

CLOSING THE READING ACHIEVEMENT GAP BETWEEN AFRICAN AMERICAN
STUDENTS AND THEIR PEERS AT A SUBURBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL: THE IMPACT OF
SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLANS.

by

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this Dissertation in Practice was to design a School Improvement Plan focused on improving reading performance of African American students at Suburban Middle School (SMS). The problem of practice was that African American students at Suburban Middle School have performed significantly lower than their White peers over the course of the 2009-2013 school years in reading performance. The reading deficiencies of African American students needed to be directly addressed in a new School Improvement Plan (SIP). The literature review of this study found that there are many different components that influence the reading performance of African American students. For this Dissertation in Practice, a new School Improvement Plan focused primarily on 6 different areas will be the end result. The components that will be examined are: 1) school climate, 2) utilization of data, 3) parental involvement, 4) professional development, 5) instructional strategies, and 6) collaboration. While these are the 6 key elements of successful models, there were also additional sub groupings within each element that also had an influence on student achievement levels.

In addition to examining previous School Improvement Plans at SMS, the end result and final deliverable was a School Improvement Plan designed to close the existing achievement gap in reading between African American students and their peers at SMS. Suggested use for the new model of the School Improvement Plan was to focus specifically on the 6 key elements to address the reading performance of African American students.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

AYP- Adequate Yearly Progress

DiP- Dissertation in Practice

ESE- Exceptional Student Education.

FAA-Florida Alternate Assessment

NAEP- National Assessment of Educational Progress

NCLB- No Child Left Behind

PLC- Professional Learning Communities

SEL- Social Emotional Learning

SES- Socioeconomic status

SIP- School Improvement Plan

SMS- Suburban Middle School

SWPBS- School Wide Positive Behavioral Supports

CHAPTER 1

Problem of Practice

The problem that exists at Suburban Middle School (SMS) is that while certain identified subgroups have been achieving progress in reading, there is a major disparity between African American students and their White peers. This is a problem that is occurring in the 6th, 7th, and 8th grades at SMS. The result is a widening of the achievement gap between the African American students and other subgroups. The National Assessment of Educational Progress or (NAEP) indicates that in 2007, African American students at the fourth grade level scored 27 points lower than White students on a 0 to 500 point scale. When reaching the eighth grade, the gap still existed, and there was no measureable change to report when 2007 reports were compared to 1992 and 2005 results. African Americans still scored on average 27 points lower than their white classmates (Rueda, 2011). Some educators believe that systemic racism is the cause of the discrepancy in achievement levels between African Americans and White students. One researcher claims that the field of reading comprehension and research testing is primarily responsible for the current state of inequities. The examination of research and testing methods remains important in an attempt to “level the playing field.” If there are inconsistencies and inequities that exist, the current achievement gap will only increase before it gets any better. Attempting to create tests and standards that do not contain cultural biases is a difficult task.

There are a multitude of research articles that attempt to explain why there appears to be more non proficient students among African Americans than others. African American students in the United States are reported to start school about one half of a standard deviation behind

their White peers on standardized reading tests. Racial disparities in achievement are believed to increase by about one tenth of a standard deviation during each year of school (Burchinal, Steinberg & Friedman, 2011). One possible cause of a lack of knowledge later on in school may be attributed to what some experts refer to as a participation gap: “Disparate participation in rigorous coursework and programs is slowly becoming recognized as a contributor to the overall gap in achievement between African American students and their peers” (Ford, Grantham & Whiting, 2008, p.10). If the students are simply not participating, then the prerequisite knowledge that is required to be successful is never being obtained by the students.

A portion of this Dissertation in Practice will focus on what the achievement levels of the African American students were at Suburban Middle School (SMS) in reading for the 2009-2010 to the 2013-2014 school years as compared to their White peers. This problem is being examined in this paper in great detail for a multitude of reasons. The first is that reading comprehension skills are needed to be successful in all courses that are encountered in a kindergarten through twelfth grade environment. The second reason is that a quality education may be instrumental in achieving a certain quality of life in students from all walks of life and socioeconomic backgrounds. The third reason is simply a matter of social justice. “Social justice focuses on challenging the arrangements that promote the continuation of marginalization and exclusionary practices; and it supports a foundational process of respect, care, recognition, and empathy” (Theoharris, 2007, p.148). The problem that is being encountered by Suburban Middle School is that all of the students are not being served in an appropriate manner to achieve

success. In order to understand discrepancies in service it is necessary to examine the organization in which the problem is occurring.

Organizational Context

Suburban Middle School is located in Suburban County school district in the state of Florida and has been designated as a Title I school. Suburban County Schools currently consist of a little over 41,000 students and employ 2,655 teachers. The district operates 59 schools, 8 of which are middle schools. The racial makeup of the city that SMS is located in is 66.60% White, 29.12% African American, 0.27% Native American, 1.33% Asian, 0.01% Pacific Islander, 4.12% Hispanic, and the rest being from two or more other races (Suburban County School Overview Website). The stakeholders at Suburban Middle School are the administration, the literacy coach, the students, the parents, and members of the faculty. The administrative team might be one of the most important groups of stakeholders in that it hires personnel that must be qualified and motivated to pursue a daunting task. The literacy coach at SMS is responsible for identifying deficiencies in reading skills by providing various reading tests throughout the school year as well as collaborating with teachers to improve upon instructional strategies. The literacy coach has known some of the students for two years and is an incredible asset to the school, the faculty, and the students. The faculty is responsible for implementing methods and instructional strategies that will ultimately result in goals being met and gaps in achievement either being reduced or eradicated. The faculty may be required to provide additional assistance such as tutoring in order to meet the goals. Suburban Middle School currently has a total of 196 African American students out of a total of 891 students. Among the 196 African American students, 106 are males and 90 are females. These students combine to make up 21.9% of the total population

of the school. Out of the 196 African American students, 168 receive free or reduced lunch. This gives Suburban Middle School the designation of being a Title I school. To qualify as a Title I school, 40% of the students who attend that particular school must live in poverty (Isernhagen, 2011). Title I mainly focuses on accountability that is based upon the results of each individual school. This means that funds provided by Title I programs are able to be used in a flexible manner instead of only targeting qualifying students for academic assistance. This in turn allows schools to address the needs of Title I students and other students within that particular school (Stavem, 2008). In hopes of promoting accountability, schools that qualify for Title I funding are required to develop and implement a comprehensive plan within one year of receiving school wide Title I status (ESEA, 1965).

History and conceptualization (Local and National)

In order to better understand the achievement gap between African American students and their White peers we need to examine the School Improvement Plans (SIPS) from the years 2009- 2010 to 2013-2014 that SMS utilized. It should be noted that the terminology and/or the way to gauge achievement levels differs throughout the various School Improvement Plans. For each SIP there will be six different categories that will be examined. The areas that will be examined are the strategies that SMS used as a school to support school climate, utilization of data, parental involvement, professional development, instructional strategies, and collaboration.

Table 1 SMS School Improvement Plans, 2009-2010 SMS School Grade A: Percentage of Students Scoring at or above grade level in Reading (2009). The differences in achievement in reading between White and African American students. White 67% African-American 51%

Focus	Strategy 1	Strategy 2	Strategy 3	Strategy 4	Strategy 5
School climate	No subheading addressing school climate in the SIP.				
Utilization of data	Progress monitoring, implementing curriculum maps and immediately offering remediation for deficiencies.	Reading teachers will analyze data and determine revisions.			

