students	Average MCA II Math Score	Average MCA II Reading Score
School A	31	56	59
School B	32	57	57
School C	36	56	58
School D	42	62	65
School E	47	60	63
School F	50	65	65
School G	61	66	58
School H	72	54	54
Average Scores – Schools selected for study	46	62	62

**Source: Created by Author based on 2007 SPPS Data (Note: a SPPS District Average Percentage of Black student is 29%; SPPS Average MCA Reading Score is 54%)**

The second dimension in school identification was to take the schools that met the first requirement and further identify which of the 19 schools also performed well on the MCA II Achievement test. I defined performing well as scoring above the state cumulative average for black students on this assessment, which is 56%. There were 8 schools identified based on their student performance. Table 3.3 identifies these schools and their status on each criterion. Two of the eight schools have new building level principals and a third school is the site where the researcher serves as principal, so these schools were excluded from the study. Given this, the study will focus on 5 schools to explore the relationships between district and building level administrators. The average percentage of black students for these 5 schools is 46 percent with an average of 62 percent proficiency in reading and math respectively.

#### *Selection of Participants within Selected Schools*

Once schools were identified, the next step was to identify who within the schools and district office would be a part of the study. The building principals of each of the 5 schools were interviewed. In addition, these principals were also surveyed. The purpose of including the survey instrument was to gain the full perspective of the interviewee and seek clarification and understanding of this leadership group.

#### *Selection of Participants at District Level*

At the district level, I interviewed one of the two elementary executive directors. The director being interviewed had been in the position for one year. Prior to operating in this role, the individual served as a director of a district early education program. The other elementary director was not interviewed because she had only been in the position for less than a year and the predecessor moved out of state.

The Director of Staff Development was interviewed to gain their perspective of the schools selected for the study with regard to professional development for teachers and principals. I also interviewed the Chief of Schools and the Chief Academic Officer. The Chief Academic Officer had been in a district office position for over 5 years, while the Chief of Schools had been in the position for nearly three years. Both individuals have worked directly with principals and schools. Table 3.4 identifies the participants for the study and the method proposed to collect data from that source.

**Table 3.4: Data Collection Description**

<b>Information Source</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Method</b>
<b>People</b>		
District Administrators	8	Interview
Principals	5	Interview
<b>Documents</b>		
School Improvement Plans	15 (3 years for each school)	Content Analysis
District Strategic Plan	1	Content Analysis
District Principal Meetings Minutes	15	Content Analysis

**Source: Compiled by author based on proposed methods**

### **Methods**

To address the research questions presented earlier, I proposed a qualitative study, as it has been noted to be most useful in gaining an in-depth understanding of the meanings people attribute to their lives and experiences (Patton, 2002). Historically, qualitative methodologists have described three major purposes for research which

include exploring, explaining, or describing a point of interest. Furthermore, qualitative methods of analysis has been found to be particularly effective for examining how people explain, justify, rationalize, and articulate attributes of relationships (Marshall & Rossman, 1995), which is a focus of the current study. Moreover, the goal of this proposed study is to gain a better understanding of the relationships between district and school level administrators and their association with the performance of urban black students.

A study that focuses on individual experiences should rely on an in-depth interview strategy which enables the researcher to capture the deep meaning of experiences in the respondents' own words. This study looked at an administrative group consisting of district level and school level administrators. Through this study, the individual experiences of each participant was gathered, analyzed and compared to one another. The experiences then were collated and viewed aggregately for summative themes.

#### *Analysis of Documents*

School documents provide a written history of interactions between administrative groups, priorities focused on, and how priorities feed into the local school sites. Through the review of documents, all of the research sub-questions were addressed and reviewed to determine to what extent shared decision-making was taking place. The researcher also paid attention to how the leaders constructed meaning of on going district priorities to enact at their building site to make informed decisions.

As part of the document analysis, minutes from administrative meetings were reviewed along with an analysis of three years of School Comprehensive Improvement

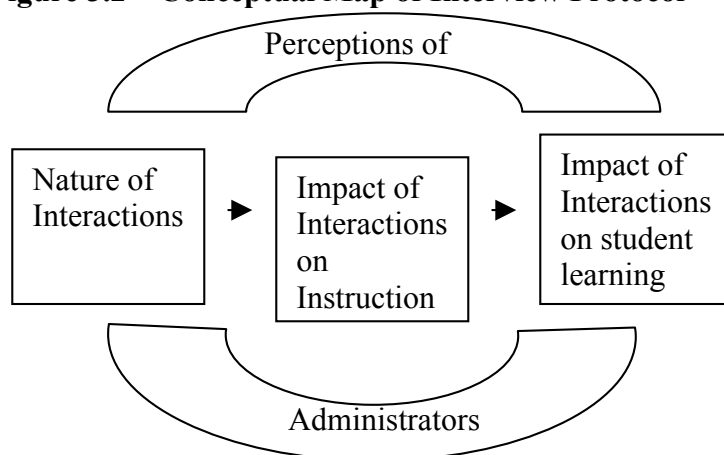


Plans (SCIPS). Particular attention was paid to the goals and strategies, their alignment to district priorities and more importantly, if the SCIPs identified school efforts to focus on black students.

### *Interview Protocols*

Two interview protocols (Appendices A and B) were developed to capture participants' thoughts and understanding of their experiences. Participant perceptions were recorded regarding their interactions and how their interactions impacted instruction and learning.

**Figure 3.2 – Conceptual Map of Interview Protocol**



**Source: Created by researcher**

The protocol consisted of twelve questions that probed respondents' experiences relative to one another around their interactions with leaders from a supervisory and subordinate structure and how they perceived their decision-making impacted student outcomes.

The protocols were arranged to align with the research sub-questions themes of: 1) nature of interactions; 2) impact on teaching and learning; and 3) impact on student learning and achievement. Questions 1 – 8 addressed the nature of interactions. These

questions enabled the researcher to determine the administrators' perceptions of who was interacting and the purpose of those interactions. The next set of questions (9 -12) identified the perceptions of how the interactions impacted teaching and learning. The final set of questions (13 -18) were asked to determine if the respondents perceived that their interactions had an impact on student learning and more specifically their impact on the performance of black students.

The interview protocols also served the purpose of determining how the administrative groups perceived the degree to which shared decision-making were taking place amongst the leaders. All of the interview questions were designed to provide respondents with the opportunity to speak about the involvement of stakeholders in decisions that are made at the school and district levels. The interviews also allowed the researcher to examine the process in which leaders developed shared understandings regarding practices and created meanings for their school sites or sites with which they were involved. The researcher refers to this process that leaders use to decipher information as sensemaking.

Qualitative techniques allow researchers to gain an understanding of what happens in dynamic and elaborate systems such as a school district. Educational researchers use various techniques in order to capture the richness that takes place in school systems. Some of these techniques include interviewing participants, observing participant interactions, and analyzing documents such as school policies and school improvement plans (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). To increase the quality and rigor of qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend that researchers consider the

following four issues: 1) credibility, 2) transferability, 3) dependability, and 4) confirmability.

### *Credibility*

Credibility refers to the degree of trustworthiness in the research inquiry and the level to which the findings are an accurate portrayal of the participants and their context (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). The use of multiple sources in order to triangulate the data supports the credibility of the study. Providing evidence from several sources makes the findings of the study more accurate and convincing (Yin, 2003). For the proposed study, data collection will include interviews, surveys, and the collection and examination of artifacts.

To enhance credibility, a process known as member checking was utilized to ensure accurate interpretations of the data and to unmask any inferences made as a result of personal subjectivity. Member checking is when data, analytic categories, interpretations and conclusions are tested with members of those groups from whom the data were originally obtained (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) . This can be done both formally and informally as opportunities for member checks may arise during the normal course of observation and conversation. Typically, member checking is viewed as a technique for establishing validity of an account. This was necessary to capture the accurate perceptions of both district and school level administrators.

### *Transferability*

Transferability refers to the idea of extending the findings of the study outside of the scope of the individual cases (Yin, 2003). While qualitative methods often cannot be generalized in the same way as more representative studies, they do offer a thorough

knowledge of the particular that can inform understanding of the general (Merriam, 1998). Merriam also outlines three strategies to maximize the transferability of a qualitative study. The first strategy, a rich thick description, offers such great detail that readers can decide if the context of the study relates to their own. The second strategy, typicality or modal category, refers to how similar the case under study is to others. The third strategy, multi-site designs, encourages the use of more than one case so the findings can be applied to a greater number of contexts.

As a technique of transferability, I provided and solicited a thick description of the phenomenon conveyed during the interviews. I sought follow up responses to questions to gauge the thinking of the participant and to ensure that their perceptions were appropriately captured. Multiple school sites were used and the perspectives of multiple personnel from the different schools were captured. The data includes perspectives from three different levels of the organization used to determine the alignment of perspectives

#### *Confirmability and Dependability*

A high-standard qualitative study includes enough detail for it to be evident that the findings are either consistent with or differ from current research. The findings must also be easily understood from the detailed reporting of data collection and analysis included in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Therefore, researchers must maintain a high level of rigor in the data gathering and analysis process, and in the reporting of the findings.