Focus	Strategy 1	Strategy 2	Strategy 3	Strategy 4	Strategy 5
Parental Involvement	Goals were present- Were parent involvement activities and strategies targeted to areas of academic need? Based on information from surveys, evaluations, agendas, or sign ins.	Provide a school calendar of events/ activities to each household. Challenge each team to hold at least one parent conference with each student's parents. Teams will develop a plan to check agenda books regularly for parental communication. Continue the utilization of the SMS marquee. Continuation of the FCAT family night hosted during the second semester of the school year	Insure that each team will have an activity that will involve parent participation once during the year, teams will develop a plan to check agenda books, use the SMS marquee in front of the school, FCAT family night during the second semester of school, keep SMS website updated, Ensure parental access to eSembler.	Host a fall open house and spring visitation day during school hours, Provide incoming 6 th grade students and parents with an informational brochure during orientation	Provide information on school based activities and events on the SMS website, Ensure parental access to Esembler (On-line grades and assignments)

Focus	Strategy 1	Strategy 2	Strategy 3	Strategy 4	Strategy 5
Professional Development	An in service will be conducted for all teachers with specific strategies for student fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary development				
Instructional Strategies	Reading teachers will share best instructional practices and develop common assessments.	Differentiated instruction will be used in all classrooms. Literacy Coach will work with teachers to provide knowledge and implementation of Reading Strategies.	Four days a week, each teacher assigned a Daily Huddle (Homeroom) will utilize AVID weekly material to target Reading strategies and skills. Daily Huddle will focus on	Reading instruction school wide for twenty eight minutes.	

Focus	Strategy 1	Strategy 2	Strategy 3	Strategy 4	Strategy 5
Collaboration	Reading teachers will meet monthly to develop objectives, essential questions, instructional strategies and progress monitoring	Implement intensive remedial instruction classes in reading at all grade levels utilizing regular and exceptional Student Education (ESE) teachers	The Reading Leadership Team will work together as a professional learning community to ensure all teachers are identifying essential standards and using best practices.		

Table 2 2010-2011 SMS SIP SMS School Grade B Percentage of Students in Subgroups making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) (2010) The differences in achievement in reading between White and African American students. White 69% African American 49%.

Focus	Action 1	Action 2	Action 3	Action 4	Action 5
School Climate	No subheading addressing school climate in the SIP	Positive Behavior Support (PBS)			
Utilization of data	Scheduling struggling readers into appropriate Intensive Reading classes according to needs demonstrated in FCAT results	AS400 schedules and liaison will monitor attendance of students required to attend tutoring each month.	FCAT data. Monitor through mentor logs, observations, interviews and surveys by mentors and students in the program. - Based	Mini assessments generated on Edusoft. AVID will be monitored through student products such as binders, tutoring logs, projects etc.	Review rosters of all Intensive reading classes vs. student needs demonstrated on FCAT results from spring 2010. Teacher generated pre and post tests

Focus	Strategy 1	Strategy 2	Strategy 3	Strategy 4	Strategy 5
Parental Involvement	Develop a volunteer coordinator. Survey at open house to determine areas of need and/or interest	Contact will be made with parents via progress reports and phone calls to encourage attendance to tutoring	Sign in rosters, parent climate surveys		
Professional Development	Enhance the tutoring program by providing training to teachers in research based models (i.e. graphic organizers, word walls, vocabulary strategies. FCAT explorer/ Study Island.	subjects- Strategy for follow up monitoring- AVIS site team monthly meetings, AVID certification binders. Responsible for monitoring- AVID site team.	FCIM, AVID, Read 180, Inclusion WOW I'm a writer overview- All teachers. Training I first nine weeks	Will conduct appropriate staff development on reading strategies based on the needs identified by the Literacy leadership team. Administration will conduct frequent classroom walk throughs to ensure that the literacy strategies are being used by every teacher.	

Focus	Strategy 1	Strategy 2	Strategy 3	Strategy 4	Strategy 5
Instructional Strategies	Instructional strategies will include cooperative learning, hands on manipulatives, and differentiated instruction.	Literacy strategy of the week through FCIM(Florida Continuous Improvement Model) process (mini benchmark lessons, instructional focus calendars, mini assessments.	Implement differentiated instruction to include real world problem solving. Springboard curriculum from college board.	Authentic reading and writing assignments. Cooperative learning, hands on manipulatives, and differentiated instruction	Enhance the tutoring program by providing training to teachers in research-based models (i.e. graphic organizers, word walls, vocabulary strategies etc.)
Collaboration	No subheading concerning collaboration in the SIP				

Table 3 2011-2012 SMS SIP SMS School Grade C Percentage of Students in Subgroups making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in Reading (2011).). The differences in achievement in reading between White and African American students. White 62% African American 33%

Focus	Strategy 1	Strategy 2	Strategy 3	Strategy 4	Strategy 5
School Climate	No subheading addressing school climate in the SIP.	Opportunities for student to work with mentors, expand mentoring program throughout campus	Positive Behavior Support (PBS) training (School-based PBS team)	Parent climate surveys, Sign in rosters for open house and other similar events	Teacher surveys

Focus	Strategy 1	Strategy 2	Strategy 3	Strategy 4	Strategy 5
Utilization of Data	FCAT data and class rosters on AS400	Student surveys, data chats through teams, student grades	Mini assessments, classroom generated tests, Edusoft, FAIR data	Read 180 report, formative assessments, Observation	Implement and progress monitor inclusion process closely
Parental Involvement	Develop a volunteer coordinator	Survey at open house to determine areas of need/ and or interest			
Professional Development	Simply says professional development of staff	Training and materials	AVID, (7-8 grade core subjects) differentiated instruction (all instructional staff)read 180(6-8 grade Intensive Reading teachers)inclusion (6-8 core subjects)	PENDA, Edusoft training, FCIM	

Focus	Strategy 1	Strategy 2	Strategy 3	Strategy 4	Strategy 5
Instructional Strategies	Differentiated instruction to include real world problem solving	Authentic literacy (Reading, Writing, and Discussion) in content area	Schedule struggling readers into appropriate Intensive Reading classes according to needs demonstrated in FCAT results and FAIR performance	Implement Read 180 with fidelity, Literacy strategy of the week through FCIM process (mini benchmark lessons, instructional focus calendars, mini assessments, etc.	
Collaboration	No subheading addressing collaboration in the SIP	PLC meetings	Curriculum based teams		

Table 4 2012-2013 SMS SIP SMS School Grade C Percentage of students in subgroups making Adequate Yearly progress (AYP) in Reading (2012) The differences in achievement in reading between White and African American students. White 56% African American 37%

Focus	Strategy 1	Strategy 2	Strategy 3	Strategy 4	Strategy5
School Climate	No subheading addressing school climate in the SIP	PBS training for PBS Team			
Utilization of Data	AS400, FIDO,PMRN,FCAT star, ESE data tracking grid, prior FCAT scores, Florida Assessment for Instruction in Reading (FAIR), Edusoft	District based benchmark assessments through Edusoft, teacher generated assessments, Mini assessments	Appropriate scheduling of students, classroom observation, classroom generated tests, formative assessments	Student survey	
Parental Involvement	There is an online link for parental involvement (Could not access the online link)				
Professional Development	Will occur during common planning times and once each month on Wednesday morning during designated PLC times.	Each professional development day(s) teachers will be afforded the opportunity to attend professional development sessions that will help them use the data systems effectively.	Content Area Reading Professional Development (NGCAR-PD), Professional Development is aligned with Strategies through PLCs	AVID, differentiated instruction, Read 180, inclusion, Thinking Maps, FCIM, Writing strategies for all content area teachers	
Focus	Strategy 1	Strategy 2	Strategy 3	Strategy 4	Strategy5

Instructional Strategies	Integrate reading strategies in content area classes by providing reading professional development opportunities.	Introduce classical literature by providing a booklist, Cooperative grouping	Implement differentiated instruction to include real world problem solving	Authentic Literacy (Reading, Writing, and Discussion) in content area.
Collaboration	No subheading addressing collaboration in the SIP.		PLC meetings, curriculum based teams, data chats through teams	

The School Improvement Plan for SMS for the 2013-2014 school year is shorter in length and on a different template than the previous four years. There has been a change in the format of School Improvement Plans across the state of Florida. The new template is shorter and appears to take a more structured and focused approach. While some of the previous plans were 80 to 100 pages long, the most current one was a total of 36 pages. The new plan was not as confusing to follow when tracking desired outcomes.

Table 5 2013-2014 SMS SIP SMS School Grade Not available yet Students Scoring at or above Achievement level 3 on FCAT 2.0 (2013) The differences in achievement in reading between White and African American students White 55% African American 33%

Focus	Strategy 1	Strategy 2	Strategy 3	Strategy 4	Strategy 5
School Climate	No subheading addressing School Climate in the SIP.				
Utilization of Data	Advance Systems 400 (AS 400), Edusoft (data base for progress monitoring), PENDA (instructional data base)PMRN(Language Arts data base for progress monitoring)	e-Sembler(Grade book management system)FIDO(Data base for school and student data), FCAT explorer, Safari Montage (Provides K-12 school districts with a comprehensive solution for their digital media distribution and visual instruction needs.	Each core area teacher will provide a pre and post assessment for progress monitoring during the before and after school program, Thinking Maps training		
Parental Involvement	Academic workshops/meetings will be provided for parents throughout the school year to increase parent involvement and student achievement.	Research based approaches to parent Involvement that will be implemented may include the following: Open House School Advisory Council (SAC) meetings,	PTO meetings, Title I nights, FCAT Night, AVID nights, Band performances, Acting play, F.A.M.E.	Method for tracking Parent Involvement- sign in sheets for all parent involvement meetings are on file. Family School liaison has data portal to track parents	Coordination with title I and District Parent Involvement Council-School Family Liaison attends monthly Title I District meetings.

Focus	Strategy 1	Strategy 2	Strategy 3	Strategy 4	Strategy 5
Prof. Develop.	SMS teachers will attend various professional development opportunities to help them to use the data support systems effectively.	Professional development will occur during common planning times and once each month on Wednesday morning designated PLC times	Small groups will be sent to professional development off site that correlate with RtI goals.		
Instructional Strategies	Before and after school program, community service learning	Literacy strategies			
Collaboration	No subheading addressing Collaboration in the SIP	Simply mentions teacher collaboration			

School Perception of the Problem

Three informal conversations took place at Suburban Middle School in an attempt to identify any additional concerns that pertain to the reading performance of African American students. During one of these conversations, the literacy coach provided some of her opinions on why the current achievement gap exists between African American students and their White peers. She stated that motivational, cultural, and organizational factors may be partially to blame. She claimed that she does not think that African American parents are motivated to read at night with their children. The literacy coach also cited a lack of adequate nutrition, single parent

families, and living in crime ridden areas as additional causes of the achievement gap at Suburban Middle School. Culturally, she believes that many people are not able to relate to some of the experiences that African American students have on a daily basis. She stated that she feels that from an organizational stand point many administrators are quick to identify African American students as being the cause of disciplinary problems. At times this may result in suspensions which ultimately result in missed instructional time. She also believes that many African American students are missing the phonological piece of reading instruction. Other problems that she cited were a lack of knowledge coming from pre- kindergarten programs as well as possessing a lower level of vocabulary than their peers. Models of teaching that the literacy coach deemed effective were structured precision teaching as well as believing that the curriculum should be very structured or else African American students will quickly become disengaged. She also believes that the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act has hurt many students by placing them in an intensive reading class before they are able to adequately represent their individual abilities. At times, she has seen fifteen or sixteen year old eighth graders who have no motivation to continue on in school after being retained multiple times.

In addition to the literacy coach at Suburban Middle School, two reading teachers also expressed their opinions. The first reading teacher has eight years of experience as a teacher. She is a graduate of the University of Florida and holds a Master's degree in Educational Leadership as well. She has spent the majority of her teaching career teaching a large number of African American students. Reading inadequacies that she has identified at SMS consist of a lack of engagement, problems with motivation, and a lack of background or previous knowledge

demonstrated by the students. The No Child Left Behind act (NCLB) was also cited by her as a problem. She feels that due to this piece of legislation, she now has a backlog of older students in her eighth grade reading classes. Another issue that was identified is that some students have not even been out of the suburb in which SMS is located. This lack of life experiences may inhibit their background knowledge and reading capabilities. Another possible reason for reading inadequacies is embarrassment. She feels that many African American students are embarrassed by the fact that they do not read well. This particular teacher feels that building a relationship with the student is very important in getting him or her to perform better. Behavior issues were also cited as an obstacle to improving reading performance. She mentioned that behavior issues need to be dealt with first before attempting to make instructional gains. One identified cause of students entering her classroom behind their peers is a lack of positive role models. She feels that many in the African American community value professional athletes or entertainers but that there is not much value put on obtaining an education. Effective teaching strategies that were mentioned consisted of effective classroom management, small group instruction, hands on activities, paired reading, and journaling. She also feels that Socratic circles, tiered instruction, and technology are tools that can be utilized to get desired results. Organizational problems at SMS were identified as communication problems, standard operating procedures, and having more consistency when addressing disciplinary issues. She acknowledged that the administration has made an attempt to improve performance by having subject area teachers have common planning together. At the same time this teacher says that there is a lack of teamwork or individuals coming together for the common good. She feels that currently there are a lot of

different ways that problems are handled and that teachers need to be informed more about expectations from the administrative team. While there are new programs and instructional strategies that are being provided to reading teachers, there is a lack of modeling these strategies. While teachers are able to read about them, nobody is modeling them or showing what they would look like in the classroom or the real world.

The second reading teacher has eight years of experience at SMS. Three of those years are as a reading teacher and the other five were as an exceptional student education (ESE) teacher. She also feels that motivation and building a relationship with the student are important factors in improving reading performance. In addition to those two factors, the teacher mentioned that there appears to be issues with reading comprehension and fluency. As far as organizational issues are concerned, she feels that students need a driving force that is going to enable them to succeed. She mentioned that the enjoyment has been taken out of school at the middle school level. While in elementary school teachers strive to make lessons entertaining for students, middle school is strictly about disciplinary issues and “getting it over with” to move on to high school. This particular reading teacher feels that current problems within the organization are due to a combination of environment and instructional personnel. She also feels that many of the faculty members do not understand where many of the students are coming from and the challenges that they face on a daily basis. The comment that White teachers do not understand the backgrounds and cultures of African American students was also mentioned. When asked if she felt that disciplinary concerns were an issue, she said yes. She thinks that many of the Black students are stereotyped as being difficult to teach or work with. She explained that some of this

can be attributed to previous students who have had a history of behavioral problems at SMS. Teachers learn that a sibling of that particular student is now in their classroom and they assume that they will have the same problems that they did with the sister or brother. She also feels that there is a willingness or desire to label African American students as needing an exceptional education program earlier than White students. The teacher stated that the problem with African American students achieving adequate yearly progress in reading at Suburban Middle School appears to be motivational, cultural, and organizational. The achievement gap that exists between African American students and their peers is not only occurring at SMS; it is a problem that is prevalent across the United States.

A Nationwide Problem

The achievement gap that currently exists has a long history. The percentage of racially and ethnically diverse students in the American public school system has increased from 22% in 1972 to 43% in 2006 (Rueda, 2011). One researcher claims that the field of reading comprehension and research testing is primarily responsible for the current state of inequities. Al Willis (2008) has attempted to document the parallel development of reading assessments and IQ tests. Willis claims that, “Most problematic are shared and fundamental assumptions about the intellectual superiority of the White male population and the development of social and educational systems that support this premise.” In addition to this, Willis believes that reading comprehension research and testing has also helped to maintain these dominant ideologies that exist. This has been done through philosophical underpinnings of the researchers as well as the content and interpretation of tests. Certain researchers are also suspected of promoting reading tests and assessments as scientific facts (Willis, 2008). The examination of research and testing

methods remains important in an attempt to “level the playing field.” If there are inconsistencies and inequities that exist, the current achievement gap will only increase before it gets any better. Attempting to create tests and standards that do not contain cultural biases is a difficult challenge. Some researchers have started this process by examining the cultural relevancy of curriculum in promoting student achievement. It is believed that cultural discontinuity can cause apathy, academic detachment, and school discontent (Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2011). While cultural relevancy contributes to the achievement gap, there are some other factors that must be examined as well.