To increase the quality and confirmability of the proposed study, a thorough explanation of every step of the research inquiry is included, from the selection of the

participants to the reporting of findings. In order for a qualitative study to be deemed dependable, a logical, traceable, and documented audit trail must be established (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The following techniques were employed to create and maintain an audit trail: 1) examination of raw data from the school sites; 2) data analysis; 3) notes from interviews and document analysis were processed; and 4) the body language and facial expressions of respondents were noted. Raw data included interview records, relevant documents, and memorandums from the district and school sites. Data reduction -included summaries exploring the researcher's understandings that are created through the process of interviewing and document analysis. Data reconstruction included themes, definitions, relationships, interpretations, inferences, integration of concepts, relationships and interpretations of the data I gathered through the process. Process notes encompassed methodological notes, including procedures, strategies, decisions and rationale, documentation regarding trustworthiness including member checking. Personal notes, reflections, expectations, and predictions to clarify and make explicit the researcher's intentions and dispositions were documented.

Merriam (1998) asserted that a key characteristic of qualitative research is that the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. To ensure quality and authenticity in the writing of the final report, researchers must maintain sensitivity and integrity during data collection and analysis, and this level of care depends on the qualifications of the researcher. The researcher plays such a significant part in qualitative research and it is important to document unambiguously the researcher's qualifications and biases (Merriam, 1998). As a graduate student completing a doctorate degree and having studied research methods courses and courses

in education leadership, I feel that I am qualified to conduct the study. My personal bias is that I am employed in the district that is being studied, I am a professional colleague of the participants, and I am a former black student of an urban public school.

#### Case study research

A case study examines a single entity, such as an individual or a classroom, within a particular context (Yin, 2003). The focus on an individual or a small group allows the researcher to create a vivid picture of the phenomenon. Case studies can provide insight into processes that some large studies fail to see. A careful and comprehensive description helps educators and researchers reach an understanding of what actually happens in the phenomenon. The phenomenon in this research is the relationship between the administrative groups. Such information can inform the development of theory and add to existing models, including discourse on transformational leadership model. Howard (2001), for example, used case studies to understand the extent to which four African-American secondary teachers implemented culturally relevant pedagogy in various content areas. Through the use of case study, I will seek to understand better the relationships among administrators at different levels. I will then try and analyze themes and see if it improves the understanding of research on shared decision-making and sensemaking. Ultimately, I seek a better understanding of what works to improve the performance of urban black students.

#### *In-depth Interviews and Document Analysis*

Foster (1991) collected data through interviews, observations, and the collection of archival data to describe the life experiences and practices of African-American secondary teachers in various content areas. Ladson-Billings (1995) conducted

interviews and observations in order to examine the beliefs and practices of African-American elementary school teachers. These strategies are useful to gain an understanding of the respondent's perceptions in regards to their thinking or to make decisions based on a particular set of information.

This study employed the qualitative techniques of interviews and document analysis to understand the process by which administrators view and define the relationships they have with one another. The respondents' perceptions of their relationships with one another were analyzed. In-depth interviews and document analysis were two techniques used that were most appropriate to gather a significant amount of data about relationships between district and building level administrators.

#### Emergent Theme Analysis

When data is analyzed by theme, it is called thematic analysis. This type of analysis is highly inductive, that is, the themes emerge from the data and are not imposed upon it by the researcher (Wong, 2002). In thematic analysis, the data collection and analysis take place simultaneously. Even background reading can form part of the analysis process, especially if it helps to explain an emerging theme. For those types of analysis at the other end of the qualitative data continuum, the process is much more mechanical with the analysis being left until the data has been collected. Perhaps the most common method of doing this is to code by content. This is called content analysis. Using this method the researcher systematically works through each transcript assigning codes, which may be numbers or words, to specific characteristics within the text. The researcher may already have a list of categories or may read through each transcript and let the categories emerge from the data. Some researchers

may adopt both approaches (Wong, 2002, pg. 39). This type of analysis can be used for open-ended questions, which have been added to questionnaires in large quantitative surveys, thus enabling the researcher to quantify the answers.

#### Limitations

A qualitative case study is inevitably limited, not only by its lack of ability to represent a group (school districts, administrators, teachers, parents, and students), but also by the biases of the researcher (Miriam, 1998). The study will focus on an urban school district serving about 40,000 students. Generalizability is limited because neither the school district nor the participants were randomly chosen. Although the study will not be generalized, it will add to the field by examining how the relationships of administrators influence the performance of urban black students. It also contributes to the research on urban black students.

I am employed by the school district in the study. The school at which I work at will not be in the study; however, I do know the participants in the study. This could influence the results in a positive or negative way. The direction could be positive in that the level of trust between the researcher and the participants may allow for more honest and accurate statements. The direction could be negative as the researcher may be given more politically correct responses based on district jargon.

Timing is the final limitation noted here due to the point in time in which the proposed selection of administrators to be interviewed. For example, the current superintendent has been in the position for two years and has made staff changes in the hierarchical structure that has impacted the central office administration. The second facet of timing that is limiting is that the study will take place during a five-month



period. During this time frame, recent interactions between the school principal and district administrators may affect response as well as the study being done at the end of the school year.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

#### Introduction

This chapter presents a synthesis of the research findings. It seeks a better understanding of the relationships between district and school level leaders based on interviews done and documents analyzed. As has been stated, the purpose of this study was to determine to what extent the perceived relationships between administrative groups influenced the performance of urban black students. Of particular interest, however, were the use of shared decision-making and sensemaking among the administrative groups (central and building) in the governance of the school and performance of students. To this end, the following research questions were asked:

1. What is the nature of the interactions between elementary school principals and district level administrators?
2. In what ways are the interactions considered to influence teaching and learning at the level of school and classroom?
3. Are the interactions viewed as effective and successful by each of the respective administrators, and how do the interactions influence students?

The chapter begins with a summary of responses from interviewees, aligned to the sub-questions themes: 1) nature of interactions; 2) impact on instruction and learning; and 3) impact on student achievement. Each section will include the perspectives of district level and school level administrators. For this study, the

researcher applied an emergent theme analysis applying content analysis of the documents with the content coming from interviews and document analysis. The relevant documents for this study included minutes from monthly administrative meetings, and school comprehensive improvement plans (SCIP). The chapter concludes with a summary of findings.

### Nature of Interactions

*What is the nature of the interactions between elementary school principals and district level administrators?*

In this section the researcher proposed to describe the structure, content and culture of the interactions between two key administrative groups. The structure referenced to participants in interactions, their roles, and how often the interactions took place. The content included identifying the substance, priorities, and resources. The culture of the interactions included the affect from the interactions and the climate created. This section relies on document analysis and interview responses for the findings.

### *Building Principal Perspective*

The school level administrators reported interacting with various members of central office administration, ranging from the executive director to the director of professional development. Only 2 out of 5 school level administrators reported interacting with the chief of schools or the chief academic officer. None of the participating school level administrators report interacting with the superintendent of schools aside from quarterly district meetings.

District level meetings include program managers, department supervisors, and other mid-level management positions. The researcher specifically asked how many direct interactions the school level administrators had with the superintendent. There was a consistent response of no and it was clearly understood that school level administrators were expected to lead their sites with limited interactions from the superintendent. When asked to explain, administrators stated that they were free to run their schools. Further probing revealed that the principals believed that since their schools were performing well on state assessments, and there were no serious complaints going to the district office regarding their schools from parents or community members, they had limited communications with district office personnel including the superintendent. When asked directly about their interactions with the chief of schools, school level administrators report that they rarely interacted directly with the chief of schools. One principal responded, “*She* will call if she needs something, other than that I communicate primarily with the office of professional development.”

Interactions took place between the school level administrators and executive directors, district level and content coaches (math and reading). The time that the school level administrators met with district administrators is documented in Table 4.1. School level administrators reported that meeting with various district leaders took place at different times in the school year, mostly as needed or as a part of on-going professional development. Results varied for each school and for each group category. Based on the district focusing on developing professional learning communities, school level administrators met with their content coaches more than any other support group.

School level administrators report meeting monthly as a group (Elementary Principals) for one and half hours. These meetings are not reflected in Table 4.1, as the agendas were informational in nature. School level administrators also report that their interactions with one another were limited and they felt it necessary to return to their sites immediately following the meetings.

**Table 4.1 Time in minutes that School Administrators met with District Administrators within a month**

	Executive Directors	Content Coaches
School A	25	80
School B	15	90
School C	40	120
School D	25	150
School E	15	110
Average	23.75	110

**Source: Created by researcher based on interviews**

*Meetings with executive directors*

School administrators report that meetings begin with introductions, followed by a description of the purpose of the meeting. A time was set aside for questions and answers, and then the meetings would conclude with participants going in their prospective directions. The structures at meetings for school level administrators with executive directors consist of limited input from the school level administrators into the agenda and were perceived by building level principals as “token meetings”. Two principals defined token as a procedural gesture involving their presence with a smile and a head nod.