Factors that Impact the Problem

Some factors that impact the problem of reading proficiencies of African American students are the fact that Suburban Middle School is a Title I school, disidentification, a lack of cultural relevance of the lessons, and cultural settings and models. Disidentification can be described as a self-protective strategy that enables students to separate their self-esteem from academic achievement and also enables them to focus on other domains of their lives (McMillian, 2003).

Title I schools have been influenced by the No Child Left Behind act (NCLB) perhaps more than any other schools in the public school system. This is important due to the fact that the majority of school age Black males attend schools with this government designation (Donnor & Shockley, 2010). The George W. Bush administration attempted to implement (NCLB) as a solution to students in the United States being underprepared as well as the continuing trend of unequal academic outcomes of African American students. One of the main points in regards to the No Child Left Behind act is to ensure that public schools are being held accountable for the

academic progress of every student at that school (Donnor & Shockley, 2010). The No Child Left Behind Act has requirements that teachers need to meet in order to be deemed highly qualified. The requirements are that the teacher must have a bachelor's degree, demonstrate competence in their subject matter, and have full certification (United States Department of Education, 2004). The designation of Title I was an effort by the government to provide financial assistance to local educational agencies in hopes of being better able to provide an education for children that live in low income families (Public Law 89-10, Section 201). In an attempt to change some of the disparities that occurred in education, the federal government tried to improve the educational quality that economically disadvantaged students are exposed to through Title I programs by using compensatory programs such as Head start (McDonnell, 2005; Public Law 89-10). No Child Left Behind required schools that received Title I funding to use standardized tests in an effort to gauge whether or not all students were receiving the same education. One problem with the NCLB act is that it focuses on outputs instead of inputs such as resources, quality of instruction, and accessibility (McMillian, 2003). In many Title I schools African American girls outperform African American boys at every socioeconomic level. In addition to this, the differences are the most profound at the lowest socioeconomic levels (Wheat, 1997). Even though the NCLB act was designed to help minority children, the achievement gap between Caucasians and African American students still exists (Burt, Ortlieb & Cheek, 2009). One possible solution is to increase the level of student engagement through finding topics that African American students are interested in and can relate to at the same time.

Disidentification

One important area to consider in regards to African American students reading achievement levels may be academic disengagement. Academic disengagement means that students do not have the psychological investment that may be needed to master skills and academic knowledge (Newmann, Wehlagea, & Lambom, 1992). On the opposing side, academic engagement can be defined as the sense of connection that a student has with academics and the value that the student places on academics and related outcomes (McMillian, 2003). Prior research has shown that stereotypes that are held by faculty members may be a contributor to the achievement gap between African American males and their peers (Osborne, 1995; Steele & Aronson, 1995). There is actually a contradiction between disidentification research and the No Child Left Behind Act. While NCLB advocates reporting test scores to help eliminate achievement gaps, disidentification proponents believe that score reporting may further alienate some African American students. Disidentification researchers also believe that emphasizing group differences through test scores may actually influence unconscious cognitive interference for students (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Other studies have found that relationships between teachers and students may be improved when recognizing diversity instead of operating under a “color blindness” approach (Burt, Ortlieb & Cheek, 2009). Also according to Burt, et al. (2009), teachers should not try to assimilate differences into the dominant culture; in order to be successful, teachers need to value differences not simply recognize them. Not only do education policies control curriculum and instruction, they may also have an influence on the social and economic advancement of African American students (Donnor & Shockley, 2010). Perhaps now more than any other time in history teachers and public schools are held more accountable for

preparing their students for serving the public good as well as private interests (Kliebard, 1999: Hargreaves, 2003). The reauthorization of the Elementary Secondary Education Act has made it mandatory for schools that receive Title I funds to use standardized tests as a means to gauge academic achievement (Donnor & Shockley, 2010).

Standardized test scores are examined in two different ways. The first way is that the final scores are aggregated. This is done in an effort to identify whatever achievement trends may be occurring throughout various school districts and schools. The second approach to examining test scores consists of more factors. The test scores are disaggregated according to socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, English language proficiency and disability status (Donnor & Shockley, 2010). There is a need for additional training in gender, economic, cultural, parental involvement, male mentors, school reform, and community and after school extracurricular activities when attempting to score standardized tests (Dalhouse, 2005). Teaching strategies that are culturally responsive and that also consist of connecting home values and classroom patterns of participation may be necessary when instructing African American students (Au, 2001). Culturally responsive teaching can be defined as, “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (Gay, 2000, p.29). More specifically, possible solutions for improving the literacy of African American students may consist of the following: Increasing the use of multicultural literature in classrooms, promoting cultural responsiveness in teachers’ interactions with students as well as classroom management, and using assessments that reflect students’ literacy achievement instead of ones that may

contain biases (Au, 2001). The level of teacher expectations might also play a role in the achievement of African American students. For some students, their academic difficulties and struggles might be linked to what they perceive as low teacher expectations in addition to the teacher and student relationship (Ferguson, 2003; Noguera, 2003). Prior research has shown that students who are in the middle grade levels may be more susceptible to behaviors that may inhibit their academic performance. Middle grade students may be more prone to participate in academic cheating behaviors (Murdock, Hale, and Weber, 2001). Some middle school students may even begin to consider dropping out of school (Rumberger, 1995). In addition to the former problems, many students begin to show declines in self-esteem as well as motivation (Anderman, Maehr & Midgley, 1999). Another problem associated with having low expectations about students is that teachers may simply stop providing the student with challenging work (Tyler & Boelter, 2008). There may be some behaviors that teachers that have lower expectations for their students demonstrate on a daily basis. Among these behaviors are providing less time for students to answer questions correctly, being praised for things other than the academic tasks at hand, simply being given the answers instead of being provided with clues, and finally students who had lower expectations were criticized more frequently and more harshly than high expectation students (Tyler & Boelter, 2008). In order for students to be engaged in the task at hand in a cognitive manner, certain behaviors must be demonstrated. When cognitive engagement is occurring students are deep in thought about what needs to be learned, learning the material, and thinking creatively about the material (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003). Through the use of empirical studies and many different reports from various government and educational

agencies, teacher attrition rates have also become a major concern (Ingersoll, 2003). These studies and agencies have identified schools that have a high percentage of minority students, a high poverty rate, and a high percentage of low income students as having the highest attrition rates (Kersaint, Lewis, Potter & Meisels, 2007). Many of the new hires at such challenging schools tend to be new teachers who are very inexperienced or improperly prepared (Chizhik, 2003). With this lack of proper preparation and experience coupled with a lack of parental involvement, it may be quite difficult for new teachers to succeed.

Cultural Settings and Cultural Models

Reviewing the literature provided possible answers to cultural and contextual issues that exist within the organization at SMS. The two connected challenges are the minority achievement gap and barriers that block school improvement and reform. Two key components of this research are cultural settings and cultural models. More specifically the two areas that were examined are home influences on learning and school and teaching improvement. Some problems may be attributed to what are referred to as a difference of explanations (Baratz & Baratz, 1970). This is an explanation that views the cause of minority underachievement as discontinuities between home and school cultures. Examples of this are values, language, and behavioral expectations (Baratz & Baratz, 1970). Others believe that deficiencies in academic achievement are not the student's fault. Labov (1972) claimed that African American children performed poorly due to a failure on the part of the White testers to understand the logic and coherence of Black vernacular English. Many researchers believe that the underachievement of African American students can be attributed to differences between Black students and others.

These differences include language, norms of behavior, cognitive styles, and other parts of personal and interpersonal functioning. Taking all of those variables into consideration, researchers started to believe that the achievement of minority children could be improved through schools being able to identify these differences and design curriculum and instruction that the children understood (Cazden, 1986).