When asked to report on the structure of the meetings between themselves and their executive directors, school level administrators reported that there was no formal structure outside of monthly principal meetings. The meetings with the executive

directors were based on a specific request from the director or school level administrator. For example one school level administrator reports:

*All of my conversations are prefaced with the idea of trying to understand what the district's vision is. We know what the mission, values, and goals are but that is the 10,000-foot view and operationalizing that is a lot different. In terms of how you can think ahead how you can develop a professional development calendar that gives the building balance. Also is foreshadowing some of the ideas and topics that you are going to be launching with your staff.*

Meeting with the executive director could also have been responding to the needs of parents. One principal reports:

*My executive director only meets with me or calls me when a parent has contacted them [sic] regarding a decision that I have made, or I will call them if I know that a parent is not in agreement with a decision that I made and will be calling them.*

School level administrators also reported having meetings with their executive directors at different points in the school year based on the time of the year that reports that may be required or school initiatives in which their school may be involved. For example, one school level administrator reported that they had several meetings with their executive director as a result of a program change that took place. The school was adding an after school enrichment program that was in conjunction with a city grant, so they were meeting with city officials, parents, and their executive director. These kinds of meetings had a particular focus, so the meetings were structured around that focus.

*Meetings with content coaches*

Meetings between content coaches and building administration were structured differently. School level administrators reported that they had more of a hand in the make up of the meeting, contributed to the agenda, and report that they felt that they had control of the interactions with the content coaches. One administrator reports “When meeting with a content coach, I can take the discussion in a desired direction of my choice.” This implies that the administrator felt that they had some control of the structure of the meeting. The meetings were described as having objectives, discussion, next steps or action items, and what to expect by the next meeting. This structure was reported by four of the five school level administrators interviewed. These administrators also report leaving meetings with the content coaches “having accomplished something”.

Content for the meetings with their content coaches was typically focused on a specific unit of study that was applicable to what was taking place in the classrooms of their schools. Four administrators report that they worked with student data that was recent and the meeting with the coaches focused on specific learning outcomes involving revising or enhancing instruction. The meetings also involved the administrators reviewing assessment data from the content area, state assessment data, and teacher anecdotal data based on their interactions with students. Administrators also report that the focus rarely changed when meeting with the content coaches. School level administrators report the focus to be on a variety of reading strategies such as differentiation.

Overall school level administrators reported being satisfied with the structure of most of the district meetings they attended. As a collective group, school level administrators felt strongly that meetings were more dynamic when they had input into how the meetings would run. Administrators used words to describe district meetings such as “productive” and a “good use of my time” when they were provided the opportunity to participate while words such as “disengaged”, “mind somewhere else”, or “why was I here for the meetings” when the expectation was for them to sit and be given information, with limited participation.

#### *District Administrative Perspective*

District level administrators report having exchanges or interactions with school level administrators minimally on a monthly basis at district meetings, and on an as needed basis. Executive directors report touching base with their principals at least every six weeks and recognize that due to different constraints, primarily time, they may not interact with building level administrators as often as planned. Other district administrators report limited or no direct interactions with school level administrators. Each district administrator reported attending quarterly leadership meetings which all supervisors, principals, and content coaches attend. A district administrator who serves as program manager reported, “There were no substantial or meaningful interactions between them and school level administrators”.

When asked how often they interact with school level administrators, the responses were consistently “seldom”. District administrators stated that they do not have the time and that they respect the time of school level leaders. One district administrator reports “I interact with principals when they call me, and need questions



answered or if we are working jointly on a district project.” The overall response was that school level administrators were left to attend to their buildings.

District administrators report that the current meeting structure does not promote professional learning for the school level administrators that they supervise. Executive directors report:

*The current way our meetings run does not foster professional growth for my principals. I think we do a disservice to our principals by covering administrative tasks in meetings. This practice has been used for years and has become a fabric of our district culture, and what happens is the principals take this same structure back to their buildings and thus the professional learning opportunities are diminished.*

District level administrators reported that the structure of the meetings between district level and school level administrators varied based on the purpose of the meeting and who was leading the meeting. The content of the meetings also varied based on its purpose. Content was essentially based upon what district initiatives were being pushed or procedural task that school level administrators were required to complete.

#### *Administrative Meetings Minutes*

Minutes were reviewed from the monthly meetings that took place between executive directors, content coaches and principals. The most salient element that surfaced from the review was the consistency of the meetings. There was intentionality from the district level to ensure that school administrators met monthly. The goal was to make sure that the priorities taking place at all schools were aligned to district priorities.

The document analysis revealed that the meeting focus changed from month to month. Content experts from both inside and outside the district provided information to school level administrators. The data shows the content provided to school leaders was primarily informational and district leaders ran the meetings. The content consisted of topics ranging from reading strategies to science initiatives and from math curriculum updates to anticipated budget changes. School level administrators level of participation was primarily to take the information back to their sites. They were encouraged to ask questions for clarity and were provided an evaluative instrument following every meeting to determine if the meeting goals had been addressed.

#### Influences of Interactions on Instruction

*In what ways are the interactions considered to influence teaching and learning at the level of school and classroom?*

In this section the researcher focused on the influence of interactions between the administrative groups on professional development. Do administrators consider that these interactions affect instruction at the classroom level? The researcher also wanted to determine if the administrators considered there to be a symbiotic relationships where school level practices influenced programmatic decisions at the district level.

#### *Building Principal Perspective*

Building administrators did not feel that their interactions with district level administrators impacted the instruction at their schools. When asked directly about the impact on instruction, the school level administrators felt that the greatest impact on

instruction resulted from their interactions with teaching staff. One school level administrator reports:

*I am just thinking about that, I don't know if those are my interactions with the district, it's my interactions with my teachers. Now the urgency of those interactions with teachers probably is more urgent based on district interactions that we all need to meet AYP. So if you want to talk in that regard, there is that urgency, so therefore I interact with my staff on a regular basis.*

Another school level administrator reports that she is the sole instructional leader in their building and that “the executive director has no input on teaching and learning.” The school administrator felt that the impact on student achievement had little to do with her interactions with the district level administrator and much to do with her presence in the classroom as an instructional leader.

One school level administrator felt that there is an impact on instruction from the interactions between the two groups of administrators. This administrator notes that the connections with central administration are important to student achievement. This administrator goes on to say,

*Yes, making that connection is kind of hard. I think there is a multitude of factors that contribute itself to student achievement in this building. [I think having those perspectives and having those conversations with key stakeholders in the broader organization, definitely contributes{sic} to achievement because the conversations surround research based best practices, so when you approach it from that perspective it's win-win all over the place because you are*

*having the most progressive conversations possible about how you can accelerate student achievement].*

The administrator felt it critical to view instruction from it being grounded in best practices and concluded that the interactions with central administration allowed him to stay abreast of the latest research on instructional practices.

#### *School Practices Impacting the District*

School level administrators indicated that there is no formal process for effective practices taking place at individual sites to influence change at the district level. As one administrator put it,

*Yeah, I don't think there is a formal feedback system. I think when someone comes in and sees the instruction of what is happening in our classrooms, they take notice of the effectiveness and maybe discuss it at a higher level.*

The principal went on to state that when you have a small building it results in a uniqueness and the perspectives do not always resonate with the district-wide perspective. The principal feels that if you are in one building all day, every day, for an entire school year with students, you get lost in even really understanding where you are as a building. The principal expressed that it is only when you go out to other buildings that you get a sense of “we’re a good place”, but separate from that is still going back to the staff and having conversations with them. The principal states that executive directors and other district leaders are in a position to do this.

Another principal adds that they prefer to work at the site level and keep activities at the building level there. The principal states,

*You know I am doing some things behind the scenes that you are not aware of that I do here. There are leadership teams; if the superintendent had remained, then everybody was going to do a leadership team and a think-tank team. Think-tank, I have a think-tank. I truly have input from staff, have think-tank and the leadership. The other thing is pushing everybody into these classrooms as instructional leaders because I'm always on that. You can't know what is going on if you're in an office. You don't know your students if you're in the office. You have to be out and about in these classrooms.*

This principal reported that they have used books from conferences at their school and the executive director then adopted the books to be used at other school sites for the purpose of professional development and learning to meet the needs of black students.

Other school level administrators shared strategies that were started at their site levels and reached the district level through their executive directors. One principal states:

*Yes, I will give the example of our RTI [Response To Intervention]. I formed an RTI team, we received training, and we are the only school that went through it last summer, a couple more schools went, another SPPS school went in March, but at the time we saw an opportunity to apply for an external coach through the state. I had to get permission, and I had to go through like a million people to get it. But when I had a conference call with the executive directors on this, they thought it was fantastic and a great idea.*

The principal went on to say that the district was considering using their school as a district wide model for RTI intervention. The principal worked with district leadership on that and their site became the model.

In summary, school level administrators report perceptions that their interactions with district leadership have little impact on instruction. Three principals mentioned that the instructional leadership that they provide was critical to student achievement. Four principals recognized the need to comply with district requirements and understood that they had to work with district leaders; however these principals were clear that they were the ones who determined the instructional accountability at their sites. Two of the five principals perceived that strategies originating at their sites had reached the district level and were being used at multiple school sites.

#### *District Administrative Perspective*

Overall, district level administrators expressed that their greatest impact on schools is in the area of instruction. Executive Directors and Content Coaches concluded that their work with school staff was designed to improve instruction. Executive directors identified the support they provided to school level leaders included providing a clear focus on district priorities, clarity of curriculum, identification of teaching strategies that school level administrators should be seeing at their local levels, and professional development structures. Executive directors report that their efforts were directed to create a school system and not a system of schools, meaning that all school working together as opposed to serving their own agendas.

However, executive directors perceived that each school acted as separate entities and that the implementation of district priorities looked different at school sites.

Their goal was to bring uniformity to the district and if they provided school level principals with professional development in the areas of curriculum and instructional strategies then they would see some similarities around instruction across multiple sites.

One director stated,

*I come from a background of curriculum, instruction, and assessment and my conversations may be different from other supervisors of the past. It is my expectation that the work between school principals and me will increase student achievement or we should not be doing it.*

This executive director also reported that she has to be intentional with how she approaches her principals in order not to push them away, “it is about relationships.”

#### *Content Coaches*

Content coaches perceive that they impact instruction through providing resources to teachers and more specifically, providing professional development to teachers on district curriculum and monitoring district curriculum. These coaches understood their support to be in the areas of resources such as the creation of graphic organizers, protocols for instruction, and retrieving hard materials such as instructional books that teachers have identified that they need. The professional development that content coaches provided to building teachers included extensive training in district reform models and use of curriculum materials. Content coaches perceived the final area of support that they provided to teachers is through monitoring how they implemented the district curriculum. They reported that this is done through the creation of pacing guides, student profile sheets, and providing structural conceptual maps for teachers to use during instruction and planning.

Overall, district administrators perceived their interactions as having an impact on instruction. They cited that they provided rich resources that supported instruction, provided professional development that enhanced instructional strategies, and monitored compliance including implementation of district curriculum. District administrators viewed themselves as an integral part of the development of instructional strategies that assisted schools in reaching alignment with district priorities and uniformity across multiple school settings.

#### Perceived Impact of Interactions on Student Achievement

*Are the interactions viewed as effective and successful by each of the respective administrators and what is the perception of how the interactions influence students?*

This section describes the measures taken by both administrative groups to ensure the academic success of students. The discussion begins with looking at all students and narrows the scope to black students. The primary purpose here is to determine the involvement of administrative groups in the academic progression of black students in the public school setting.

#### *Building Principal Perspective*

The responses from school level principals varied and addressed the second part of the question regarding how the interactions between the administrative groups influenced students. All of the responses were focused and intentional around student learning and spoke to school level administrators' leadership foci and strengths. For example, one principal discussed curriculum, while another identified formative assessments, and others immediately went to data. The curriculum-focused school level administrator stated,



*Classroom, I'm in the classroom. Secondly, I sit with my think-tank team, and we look at what works, what doesn't, what type of curriculum looked at prior knowledge, and we put a scope and sequence together. Like Everyday Math, yeah we have Everyday Math here, we teach Everyday Math here, but it's our way. We put it together our way, with the scope and sequence. So we learned that African American children do not learn that way the spiral effect with the existing district curriculum provide. We learn here it is, you learn it and then you build on it. So when it comes to operations in Everyday Math, we look at every section of operations, where children really need to know it and we do it with our scope and sequence. That is what the teachers find.*

This administrator was adamant that the curriculum must meet the needs of the learners. The principal never discussed doing this activity with the executive director or content coach. It is also noted that the team that reviewed the curriculum did not have any district representation.

Another school level administrator focused on assessments. The district provides several assessments and the principal stated that her executive director did not specifically recommend one program over the other. The principal shared that the executive director allowed the decision to come from the school level. This administrator stated she felt that student learning grew faster when teachers employ formative assessments. The administrators stated that:

*There's a variety, it could be as simple as giving a student a running record and determining if there is growth, or what those needs are. I think always looking*

*at student work, teachers being able to organize and manage the data streams that are coming into their classrooms.*

The administrator considered that breaking down aggregate data from the formative assessments so that teachers' instructional focus could meet the students' needs made academic acceleration a reality for students. When asked directly if this changes for different student groups, the administrator responded,

*Absolutely. It helps shape our work. It is not about certain subgroups, it's about knowing each student and what that student needs. And then the data supports what your larger goals are. From a building wide perspective we know what sub-groups we need to target. So its not a finger pointing issue when you're meeting with teachers, its about saying this is what the data told us, this is what we determined as a goal, lets have conversations during grade level meetings about how we're doing and lets have some very honest conversations and if you need additional support or help then the conversations can be productive and the teachers can feel like there is someone there a) listening but b) also providing resources to help them get the job done.*

School level administrators were asked specifically, 'How do you ensure learning for your black students?' The responses overwhelmingly reported that the strategies and practices did not change for this particular group of students. One school level administrator reports,

*I have been in this building for 12 years, and the school is an intensely diverse building from a socio-economic level. The interactions, I don't necessarily*

*categorize it by saying my interactions with a Hmong student is different than an African American student. I think the bottom line is kids are kids.*

This school administrator also reported that the focus should be based on what the students need, regardless of their race. “It is about building relationships with every single student in your building. You can very easily know every student in your building and know something about them and develop a relationship with them.”

In summary, school level administrators perceived that their relationships with their sites and students influenced learning. Four of the principals spoke about the importance of relationships when working with students. No principals interviewed indicated that district leaders’ relationships with them or with their staff reached the student level.

#### *District Administrative Perspective*

District level administrators perceived that their impact on achievement was connected to the work that they do with the school principals and teaching staff. Executive Directors, Content Coaches, and Program Managers all perceived their work with school staff to influence student achievement. Executive directors indicated the support they provided to school leaders included providing student achievement data and engaging school level principals around the data.

Executive directors’ perceptions of their influence on student learning were relative to the support that they provide to building level administrators. When asked how they perceived their influence on student learning, executive directors unanimously reported that there was no connection to the student level; rather the support came through them to the school level principals. Their perceptions were consistent that each

school was monitoring student learning and as a result, student achievement was high and therefore the perceived level of influence was strong. As an executive director reported, “I provide the principal with resources and professional learning, and they in turn take the learning and resources back to their building. The results [student MCA II test scores] are high, so the process is working.”

Content coaches perceived their impact on learning in a similar manner to executive directors, that is, as an influence on the teacher to the student. Coaches perceived that the support that they provided to teachers resulted in better instructional practices, and thus increased student achievement. As a group, coaches were able to give specific examples of strategies provided to teachers, although none of the strategies reflected relational construct between themselves and the teacher or between the teacher and student. However they perceived that effective teaching strategies that teachers used to improve student performance were related to the support provided by them.

#### *School Comprehensive Improvement Plan (SCIP)*

Every school in the district was required to submit a yearly school comprehensive improvement plan (SCIP). The plan identifies goals on which the school will focus throughout the school year. Most schools focused their efforts on three goals: reading, math, and climate. The plan also included an action plan to attain goals, which was identified in terms of strategies. Strategies were organized into sections that provided: 1) research based rationale; 2) environment for learning; 3) curriculum and instructional focus; 4) professional development; and 5) parent involvement. Each SCIP is directly connected to the school’s operating budget. The

budget and goals must align with district priorities and be approved by executive directors and a program manager for district quality improvement.

**Table 4.2 – School Improvement Plans Alignment with District Priorities**

Schools	Goals aligned with district priorities	Strategies identified to meet goals	Focus on black students
School A	YES	YES	YES
School B	YES	YES	NO
School C	YES	YES	NO
School D	YES	YES	NO
School E	YES	YES	YES

**Source: Created by Researcher based on interview data**

Based on the review of the SCIPs all schools met the criteria for having goals aligned with district priorities and identified strategies to meet their goals. All the schools listed reading and math goals. Four out of the five schools were continuing to utilize elements of a reading recovery program that was previously funded through a Reading First grant. Strategies identified in the curriculum and instruction section contained explicit strategies for teachers to employ.

Interestingly, only two of the five schools were intentionally focusing on black students as a group according to their school comprehensive improvement plans. Table 4.1 highlights this factor. The other three schools were intentional about increasing overall student achievement; and the language did not target black students. The language used in the school improvement plans stated all students, aggregate and disaggregate student categories. The two schools focusing on black students set specific

benchmarks for this student group to attain and listed avenues of support that aid students and staff in reaching the benchmarks.

Overall district administrators perceived their impact on student learning as causal, and more as a result of the work that is done with school level administrators, teachers, and other school staff. District leaders felt that their interactions with school level leaders enabled student learning because of their working effectively with building personnel. Their view on the interactions between themselves and school leaders was that their interactions were successful.

#### Summary of Guiding Questions

Each administrative group had a unique perspective on how its role influenced student achievement. Both groups were alike in their perceptions that their influences impacted all students and not one student group more than any others. Both administrative groups avoided focusing explicitly on black students. There appeared to be an intentional and deliberate effort by both administrative groups not to speak about the black student group as a separate focus. The responses were always wrapped back around to speak about all students. Based on the perceptions of both administrative groups I conclude that, in the opinion of these administrators and especially at the school level, the closer they monitor instruction the more likely they are to have a positive impact on students' achievement, regardless of ethnicity.

The results of the response were synthesized to identify themes based on the research done and relevant response data. The themes were identified within the framework of the researcher's review of the literature on styles that guide leadership. Specifically, shared decision-making and transformational leadership were used to

frame the themes and categorize participants' responses. The identified themes are identified in Table 4.2. The table is arranged by the guiding research sub-questions. The researcher's assumptions were presented and compared to the results obtained from the study.