The Model

This Dissertation in Practice will present a model that addresses key elements that focus on improving achievement in reading among low performing students. Changing schools is a much more monumental task than simply changing curriculum and instructional practices. According to Sarason (1971), the school's culture, the very fabric of its existence, is what must be changed. Important to school reform is the current research that is being conducted that deals with school cultures and how they influence the way that teachers act and think the way that they do. This research has actually turned into a science that attempts to implement "reculturation." Reculturation can be defined as changing the behaviors, norms, language, expectations, and different modes of interaction among people who work in schools (Fullan, 2000). One of the main problems that researchers are experiencing is that there is isolation between experts who are working on school improvement plans versus those who are dealing with the underachievement of minorities (Gallimore & Goldberg, 2001). There is a need to connect all of the theories and the framework of these two problems in order to achieve more positive results. Cultural settings and cultural models are often tied into problems that exist within school reform, as well as underachievement of minority students. Cultural models are more than a teacher with

whom students can easily identify. Cultural models in this sense refer to “shared mental schema or normative understandings of how the world works or ought to work” (Gallimore & Goldberg, 2001).

A better explanation of cultural models may be tools of the mind that represent historically evolved and shared ways of thinking and storing possible responses to adaptive challenges and changing conditions (Cole, 1985). Cultural models can also be experienced outside of school, and as a result, problems become much more complex. While teachers can attempt to provide the most beneficial environment and make an attempt to understand differences, they do not know what occurs after the dismissal bell. While cultural settings can be a very complex issue, allowing students to maintain feelings of cultural relevancy may later enable educators to begin the reform process that will later result in improved cultural settings and cultural models.

Culturally Relevant Lessons

The main cause for the culture/context in relation to achievement is a lack of culturally relevant lessons in reading. Research has shown that if a student is interested in a specific topic they are more apt to perform at a higher level. If a teacher were to be able to connect with students on a level that was compatible with their cultural beliefs the chances of reducing the gap would increase. According to Whaley (2011), culture can also be referred to as “subjective culture” or ideas, ways of doing things, and objects that are created by a group of people. While this is a convenient definition for culture there are many other aspects that may have an influence on cultural attitudes. Some theories about racial gaps in academic achievement attribute socioeconomic and structural barriers as being causes of cultural attitudes and behaviors that are

associated with African Americans (Slaughter-Defoe, Nakagawa, Takanishi & Johnson, 1990). Some researchers even go so far as to claim that educational aspirations are not even compatible with Black culture. This perspective signifies opposing or conflicting roles for African Americans that exist in a school setting. Among these are ethnic and racial group membership which may create barriers in both roles of group membership and succeeding as a student (Whaley & Noel, 2012). In other words cultural group identification among Black students is believed to impede their ability to succeed academically. Whaley & Noel (2012) sum this up better by saying that identification with the academic domain, which promotes European American perspectives, has created some conflict between African American students and their cultural community. It also implies preference for that culture over African American culture: or identification with their culture of origin makes them vulnerable to negative racial stereotypes (Whaley & Noel, 2012). If there are in fact teachers at SMS who do not understand some of the cultural differences among the student population, it is the responsibility of the leadership team to provide faculty members with additional training.

Strong Leadership

Improving schools in order to improve academic achievement requires strong leadership and a good deal of communication with teachers, families, staff members, and members of the community (Manwaring, 2011). Marzano (2003) believes that leadership from the top may in fact be the most important component of effective school reform. This is a relevant topic due to the fact that Suburban Middle School is a Title I school that is sometimes under the microscope after receiving a grade of “C” last year. Suburban Middle School had visits from the Differentiated Accountability team all year long on a regular basis and solutions to the current

problems including reading performance need to be addressed on a consistent basis. While there are still uncertainties in the process, comprehensive school reforms are implemented by administrators in hopes of addressing the need to improve student performance. This can be achieved by implementing certain comprehensive school reforms that are found to be effective. Some of the literature implies that comprehensive school reform models operate on the pretense that a single process will enable schools to improve the achievement levels of all of their students. In order to be considered a comprehensive school reform, the U.S. Department of education has identified eleven characteristics that help define what a comprehensive school reform consists of. Urban schools are defined as the number of households that are served within the central city of a metropolitan area are 75% or greater (Shippen, Houchins, Calhoon & Furlow, 2006). While researchers are often quick to point out that urban schools often serve children from low income backgrounds this does not have an effect on the study. Low socioeconomic status by itself does not seem to contribute to reading failure.

CHAPTER 2

Middle School Reform

Commonalities of successful middle schools

One of the key components in enabling students to perform better is collaboration and working in teams. “Since the work of the organization (the education of youth) is too complex and uncertain to be left to professionals operating in isolation from each other, teams of teacher are required to work together to carry out the main function of the school” (Trimble, 2002, p.34). In addition to collaboration, the research team also identified two other common practices of high performing high quality schools. All five of the middle schools used teams of grant writers to receive more money for the purpose of implementing reform initiatives. A major aspect of raising achievement was the ability to raise additional funds. The successful schools also developed and set goals while focusing on certain strategies in order to meet their individual goals. The schools also had built in criteria when it came time to make decisions. Other possible contributors to success in a high poverty environment were length of team timing, classroom practices, common planning time, and family income of the students (Mertens & Flowers, 2003). While some educators only observe student achievement data to measure success others believe that middle school students are more effective at schools that are socially equitable, academically excellent, and developmentally appropriate (National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, 2002). Ultimately student achievement scores will be the deciding factor when determining success and failure levels of schools but there are many different aspects that may impact student

achievement. One challenge for middle school personnel is that they may need to understand classroom instructional practices and curricular coordination and integration. In addition to those key aspects educators may also need to understand various socioeconomic backgrounds, gender differences, and diverse learning strategies (Mertens & Flowers, 2003). Two areas that need additional research in order to determine their effectiveness in high poverty schools are interdisciplinary teaming and common planning time. One problem that may occur when attempting to examine the effects of poverty on school achievement is distinguishing the effects of family background and other social contexts (Lauen & Gaddis, 2013). Researchers in social science have influenced the educational policies in the United States for quite some time. Many of these studies have attempted to categorize students by race and poverty status (Kahlenberg, 2001; Bazelon, 2008; Grant 2009). Some educational researchers have claimed that there are four different explanations that are specific to the effects of classroom poverty on student achievement. The first groups of factors are referred to as institutional factors. Institutional factor consist of lower quality teachers, slower pacing, lower expectations, less rigorous curriculum, and low parental involvement in schooling (Barr and Dreeben, 1983; Sedlak, Wheeler, Pullin & Cusick, 1986; Lee, Bryk & Smith 1993). The second institutional mechanism is known as contagion mechanism. Contagion mechanisms are when predominately low achieving peers demonstrate downward leveling norms (Crane 1991; Harding, 2003; South, Baumer & Lutz, 2003). The third institutional mechanism that attempts to explain how poverty may have an effect on student achievement is referred to as a relative deprivation mechanism. These can be described as a lack of

competitive pressure as well as having a lower average comparison group (Attewell 2001; Crosnoe, 2009; Davis, 1966). On the opposing side some research has shown that neighbors or peers that are not poverty stricken and are affluent may have a negative effect on student performance as well. Relative deprivation has been believed to lower the aspirations, attainment, and achievement levels of students within schools that are not in high poverty areas (Davis 1966; Marsh & Parker, 1984; Bachman and O'Malley 1986, Marsh, 1987; Jencks and Mayer 1990; Attewell 2001; Crosne 2009). While many may believe that it is an advantage to be exposed to affluent peers it may in fact be a disadvantage. This disadvantage can be attributed to the decrease in curricular placement, grades and aspirations, more so when the students involved are competing for scarce resources (Lauen & Gaddis, 2013). The final finding is that poverty may have no effect at all on student achievement once the background of the student is properly controlled. This is often explained as a selection mechanism. This means that the effects are actually due to families selecting schools and classrooms based on factors that can be correlated with classroom poverty level and the growth of test scores (Hauser 1970; Mouw 2006). Knowing that poverty might not have much of an effect on reading performance if the background of the student is controlled serves as a transition into parental involvement as well as perceptions and experiences.