**Table 4.3 Emergent Themes – Perceived Influences**

Questions of Inquiry	Researcher Assumptions	Research Results	Emerging Themes
Nature of Interactions	Two groups interact regularly	Interactions present - consistent	Shared - Decision Making
Influence on Instruction	Instructional changes based on interactions	Locally monitored - Instruction based on local needs	Transformational Leadership
Impact on Black students	Intentional focus based on achievement gap	Non-specific to student group	Indirect focus

**Source: Created by researcher based on interview data**

### Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership aims at empowering followers through collaboration with leaders and working collectively to complete tasks. There are four interrelated components in this leadership style: 1) idealized influence or trust; 2) inspirational motivation or openness to creative solutions; 3) individual consideration or seeing the uniqueness of each entity; and 4) intellectual stimulation or challenges that lead to shared understandings. This section reports a summary of the perceptions of building and district level administrators regarding the components transformational leadership.

*Building Level Administrators Perceptions*

Building principals' perceptions of their leadership styles and the leadership styles of district leaders are consistent with the characteristics of transformational leadership. School level administrators viewed that idealized influence was evident and present between themselves and district leaders. All school leaders interviewed spoke of trust taking place between themselves and district personnel. Two principals reported, "I trust the executive director to make decisions that will support our efforts at this level and feel that they trust me to run my building." School leaders also reported that inspirational motivation took place as district leaders provided an overall vision and identified priorities, as well as allowing schools the autonomy to meet goals and priorities their own way. Once school leaders had the big picture view, they were allowed flexibility to accomplish set goals. Three principals reported having the autonomy to weave the district goals into their existing program. For example the district required each school to support literacy by having a coach to support teachers. At two of the school sites they used the coaching position to coach teachers on teaching literacy through their specific school programs, one being an international program and the other being a science-technology program. This also suggests that individual consideration was in place.

Building principals did not perceive that intellectual stimulation was totally present in their interactions with district administrators. School principals reported that they were not provided with challenges from the district office that afforded them motivation for completing assigned tasks. Furthermore they were expected to complete tasks in which they had little or no input and which may not have been applicable to



their school sites. As a result, school level leaders felt that the goals and priorities were set by the district level administration and were therefore not shared goals. As several school level leaders reported, “the goals are given to us, and we make it fit our current situation...sometimes it works for our sites and at other times we allow it to pass us over.” This led to the school level leaders lack of inspirational motivation since school leaders did not feel there was group interdependence through shared goals.

#### *District Level Administrators Perceptions*

The perceptions of district administrators’ regarding their interactions with school-level administrators support the elements of transformational leadership. District leaders cited their ability to provide opportunities to collaborate, provide resources and support, which are evidence of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individual consideration. Trust was in place as reported by both administrative groups. This trust is the result of the collective commitment to the standards and student success at meeting those standards. An executive director was quoted as saying, “principals know their sites and can pin point what it will take to move their students toward standards. My job is to believe in them and provide support where needed.” Respect is reciprocated between the two administrative groups as members from both sides put student needs first. As one district leader put it, “I hear what my principals have to say. I want to know their perspective because it has to work for them at their sites.”

District leaders identified intellectual stimulation in their efforts to provide school leaders with a common vision and clear expectations. Through providing school leaders with district goals, district administrators felt this would serve as a challenge to school

principals. “Each school was given a goal of a ten percent gain in reading for all student groups on the state test. I am confident that my principals will achieve this goal.” District leaders’ appeal to student success provided the impetus for school leaders to move forward. One district administrator stated, “We do this by allowing the goals and shared vision to drive all decisions that we make. We keep coming back to this as a starting point.”

District leaders accomplish inspirational motivation by providing school level personnel with resources and structures to support professional learning. The vision of district leaders’ provides the framework for school leaders to see how they connect to the leader, the organization, each other, and the district goals. “I sit down with my principals at the beginning of the year to reinforce district expectations.” Once school leaders have this big picture view and are allowed the autonomy, they can creatively overcome any obstacles in the way of the mission through new approaches and open ideas and not be criticized because their ideas are different from those of district leaders.

District leaders also perceived themselves to be transformative in the area of individual consideration. They cited this as a result of their efforts to standardize practices across the district. District leaders recognized the need to have uniformity in regards to policies and procedures, vision and priorities. However, district leaders perceived the need flexibility by building level leaders as to how they put set expectations in place at their school sites. “It is not a one size fits all. We provide the big picture and school leaders make it work.” District leaders also state, “Principals have to make it work, as they are in the trenches. They know the lay of the land and

what will work or not work”. This statement shows that district leaders recognize the uniqueness of leading a school and applying the correct strategies at the correct time.

In summary, transformational leadership, as the literature defines, was not taking place. While leaders at both the district and school levels are able to use the terminology that is associated with transformational leadership, the practice was superficial. Individual school sites experienced success on state test, and the organization as a whole continues to lack adequate academic progress on these same assessments. This can be attributed to the fact that the organization is not transforming, and leadership remains narrowly focused on individual successes.

#### Shared Decision-Making

Shared decision-making (SDM) represents a flattening of the typical hierarchical organization structure by involving workers in decision-making. Central to the concept of shared decision making are: (1) learning from past experience; (2) acquiring knowledge; (3) processing on an organizational level; (4) identifying and correcting problems; (5) decision making authority; and (6) organizational change. This section summarizes the perceptions of building and district level administrators regarding shared decision-making.

#### *School Level Administrators Perceptions*

Building principals report that their perceptions of shared decision making vary based on which district administrator with whom they are working. They also reported the need to have decisions made at the district level and passed down to them, as they have to make some decisions at their local levels with no input from other staff members. As such, school level administrators felt divided regarding the given

elements of shared decision-making. School level administrators perceived that they have the ability to create the vision for their school as well as to recognize the need to have that vision be aligned with the broader district priorities. All five principals interviewed reported that they, along with their staff, created their school's vision statement. A principal responds, "It is my responsibility to provide the vision and direction here at my school and at the same time I have to be inclusive of district goals." School level administrators recognized that the vision statements had to speak to student achievement. No principal stated that the vision was created in conjunction with district level administration but stated that their executive directors referenced school vision statements at least once a year as part of their annual evaluation.

School level administrators had different perceptions of their decision-making authority. They felt like "middle level managers" as two school level administrators put it:

*I am kind of a mediator of sorts, I am the instructional leader of the building on one level, but I am also glorified middle management on another level in terms of if there is district initiative that needs to be implemented. So in terms of trying to bring all the perspectives back, the next step in this building in terms of determining what outcomes would then be created would be having a lot of conversations with my building level coach.*

This feeling was a result of the involvement of district administrators making decisions around curriculum issues and program decisions. Some school level administrators report that decisions are passed to them to share with their staff or passed to them to put in place at their sites. One reporting school level administrator stated, "the shared in

shared decision making means that I go to the district meeting and then I come back to my site and share with my staff what the decision is.” The principal felt that the district decision was not supportive of their school’s focus.

School level administrators perceived their sense of power as small or non-existent. The power they felt they possessed was limited to managing operations at their school sites. This group of administrators also stated that they had begun receiving development and support by district administrators, particularly in the area of reading. Their monthly meetings recently had focused around reading topics. School level administrators recognized this as a good use of their time and that it would directly benefit their work. They also stated that they feel that the communication was effective between them and district administrators. It was reported that communications were timely, and received well from both groups. “Whenever I need my supervisor, they get back to me within the same day. This is greatly appreciated, especially when I am in a tight spot.”

#### *District Level Administrators Perceptions*

District-level administrators perceived themselves to be strong at shared decision making. For example, an executive director reports, “I trust my principals to make good decisions and I will support them as much as I can. They know that they can bounce ideas off me and I give them honest feedback.” This group spoke adamantly about empowering school leaders and providing them with the necessary resources to accomplish district goals and their schools’ vision. District administrators understand that schools have the autonomy to create their own vision statements. Although vision statements may be worded differently, they fall under the priorities and initiatives

identified by the district. “Semantics is what it boils down to. I know that my schools are following district initiatives. They just have to make it fit their school... it may sound different and sometimes look different, but at the end of the day it is the same.”

District administrators’ perceptions of decision-making authority revealed that they felt that school level administrators possessed local control over this element. The feeling was that the school administrators knew their sites best and were closer to the issues at the site than they were. The perception was that the district would support site leaders and provide resources to sites as needed. Accompanying this perception of decision-making authority was the view of power, and district administrators again felt that site leaders had the power to run their school effectively based on needs associated with their schools. They were careful to point out that some decisions had to come from the district due to legal and policy requirements and principals should understand this. “Sometimes decisions come to us (the district) from the state or federal government. School principals know that our hands are tied and we have to be compliant.”

District administrators identified principal development as an area that was recently getting attention and were responsive to meeting the needs of local administrators to be effective leaders at their individual sites. It was noted that principals must have a solid understanding of what they are expected to put in place at their schools, including supervision and development of their staffs. District administrators were also confident that their communications with school level leaders were timely and need specific. They perceived themselves to be accessible to schools via email, phone, or in person upon request. It was important to district administration

that school level leaders feel supported by them and that there is a sense of trust and respect reciprocated by both levels of administration.

### Sensemaking

Sensemaking depends on the collective learning opportunities that are available to administrators. Organizational learning is a critical component of sensemaking because it prevents school level and district level administrators' current beliefs and experiences from interfering with their ability to implement and interpret the policies in the manner that policy makers intended (Leithwood and Louis, 2004). This section reports a summary of the perceptions of building and district level administrators regarding how they arrive at decisions.

#### *School Level Administrators Perceptions*

School level administrators consistently processed information and made meanings that led to decisions that they perceived were best for their program. They were careful with disseminating the directives, district priorities, and information provided to them by district level administration. There was an overall understanding that teachers need not be overwhelmed, and it was the school level leaders' responsibility to ensure this. "I can't just come back from a district meeting and present everything to my staff. I have to make sense of how everything fits together and will benefit my students" one principal reported.

School level administrators' ability to sense what was appropriate for their sites allowed their sites to produce proficient standardized results in reading and provide a climate of professional learning for staff. This group's ability to have a common understanding of goals had a large impact on student achievement; based on interviews,

documents analyzed, and research conclusions. One explicit example was the decision of four of the administrators to continue with elements of Reading Recovery that were working for their sites even after funding had been eliminated from the district level. “I have a Reading Recovery program that I continue to use because I see the student growth. The district has another program that the school should be using, but I will stick with what is working for now” reports one principal, and three other principals made similar remarks regarding Reading Recovery.

Three school level administrators stated, “I know the climate of my building. I know the staff needs, and how district initiatives would go over here.” This group of administrators was able to construct meanings socially of the new information and apply it to the context of their schools. As one principal put it:

*And I think our role as building administrators is hearing all those voices and hearing everything and then bringing it back and trying to make sense of it, and organizing and making it become meaningful for your building.*

*When I share with them the perspective I perceive, and then together it is kind of one of those things where it is kind of about strategic empowerment, in that I know what we would theoretically need to do, but it is not about me just standing and saying okay guys this is what we need to do.*

#### *District Level Administrator Perspective*

District leaders had an understanding of different needs for schools and noticed that some of the district priorities provided to all schools did not fit the needs of every



school. District leaders recognized the need to use past experiences and allow school level leaders to find patterns on which to base decisions on how the priorities would look at their school site. As one district leader stated,

*So with that the affect is, it is about kind of trust and being very open and wanting to be very honest with them and just saying guys this is where we are at, so you have an opportunity to be the masters of your own destiny. In my experience in this district, people generally even though it is a little more work, enjoy blazing their own trail, and defining who they are and who they are as a building, versus being told what to do.*

District administrators had a larger organizational perspective, which they use as their primary framework to respond to policy initiatives. District leaders consider all school, programs, and available funding when making decisions. Individual differences of schools come into consideration at the stage of implementation and not as the decision are being made. The social construct through which district leaders work differs from the social construct of a school level administrator, and thus the frame of reference when making decisions is different. This also impacts the meaning making that district administrators have as their scope encompasses more than one site.

Factors that may determine district administrators' response are previous familiarity with the policy, diagnosis of specific issues within their knowledge and experiences, and assumptions of student needs as well as their relationships with the school level leaders. This causes their understanding of policy problems to look different from the sensemaking of a school level administrator. District administrators' experiences are wider in scope due to their responsibilities of working with more

schools. The multitude of responsibilities that district administrators carry out on a daily basis results in their process of sensemaking being perceived differently than that of school level administrators.

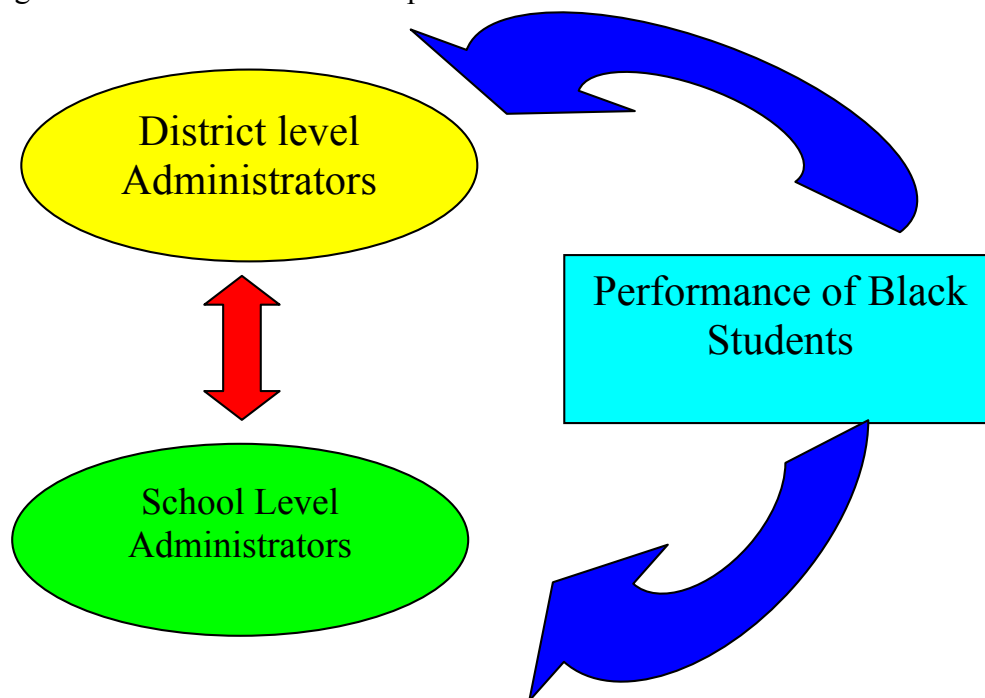
### Summary of Findings

The perceptions of school level administrators and district level administrators on the influence of their interactions regarding student achievement were mixed. District level administrators viewed their influence on school level work such as instruction and student learning as a result of their interactions with building level administrators. In other words, through the top-down hierarchical structure, their influence came through the principals and impacted the achievement of all students. District administrators' perceptions of the influences can be identified as intentional and purposeful. They felt that the support rendered to school level administrators afforded them school success. District level administrators also viewed the relationships between themselves and school level administrators as bi-directional, meaning that the interactions were reciprocal and each group contributed equally to the relationship. See Figure 4.1.

The fluidity of the interactions, based on the district level administrators, allowed for trust to be established between the two administrative groups and the schools to produce success for students. District administrators and school level administrators both communicated largely in language pertaining to all students. Both administrative groups were intentional regarding their conversations about students and consistently stated that strategies and support for black students were not different from other student groups. One exception was a school level principal who indicated that

black students did not learn the math curriculum in a particular way so that educators in her school modified how it was taught.

Figure 4.1 Perceived Relationships – District Administrators



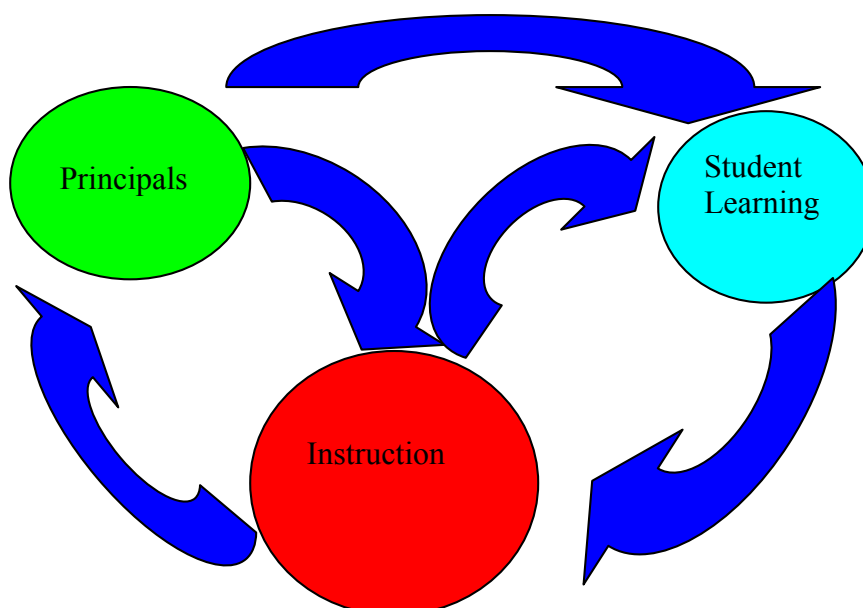
Source: Created by

Researcher based on interview data

The perceptions of school level administrators regarding their relationships with district level administrators were also mixed. Figure 4.2 illustrates the perceived disconnect reported by school level leaders in regards to their relationships with district level administrators. The figure does not reflect the presence or influence of district leaders. School leaders recognized the hierarchical structure that is in place and the need to operate within the framework provided to them. Even with the hierarchal structure in place, trust was strongly evident between building and district level administrators. As one school principal states,

*I think trust is asking the right questions and being ready to hear what the honest answer is. It is listening and hearing, and hopefully with the number of interactions that you have you are hearing something a little bit different, you are identifying what those common themes are.*

Figure 4.2 Perceived Relationships – School Level Administrators



Source: Created by researcher based on interviews

School level leaders reported their appreciation of having clear priorities identified for them and resources available to address those priorities.

Having the autonomy to run their buildings, school level administrators viewed their influence on student achievement as a result of the work at their site level.

Principals interviewed for the study highlighted a different area that contributed to the success that their school experienced. Most of the responses could be synthesized to the understanding that the principals were in touch with what was taking place at their

schools, and operating as instructional leaders. School level administrators perceived their influences on student learning as their ability to change instructional practices based on what they sense is needed from progress monitoring and formative assessment data.

The perceptions of school level administrators differed from district administrators, as the group viewed the relationships as one-directional, meaning that the interactions were related more to the school being compliant with district priorities. This was the case even if that priority was not immediately benefitting their schools. School level leaders identified the priorities as necessary; however they felt strongly that each school site had different needs. When their specific needs do not align with set priorities, it became challenging for school level administrators to stay motivated in that particular area of focus.