Application of Critical Components

Needs for the design were determined by looking at previous school improvement plans from Suburban Middle School. In addition to looking at previous data a thorough search of the literature involving school improvement plans was conducted. The trends in research pointed towards six different areas that should be considered key aspects or elements of school

improvement plans. These six areas are school climate, proper utilization of data, parental involvement, professional development, instructional strategies, and collaboration. (Andrews & Lewis, 2007; Archer Banks & Behar Horenstein, 2008; Armento, 2001; Banks, 2001; Bernhardt, 2004; Brown, Roderick, Lantieri & Aber, 2004; Desimone, 2011; DuFour, 2007; Eaker & Keeting, 2008).

This Dissertation in Practice focuses on redesigning a School Improvement Plan that addresses the need to improve achievement in reading of African American students. The achievement gap that currently influences the academic achievement of African American students could consist of academic climate, the racial composition of schools, and family level factors. These family level factors are parental involvement and the socioeconomic status of the student's parents. The problem of practice is that African American students at Suburban Middle School performed significantly lower than their peers over the course of the 2009-2013 school years in reading performance. The reading deficiencies of African American students need to be addressed by the School Improvement Plan (SIP). The key elements of the design are school climate, proper utilization of data, parental involvement, professional development, instructional practices, and collaboration. While these are the key elements there are additional sub groupings in the Dissertation in Practice that may also have an influence on student achievement levels. One necessary component in improving academic performance is that all of the faculty members are aware of what the actual school mission at SMS consists of.

School Climate: School Mission

Many educational researchers are questioning whether or not the process of reforming middle schools is actually improving academic and socio-emotional development. Some policy

makers have also begun to question if the curriculum at most middle schools is rigorous enough (Anfara & Lipka, 2003). While school reform is often talked about and given priority over other matters there appears to be confusion when attempting to implement practices. Many parents and scholars operate under the assumption that if a middle level philosophy is implemented citizenship, personal development, and achievement will somehow follow (Russell, 1997). An additional problem when attempting to gauge student achievement is inconsistencies that exist in the research process. Attempts at reform and diagnosing problems concerning student achievement often end up with conflicting results. In addition to conflict there is a lack of longitudinal studies, conflicting designs, weak research designs, and an insufficient number of studies (Van Zandt & Totten, 1995). Student achievement by its very nature is hard to measure. While student academic achievement is currently measured by standardized testing it should not be the only factor in determining individual performance. What may be needed are more debates in regards to how to define student achievement as well as assess it from a holistic approach (Anfara & Lipka 2003). While it is very difficult to gauge student achievement it is even more difficult to quantify teachers perceptions and feelings about African American students and performance issues.

Perceptions

Earlier some of the perceptions of the reading teachers at SMS and the literacy coach were discussed. Some of the reasons that the literacy coach gave for the current achievement gap were motivational, cultural, and organizational factors. She also felt that many of the faculty members were not able to relate to some of the experiences of African American students. One of the reading teachers stated that reasons for the achievement gap were a lack of engagement, a

lack of previous knowledge on the part of the students, organizational structure, and behavioral issues. The final reading teacher believed that establishing relationships with African American students was important. In addition to the previous belief she also stated that many White teachers do not understand the background or the cultural differences of African American students.

If the perception that a teacher has about a student is negative there may be a higher chance of academic failure. If a teacher feels that a student is not performing well in the dominant culture because of atypical codes of speech or behaviors or feels that the particular student is of average or lower than average in intelligence there is a greater chance of academic failure (Marks, 2005). Expectations of the parents and beliefs about academic achievement may be a key factor in exactly how well the student performs. Parents that have demonstrated high expectations for their children often and also have plans for the future of their child's education (Entwisle & Olson, 2005). Research also shows that children that live with two parent families are more apt to receive more supervision, resources, and enjoy greater stability than single parent families (Kim, 2004). Socioeconomic status (SES) has often been a good predictor of student achievement levels. When adding the race of the student to the equation socioeconomic status does not remain a strong factor in accounting for differences in academic achievement (Kim, 2004). Much of the research that has been done on having a clear school mission identifies three important aspects of the mission. The three key components that are necessary to achieve success are vision, mission, and beliefs (Nelson et. al. 2007). While all three of these are integral parts of a school mission it might be beneficial to all to prioritize different components within each

section of the mission. Later on in this Dissertation in Practice school climate will be analyzed, first it might be beneficial to examine the impact of academic climate on academic achievement.

Academic Climate

Processes within the school or organizational factors can be responsible for the achievement gaps that exist between Black and White students. There is a multitude of research that shows that students coming from disadvantaged social classes are often placed in slower learning classrooms than their advantaged peers (Condrón, 2007). The end result in this placement is often that students that are in higher performing groups learn more while lower group placements result in inhibited learning (Condrón 2008; Hoffer, 1992). Academic climate is often determined and affected by the socioeconomic status of the students that attend the school (High, 2004; Kahlenberg, 2001; Lareau, 2003; & Palardy, 2005). Many different studies have come to the conclusion that while the academic climate of a school is a social force apart from individual student's characteristics it can have a positive influence on student achievement and various outcomes (Mickelson & Greene, 2006). The influence of academic climate has been deemed as extremely important by some researchers. Rumberger and Palardy (2005) conducted a study in which the findings suggested that in some southern middle schools the mean socioeconomic status of the school was four times more impactful than the socioeconomic status of the parents was at predicting student achievement. Educators may be able to control academic climate but one area that educators have very little influence on is outside of school.

Non-School factors

It is quite possible that disparities in achievement between students can be attributed to non school factors such as family background. Some researchers believe that students that come from poor families do not achieve as much academically due to inequities and social class differences. Examples of these inequities are health and nutrition, residential mobility, quality of housing, and approaches to child rearing (Rothstein, 2004). The schools themselves can only be held accountable to a reasonable degree. Social stratification is an area that schools cannot control. Social stratification may be responsible for producing racial disparities as well as disparities in learning. This makes it very difficult for school reform to have any kind of effect on achievement gaps (Karen 2005; Rothstein 2004; Wilson 1998). Another difficult aspect for schools to combat is that many researchers have discovered that inequalities that occur in learning may be mostly happening during the summer months when children are not in school. Many researchers are in agreement that schools often serve as great equalizers while non school factors during the summer are partly responsible for class based achievement gaps that occur (Downey, 2004). Downey (2004) also claims that while schools may influence differences in social classes they do not have much influence on the current achievement gap that exists between Black and White students. His research has primarily shown that the academic skills of African American students often start to fall behind their peers during kindergarten and the first grade. Perhaps these findings should lead us to a series of pertinent questions. Do disparate non-school environments lead to social class disparities in learning? Do inequalities that exist between schools contribute to disparities in learning between White and African American students? In order to answer these questions there needs to be more research studies focused on

why class gaps grow during the summer and why the achievement gap between the races occurs mostly during the school year (Condrón, 2009). Class and non-school factors consist of family related factors, cultural and social capital, and health related factors (Condrón, 2009). Some studies have concluded that students that live in one parent families face things that may inhibit academic achievement (Downey 1995; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). In addition to single parent households housing mobility may have a dramatic effect on academic performance as well. The more time that a family spends moving and preparing to do so may result in more days of school missed (Rothstein, 2004). Many times when families are constantly moving it can be attributed to living in poverty.