Overall, school administrators' perceptions were that district level influence was minimal. In other words, the perceptions were that the hierarchical structure existed for supervision and support as required. The direct actions that guided student learning took place at the school level only and the interactions with district level administrators were loosely coupled with their efforts. For example one principal reports, "I am not sure if the district is aware of some of the things that take place here. I am okay with that. They don't come and regulate." Figure 4.2 illustrates this perception of school level leaders. District leaders provided the overall direction and the school leaders employed strategies that were needed at their local level as they saw fit. The perceptions of school level leaders are that the influence of administrative

relationships on student learning is influenced by what happens at the site level, regardless of the relationship between school and district administrators.

## CHAPTER V

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

## Introduction

There is a national movement to improve the performance of urban black students. Moore (2006) notes that the performance of these students has broad social and economic implications in the United States. In other words, the future success of our nation depends on ethnic minority students' level of educational attainment (Mau, 1995).

Some researchers have blamed factors beyond the school's control for student failure. For example, Ogbu (2003) asserted that low-effort syndrome inhibited black students from reaching high academic achievement. Ladson-Billings (1994) asserts that a factor contributing to the performance of black students is the lack of culturally relevant teaching taking place in schools. Delpit (1988) claims that aspects of power have created a schism between liberal educational movements and non-white, non-middle-class teachers and communities. Hale (2001) argues that the activities taking place in the classroom between the teacher and student are at the root of performance issues of black students. These research studies did not speak to the role of administrators in the educational process for this student group.

School leaders have more control than they know over factors affecting student performance. Strong instructional leadership can affect the climate, and school administrators have the power and responsibility to create a positive climate within their schools. They also need to hold high expectations for students (Louis, 2006). In addition to instructional leadership and overall school climate, there must be strong

relationships between administrators at the district and school levels and these relationships must affect the performance of all students, especially black students. School leaders must have a commitment to see black students succeed in school and their actions and behaviors must be deliberate in order to fulfill their commitment to this student group. This commitment and drive must take place on all levels of administration. However, essential to the impact on student achievement is the relationship that occurs between district and school administrators.

Educational administrators must lead their organizations to reach high standards and make differences in the lives of children by using their ability to make sense of the environments in which they work and reach shared understandings based on their work with one another. Shared understandings cannot be realized without relationships. Through shared understandings organizations learn. An organization that facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms its members creates the capacity to expand the knowledge and expertise of its members.

The purpose of schools is to provide adequate education for students so that they may become productive citizens. Schools have an obligation to carry out this purpose for every student. As educators fulfill this purpose they must be continually learning themselves. This learning must take place at all levels of the school system. For this to happen, a practice must be in place to allow for dialogue and reflection. I believe that this practice is organizational learning. Organizational learning will guide this chapter as it helps frame the components of transformational leadership, shared decision-making and the process of school leaders making meaning of their lived experiences.



Chapter five begins with a discussion on organizational learning. The chapter then discusses the relevance of relationships in organizational learning. The chapter then goes on to discuss how knowledge of administrative perceptions can inform the practice of educational leadership. The chapter concludes with implications of the research for administrators at the district and school levels.

### Discussion

#### *Organizational Learning*

Organizational learning involves turning facts or information into knowledge that is shared and that can be acted upon. Improving organizational learning should always be the goal of educators. Through each learning task or endeavor, educational leaders are taking in information and applying it to their specific circumstances to construct meaning. Learning is continuously evolving and building off the experiences and knowledge of leaders. Senge (1990) created the phrase learning organizations. He defines learning organizations as:

*Organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together.*

Senge further writes that all people have the capacity to learn, but the structures in which they have to function are often not conducive to reflection and engagement. Furthermore, people may lack the tools and guiding ideas to make sense of the situations they face.

My personal experience with organizational learning is that it takes time for school districts to experience learning at this level. Learning at this level requires individuals to gain new knowledge as well as operate in structures where they can reflect and engage so that learning can happen. This typically begins on a small scale at a team level within an individual school before it grows and becomes something that is done by the collective group. I view organizational learning as an intentional practice that leaders within an organization should facilitate happening. From here, leaders should then allow this practice to grow and become an organizational norm. This effort must be an intentional act because educators are doers and seldom take time to focus on learning. The focus on collective learning is fundamental to accomplish organizational learning. Collective learning is important to organizational learning, and building strong relationships are critical in order for this learning to happen.

### *Relationships*

Schools systems are relationship-intensive places that operate in unique ways to attain student learning. For student learning to happen, there must be work towards the establishment of positive and effective relationships amongst all stakeholders. The review of extant literature spoke to the significance of relationships between teacher and students, principal and teachers, teachers and principal and community. There is little in the literature on the relationships of principal and district leader. In executing practice from theory (or vice-versa), educational leaders must become immersed in the charge of forging viable, lasting relationships at all levels that include all stakeholders. Importantly, there must be a strong relationship between educational leaders, at both the

district and school levels. Effective school leaders must create environments where trust is felt and taking a risk can occur with high levels of comfort (Rude, 2005).

I believe that viable relationships are the life or death difference in the manifestation of organizational learning between educational leaders. If organizational learning is to be a reality, trust has to be alive and operating amongst leaders at both district and school levels. Upon the establishment of trust, educational leaders have the freedom to take risks. The risks that the educational leaders take allow them to distribute and obtain knowledge from one another without fear of repercussion. An example of such a risk in this study is when one school principal changed how the district math curriculum was taught at her site. Being a prescriptive math program, following a designed sequence and daily pacing guide, this method was not working for the students attending the school. There were no repercussions for this risk; however the experience was not shared with the larger organization.

When a viable relationship exists between both levels of administrators, interpretations of acquired knowledge become shared understandings. As shared understandings are created and nurtured they become a part of the organizational memory that is created between the administrative groups. Going back to the math curriculum example, this would have been a good opportunity for the principal, district math coach, and executive director to have meaningful dialogue. This dialogue could have been expanded to other district and school leaders. The dialogue could have also benefitted the organization as a collective whole. This is possible when there is trust and strong relationships exist.

*Administrative Perceptions of Relationships between District and School Leaders*

This study examined the perceptions of administrators at the district and school levels regarding their relationship with one another. It offers some insight into how leaders at different levels perceive their relationships and how they understand the role of their relationships. It illustrates the importance of the site context as well as that of the larger district setting. The perceptions of leaders regarding relationships differed from the expectations suggested by the literature.

When relationships are strong, learning is more likely to occur. I saw evidence of this with school principal and district content coaches. Their interactions around reading strategies provided engaging dialogue where both the coach and principal provided ideas and critiques of instructional strategies. These interactions strengthened the relationship between the two groups and learning was expanded. The learning not only affected them but also reached the classroom level.

I did not find this type of interaction between school principals and executive directors. These school leaders perceived that relationships exist but learning resulting from their interactions is not evident. The data does show that components of transformational leadership to be in place. Both district and school-level leaders perceived themselves to have idealized influences, inspirational motivation, and individual consideration but those components were not enough to produce learning between these groups of administrators. Transformational leadership is focused more on the relationship between leaders and followers than on the educational work of school leadership. We need to identify more fully the role that transformational leadership plays in the development of organizational learning.

## Implications

### *Implications for District Leaders*

Research suggests that reflective practice is an important component of organizational learning (York-Barr et al., 2006). Reflective practice amongst and between district and school level leaders must take place and must become a structural part of district leaders intentional efforts to strengthen organizational learning. However, this task will be difficult for district leaders because school level leaders perceive their time to be productive only when efforts were connected to instructional growth. Building leaders often focused on doing, with little or no time for reflection (York-Barr et al, 2006).

In order for organizations to be effective, leaders must be on the same page and have shared understandings. District and school leaders did perceive themselves to be working effectively with one another. They considered their interactions to be effective if they left one another alone for the most part. However, by leaving each other alone there was limited interaction and opportunities to make meaning of their work. The literature would suggest that regular meetings between two groups allows for collective understanding amongst members to happen.

### *Implications for School Principals*

The findings show that school leaders did not see the benefit of their interactions with district level leaders. School leaders seemed to have an incomplete understanding of some of the roles of district leaders, specifically the value of how their own interactions with district leaders impacted student learning. School leaders often

reported that student success was a result of the instructional leadership provided at the school level. There was no emphasis placed on the contributions of district leaders.

School level leaders feel that acting independently did not hinder larger organization growth. Members of this group of leaders fail to see the district as a whole and did not see how their interactions with district leaders benefit learning for the district as a whole. This narrow perspective leads to school leaders having a myopic view of organizational learning. Not only does this narrow perspective limit learning for the school system as a whole, it can also have an adverse effect on the growth of the individual school leader. There was one school leader who recognized the need to get out his building and find out what other schools were doing. The school principal did not speak to his interactions with other principals, but it is broad thinking like this that leads to collective understandings.

School principals are intentional with their interactions with their site staff. They check in with them on a consistent basis, have meaningful dialogues with staff around instruction and student data, and are able to provide staff with support as needed. For example, one school principal stressed the importance of being in the classrooms daily. She felt this was part of instructional leadership and felt because she was in the classrooms regularly, she was able have purposeful conversations with teachers. School leaders have to be just as intentional about their relationships with district leaders as they are aware of their relationships with the staff they supervise.