Perceptions and Experience

Some educators believe that parents as well as the teachers of African American students do not spend enough time focusing on reading materials that the students value (Paul, 2000). While Black students have made some gains in reading performance national and statewide tests have shown that there are still significant disparities in reading achievement between Black and White students. Perhaps teacher quality may have a direct impact on the current achievement gap that exists. Some researchers believe that teacher perceptions of current levels of reading proficiency of African American students need to be examined. A possible solution would be for research teams to analyze to what extent the prior knowledge that a teacher has in relation to the racial achievement gap affects the performance in reading of African American students (Flowers, 2007). While some researchers believe that standardized testing may not be the best way to measure achievement it is still necessary to understand how this form of testing affects reading achievement for African American students. It would be beneficial to African American

students if more research was conducted to learn how to improve the test taking skills of this particular subgroup of students (Flowers, 2007). According to Flowers (2007) one solution to better understanding the problem may be to compare the scores on reading tests to those of other African American students or examining scores by gender within the race. In addition to standardized testing, teacher quality, and perceptions there are a multitude of other variables that may influence the level of reading performance that African American students are able to achieve. School setting, physical and emotional characteristics of the students, and the educational environment are additional areas that need to be investigated in order to fully understand the problem (Barton, 2003). Schools that are effective regularly evaluate their schools based on data and research. Effective schools also have a clear mission, frequent monitoring of programs, instructional leadership, high expectations have good relations with parents and are safe and orderly (Nelson, Fairchild, Grossenbacher & Landers, 2007). Having completed a general overview of various components that affect the reading performance of African American students it is now necessary to apply this knowledge in order to create a new school improvement plan.

Application of Critical Components

Needs for the design were determined by looking at previous school improvement plans from Suburban Middle School. In addition to looking at previous data a thorough search of the literature involving school improvement plans was conducted. The trends pointed towards six different areas that should be considered key aspects or elements of school improvement plans. These six areas are school climate, proper utilization of data, parental involvement, professional development, instructional strategies, and collaboration.

School Climate

One way to change or influence school climate is through the use of discipline procedures. One problem appears to be that punitive discipline may not always solve the existing problems. Much of the disciplining process that occurs at schools is geared towards targeted intervention, broad prevention, and the development of self-discipline. The traditional route to dealing with these problems is to respond with punitive and exclusionary practices that often have little value (Osher, Bear, Sprague & Doyle, 2010). Many different behaviors can be defined as low level aggressive behaviors but they are still a disruption to instructional time. Among these behaviors are cutting class, rule violations, cursing, bullying, refusal to complete assignments, fighting, and vandalism. School discipline plans should include more than just punishments, they should also include the opportunities for students to develop self-discipline (Bear, 2005). The factors that influence disciplined behavior or the lack thereof consists of student, teacher, and school culture; the socioeconomic status of the student, the composition of the classroom and the school, Two popular universal approaches to developing a school wide discipline program are School wide positive behavioral supports (SWPBS) and Social emotional learning or (SEL). In the past Suburban Middle School has used a variety of positive behavioral supports with limited success. For the purpose of this Dissertation in Practice we will examine Social emotional learning (SEL). Social emotional learning is an approach that combines relationship skills, social awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, and self-awareness and also builds connections between staff members and students (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2003; Osher et al., 2008; Watson 2003). Social emotional learning could be beneficial to Suburban Middle School in that it is believed to help

develop a variety of the students' individual qualities. These qualities are primarily related to positive mental health, moral development, as well as development of cognitive, emotional, and social components (Berkowitz, Sherblom, Bier & Battistich, 2006; Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak & Hawkins, 2004). One of the main goals of SEL is to begin or attempt to create a foundation for fewer disciplinary issues while improving academic performance at the same time (Durlak, Weisberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, n.d.; Zins, Wiessberg, Wang & Walberg, 2004). Another anticipated or desired positive outcome of Social emotional learning is that the emotional and social capacities of the individual improve. More specifically the students are enabled understand character education which in turn facilitates other qualities. These qualities that SEL tries to influence are conflict resolution, self-understanding, respect, resilience, and bonding with others (Schwartz, 2006).

Perhaps the best approach at SMS might be to keep some of the current practices of SWPBS while implementing certain aspects of SEL at the same time. Certainly a one size fits all approach will not work for every individual at Suburban Middle School. School wide positive behavioral supports (SWPBS) primarily target office referrals by using data based decisions to determine behavioral problems (Durlak et al.). While it is true that educators need to utilize data in order to make informed decisions it might also be beneficial to have an additional measure in hopes of improving current behavioral issues throughout the school. While taking an approach grounded in Social emotional learning may help students develop additional attributes there are not many interventions that can be used by the administration to deal with disruptive behaviors that are occurring (Osher et al., 2010). Solely utilizing School wide positive behavioral supports

can produce some deficiencies as well. When SWPBS programs only have concrete reinforcers to curb student behavioral problems they are not likely to assist students in developing emotional and social qualities that are related to self-discipline (Bear, 2005, 2009, in press). Much of the present research shows that multiple types of interventions and supports are needed to achieve concrete results. Combining Social emotional learning and School wide positive behavior support programs while fostering supportive student and teacher relationships may improve disciplinary issues throughout the whole school (Metzler, Biglan, Rusby & Sprague, 2001). In order to be able to target students that may benefit from Social emotional learning educators must use data that will enable them to make informed decisions.

Utilization of Data to Improve Schools

There must be reliable and valid data gathered when attempting to develop an effective School Improvement Plan. A data driven approach needs to be utilized when focusing on specific areas of improvement. Often times administrators make decisions that are possibly based on personal experiences or informed intuition instead of data (Ingram, Louis, and Schroeder, 2004). While gathering and analyzing data may be a daunting task at times the goal should not be to gather huge amounts of data just for the sake of having data. The main purpose of gathering and analyzing data should be to use meaningful data in order to implement effective practices. While many middle schools focus on achievement exam scores they must also realize that it is important to disaggregate or break the data down by gender, race, and other variables (Schmoker, 2003). Contextual information may play an important role when attempting to reform middle schools as well. Examples of contextual factors would be examples of student work, lesson plans, and parent survey results (Flowers & Carpenter, 2009). The following table

shows examples of school data and areas of applicability to include in School Improvement Plans according to Flowers and Carpenter.

Table 6: Examples of School Data and Areas of Applicability

Leadership and professional development	Instructional practices	School climate	Parent Involvement
Leadership team meeting minutes	Curriculum materials	Attendance rates	Parent attendance rates at activities
Grade level meeting minutes	Lesson plans	Discipline rates	Types of parent activities
Leadership and professional development	Instructional practices	School climate	Parent Involvement
Interdisciplinary team meeting minutes	Examples of student work	Safety data	Parent communication examples
Professional development calendar	Rubrics and assessment criteria	Climate survey results	PTA or PTO meeting minutes
School assessments	Student self-assessments	Dropout rates	Parent survey results
Years of teaching experience	Master schedule	Student services/guidance records	
Type of certification	Technology capacity		
Turnover rates of teachers and staff	Benchmark testing results		
Budgets	Standardized test results		
	Attendance rates		

There also needs to be a process which all faculty members can use to make informed decisions. It is possible that many of the faculty members at a middle school may not have experience analyzing data and might feel overwhelmed when attempting to do so (Ronka,

Lachat, Slaughter & Meltzer, 2008). Flowers, Murtans, & Mulhall 1999, 2002 have developed a process that is designed for schools and educators to use data when making day to day decisions about making improvements at their schools. According to the research team the process that was designed assumes that faculty members do not have much training in data gathering and exploration, have very little time to conduct data gathering and exploration, and that the faculty members also have a desire to raise important questions among stakeholders. The following steps are needed to properly complete the process for using data: Step 1- Review your school improvement plan. Step 2-Determine how the data will be used. Step 3-Identify relevant data. Step 4-Examine and discuss the data. Step 5-Set goals and evaluate progress. The research team of Flowers (2009) then provides additional information in regards to completing each step of the process. An important step when reviewing your school improvement plan is to analyze specific goals, this will enable the faculty members to have the ability to determine what the primary focus of the school currently is. Prioritizing goals is also an important aspect of the first step in using data. The actual process of prioritizing the goals may begin to create a consensus among staff and administrators and could definitely be instrumental in providing a starting point for a school improvement plan (Flowers, Mertens & Mulhall, 1999, 2002). One major challenge may be to remain within the structure that is already in place at the middle school or place of employment. Available data should become a resource for all team members to use and have access to on a regular basis. As previously mentioned collaboration is an important element when attempting to improve student achievement. Also according to the research team there are key elements that should serve to create a culture of collaborative learning that is geared towards

student learning and student achievement. Elements that would help to create such an environment would be to engage parents and community members, provide specific areas of responsibility, make sure representatives of different groups can come together to share information, keep things moving, and involve as many staff members and faculty as possible (Flowers, Mertens & Mulhall, 2000). Identifying relevant data can actually be a fairly easy process.