#### *Implications for Further Research*

This addresses the gap in the literature regarding relationships between district and school leaders. Research is increasingly focusing on principal leadership and

district leadership as individual functions. These two groups work together and their relationships are important to the field of education. Future research on how these groups work together can increase our understanding of educational leadership.

I would recommend that future research consider how district and school leaders function in relation to a specified task. It is important to view organizational learning from the standpoint of relationships and task. However, current research tends to create dichotomies of principals leading through tasks assigned versus principals leading through relationships (Robinson, 2007). Leadership studies often identify tasks that leaders must perform while omitting the importance of relationship skills. This study focused on relationships more than tasks per se and my conclusion is that relationships and task go hand in hand.

## Epilogue

Emancipating change in the lives of children has been the driving force that has motivated me through my career in education. From the time I started my first teaching assignment working with junior high school students, learning math from them and teaching when I could, I recognized the importance of relationships. Not only did these relationships serve to guide our acquisition of knowledge collectively, these relationships also supported us in our life's journey. The time we spent together enabled a belief in each other that made us want to give more and succeed at all possible costs. Relationships like these make a difference in the lives of people especially children.

As I have pursued my career, I have held on to the lessons learned from those first few years of teaching. The lesson that has resonated with me most is the fact that relationships matter. The importance of connecting with people through getting to know who they are and listening to their story is critical to the relationship flourishing. I am reminded of a former superintendent who I worked with that stressed the importance of my knowing who I am and why I am here in education. I am here as an African-American male charged with changing the lives of others. Through the personal vision statement of 'children are making better decisions' and a mission statement of 'guide children in their development of strong foundations; academically, emotionally, and socially' I utilize the relationships that I have to bring this vision and mission to fruition.

Emancipating change for all children requires a collaborative effort from adults and a continuation of learning through shared experiences and the acquisition of new knowledge. Knowledge grows exponentially and technology makes it readily available



via mediums such as the World Wide Web, Internet, social networking, blogging and other technological advancements. When I was young I was told that through a book I could mentally go anywhere that I desired. Technological advancements have made it possible for children to not only travel the world mentally but visually experience it. These tools have assisted adults in sharing their experiences and knowledge for the benefit of children.

Through the process of completing this dissertation I was able to visualize the possibility of adult relationships enabling an increase in knowledge to educational leadership. By studying a small group of educational leaders, whom I identify as experts at their crafts, I was able to review the process of transformation of their school sites from mediocre student performance to high student achievement. They all approached this transformational process from a unique perspective. The common threads amongst the leaders were their relationships with their staff and a clear direction of where they wanted to take their schools. Each leader spoke of the work they performed with staff individually as well as collectively. The result of the work of these leaders and their staff was impressive. What perplexed me, however, were the silos in which the leaders operated.

The possibility of large-scale systematic change was paralyzed by the actions of leaders to keep their expertise at their local sites. There appeared to be a culture of fear from the context of the broader organization and as a result, leaders kept their ideas to themselves. This approach does not support the expansion of knowledge and fosters superficial relationships while fostering relationships and promotes a sense of competition among schools, staff, and leaders. While competition can be good, this

level and type of competition is malignant to organizational learning and limits the desire of leaders to share their experiences with one another.

I think it is impossible to emancipate change when you operate in fear and competition. As educational leaders it is our duty to make a difference in the life of each child with whom we come into contact. In order for us to change we need to share our experiences, stories, successes, and failures with one another and expand the knowledge base. Fear has to be placed aside in order for growth to transpire. As an educational leader committed to emancipating change, I realize that operating from a platform of fear does a disservice to the profession and more importantly to the students I serve. My charge moving forward from this dissertation work is to utilize the relationships I have with teachers, administrators, and community members in order to share my experiences and grow the educational body of knowledge.

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## APPENDIX A

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL 1

Nature of the Interactions:

1. Who do you interact with at the district/school level pertaining to academics?
  - a. Positions/Role
2. What is the purpose of your interaction?
3. Is there a form or structure for the interactions?
4. How frequently do you these interactions take place?
5. Who determines the content of the interaction and what are some examples of content?

Based on the interactions taking place between you and (Depends on their role)....

6. What priorities for School Improvement are generated?
7. Have the priorities you mentioned been embedded in the culture of the school? Give an example.
8. What is the affect from the interactions(between you and .....)? (e.g., sense of trust, support, respect that emerges from the interactions) – directly ask them (trust, support, etc)

Impact on teaching and learning

9. Is there evidence that supports those interactions between district and school level administrators has an impact on instruction?
10. If so what is the evidence?
11. If not, what do you feel impedes this from happening?
12. Is there a feedback process that allows for current teaching practices to affect the decision making of district and school level administrators? Provide example.

Impact on Student Learning and Achievement

13. How do you ensure that your students are successful in school?
14. Does your strategy change for different student groups?
15. What do you do to ensure that students are learning?
16. Does that look different for different groups?
17. Do you have discussions around achievement for different student groups?
  - i. Who is involved?
  - ii. Who determines what is discussed?
18. Describe your experiences in working with Black students.
  - a. How is data used?
  - b. Action steps

**APPENDIX B**  
**INTERVIEW PROTOCOL II**

**Interview Protocol (2)**

**Participant Information:**

1. How long have you worked with the district?
2. What is your current position?

**Interactions:**

3. Who do you interact with at the school level?
4. What is the purpose of your interaction?
5. Is there a form or structure for the interactions? If so, then what?
6. How often do you interact and for how long do you interact?
7. Who determines the content of the interaction and what are some examples of content?
8. What are the roles of those persons you interact with?

**Interactions Results:**

9. What priorities for School Improvement are generated?
10. Are resources available for school improvement? If so provide an example.
11. Have said interactions added to the culture for school improvement?
12. What is the affect from the interactions? (e.g., sense of trust, support, respect that emerges from the interactions)



**APPENDIX C****CODE CATEGORIES**

## Meetings:

- Consistent ( C )
- Inconsistent (IC)
- Led by Consultant (CL)
- Led by District Administrator (DA)
- Led by Principal (P)
- Led by Other (O)
- Content Focus
  - Reading
  - Math
  - Science
  - Budget
  - Personnel
  - Other
- Type of Meeting
  - Informational (IM)
  - Professional development (PD)

## School Comprehensive Improvement Plans (SCIP)

- Goals
  - Listed
  - Not listed
  - Aligned with District Priorities
  - Not Aligned with District Priorities
  - Focus
    - Reading
    - Math
    - Science
    - Climate
    - Other
- Strategies
  - Listed
  - Not listed
  - Aligned with District Priorities
  - Not Aligned with District Priorities
  - Focus
    - Reading
    - Math
    - Science
    - Climate
    - Other

- Targeted Focus
    - Focus Identified
    - No focus identified
    - Black Students
    - NCLB indicators
    - Other
-

**APPENDIX D**  
**CODING SHEET**

Source	Category	Page Number	Key Quote
School A SCIP Year 1			
School A SCIP Year 2			
School A SCIP Year 3			
School B SCIP Year 1			
School B SCIP Year 2			
School B SCIP Year 3			
School C SCIP Year 1			
School C SCIP Year 2			
School C SCIP Year 3			
School D SCIP Year 1			
School D SCIP Year 2			
School D SCIP Year 3			
School E SCIP Year 1			
School E SCIP Year 2			
School E SCIP Year 3			
Principal Meeting Month 1			
Principal Meeting Month 2			
Principal Meeting			

Month 3			
Principal Meeting Month 4			
Principal Meeting Month 5			
Principal Meeting Month 6			
Principal Meeting Month 7			
Principal Meeting Month 8			
Principal Meeting Month 9			
Principal Meeting Month 10			
Principal Meeting Month 11			
Principal Meeting Month 12			

**APPENDIX E**

**IRB CONSENT FORM**

The IRB: Human Subjects Committee determined that the referenced study is exempt from review under federal guidelines 45 CFR Part 46.101(b) category #2 SURVEYS/INTERVIEWS; STANDARDIZED EDUCATIONAL TESTS; OBSERVATION OF PUBLIC BEHAVIOR.

Study Number: 0805E33581

Principal Investigator: Tyrone Brookins

Title(s):

School Leadership: Relationships Increase the Performance of Urban Black Students

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This e-mail confirmation is your official University of Minnesota RSPP notification of exemption from full committee review. You will not receive a hard copy or letter. This secure electronic notification between password protected authentications has been deemed by the University of Minnesota to constitute a legal signature.

The study number above is assigned to your research. That number and the title of your study must be used in all communication with the IRB office.

Research that involves observation can be approved under this category without obtaining consent.

**SURVEY OR INTERVIEW RESEARCH APPROVED AS EXEMPT UNDER THIS CATEGORY IS LIMITED TO ADULT SUBJECTS.**

This exemption is valid for five years from the date of this correspondence and will be filed inactive at that time. You will receive a notification prior to inactivation. If this research will extend beyond five years, you must submit a new application to the IRB before the study's expiration date.

Upon receipt of this email, you may begin your research. If you have questions, please call the IRB office at (612) 626-5654.

You may go to the View Completed section of eResearch Central at <http://eresearch.umn.edu/> to view further details on your study.

The IRB wishes you success with this research.