According to the researchers the main question that members of the school improvement committee need to ask themselves is whether or not the data is relevant to the school improvement plan. If the data does not appear that it will be beneficial to the school then it should simply be placed to the side (Flowers & Carpenter, 2009). Examining the data should be done as a group, this will enable faculty members and administrators the chance to see if all team members involved understand how to interpret the data. One of the most difficult parts of reviewing and interpreting data is remaining objective throughout the entire process (Flowers et al. 2009). When setting goals it is important to consider short and long term goals when implementing a school improvement plan. Ideally long term goals will be set to occur in three to five years. In the meantime short term goals are included to measure the amount of progress that is being achieved along the way. Short term goals let the faculty know if they are heading in the right direction while it also offers them the possibility of experiencing successes along the way (Flowers et al. 2009).

Parental Involvement

Parental involvement has been found to be associated with positive gains in a student's academic and cognitive outcomes (Arnold, 2008). Parental involvement could actually occur by

attending school events or assisting the child with required work or homework assignments. Possibly more important is the association of race or ethnicity in parenting practices with academic achievement. Racial and ethnic socialization can be identified as the process in which parents shape their child's attitudes and understanding about the impact of race via specified messages and practices (Murray & Mandara, 2002). Different aspects of racial and ethnic socialization include teaching culture and origin in hopes of facilitating a sense of ethnic and cultural pride (Banerjee, Harrell & Johnson, 2011). Research has shown that this socialization can have an impact on academic achievement. Researchers also found an interaction between high parental involvement and high cultural exposure. In addition to this when students that have parents who possess attitudes that favor diversity and their practices reflect positive in group cultural experiences the students seem to benefit in cognitive ability and achievement (Caughy, 2002). Parental involvement influences the student's beliefs and attitudes about education. Parental involvement in specific educational activities appears to be much more of a factor than involvement in the school that the child attends (Clark, 1983; Epstein, 1995; Lareau; 1987). While the majority of parents probably want their child or children to succeed not all parents take it upon themselves to participate in ways that will actually help to maximize the level of student achievement (Mickelson & Green, 2006). Productive home-school relations may require parents to put in additional effort in support of their child's education. One middle school helped this process along by having counselors and assistant principals loop or follow the students through their middle school careers as to familiarize themselves with the families. Parents were often on curriculum committees and were also required to participate in at least four school functions

throughout the school year. Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) workshops were held two times a month for parents and students (Nelson et. al. 2007). Middle school teachers often need to deal with declining parental involvement as the students progress from elementary school to middle school (Brough & Irvin, 2001). Parents may often serve roles such as selling tickets for school events or operating concession stands. It may benefit all involved if parents could serve in a greater capacity. While these efforts are usually appreciated by all it might be more beneficial to all parties if parents were more involved specifically with student learning. Good examples of duties that parents could perform are serving as a member of the school leadership team, acting as a resource person for special activities or school programs, and serving as an aide or a tutor (Valentine, Clark, Hackmann, and Petzko, 2002). Not only does serving in these roles help the students it also takes some of the burden off of the teachers and the administration. Outside of being an aide or a tutor most opportunities that parents have to volunteer do not deal directly with student achievement and working in a classroom environment. Socioeconomic status of the parents has been shown to be a significant predictor of achievement levels. Usually students that come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds score higher on tests and achieve higher grades than their classmates that come from lower SES backgrounds (Mickelson et. al 2006). However, it should be noted that socioeconomic status is considered to be a weak predictor of achievement for Black students. Researchers have found that parental involvement and cultural capital or socioeconomic related social processes are a greater predictor of achievement for African American students (Mickelson et al. 2006).

Professional Development

Students that experience difficulties in reading often have problems that begin to compound over time. One major problem with students that read at low levels is that later they might experience difficulties with understanding complex narrative and expository texts that become increasingly difficult in high school and beyond (Slavin, Cheung, Groff & Lake, 2008). This makes it even more crucial for students to improve their reading skills during middle school. Accountability programs throughout the United States have been responsible for mandating additional reading instruction to a large portion of middle school students (Deshler, Palincsar, Biancarosa & Nair, 2007). While this is a good start a major component of school improvement may be professional development opportunities for teachers. Schools must ensure that all of the faculty members are working together as a team. The following quote sums this sentiment up. “To provide successful professional development in middle schools, principals must engage teachers in strategies that support school-based collaborative problem solving and decision making activities that are concentrated on improving student achievement” (Clark & Clark, p. 47, 2004).

Professional Development Goals

Professional development is viewed by some as being one of the most important aspects when it comes to achieving successful reform. It is not nearly enough to simply complete professional development sessions and then expect instantaneous results. The reform may in fact rely on the teacher learning that occurs that ultimately results in greater student learning (Desimone, 2011). A more important question might be what actually makes professional development valid or effective? For a long period of time professional development seemed to

focus on teacher attributes or lack thereof instead of encouraging reform. Over the last thirty years or so the focus regularly appeared to be on commitment to innovation, changing attitudes, or teacher job satisfaction (Desimone, 2011). The following bullet points list five core components as well as provide a brief description of ideal factors of each aspect. These five core features are taken from an examination of empirical research that was conducted by Laura Desimone. She is currently an associate professor of public policy and education at the University of Pennsylvania. The following five common features and explanations are taken verbatim from p.69 from a 2011 article entitled “A Primer on Effective Professional Development.”

- **Content focus-** Professional development activities should focus on subject matter content and how students learn the content.
- **Active learning-** Teachers should have opportunities to get involved, such as observing and receiving feedback, analyzing student work, or making presentations, as opposed to passively sitting through lectures.
- **Coherence-** What teachers learn in any professional development activity should be consistent with other professional development, with their knowledge and beliefs, and with school, district, and state reforms and policies.
- **Duration-** Professional development activities should be spread over a semester and should include 20 hours or more of contact time.

- **Collective participation-** Groups of teachers from the same grade, subject, or school should participate in professional development activities together to build an interactive learning community.

While determining what professional development activities are important is a difficult task it may be even more difficult to gauge what specific professional development is actually worth paying for. Many administrators and educators understand the importance of professional development but also need to be mindful of the costs. One complicated factor is that recertification, professional development, and local salary schedules are all interwoven. Add a required number of school days to the mix and it becomes extremely difficult to identify what money is spent and who is supposed to pay for it (Christie, 2009).

Recertification itself has not entailed the most effective strategies or professional development in most states. Even worse might be the fact that recertification programs and associated professional development participants seldom go through a valid or reliable evaluation after it is completed. The usual outcome is that teachers and educators are awarded the points for simply attending the event and there is little or no actual change that occurs within instructional practices (Christie, 2009). Professional development has long been a factor and a strategy to improve teaching practices. Unfortunately it seems that educators have failed to understand the advantages that could be produced by effective professional development programs. There have been increases in accountability measures and attempts to improve student achievement but not many schools view professional development as a strategy for school improvement (Elmore, 2002). If we are considering

school improvement as our main goal to be achieved through professional development then there are some overarching principles that need to be addressed. In order to increase student achievement educators need to understand adolescent learning and development, curriculum design, knowledge of the organizational structures by the principals and the teachers, and finally instructional strategies (Clark & Clark, 2004). Leadership may well be one of the most important factors that need to be addressed when attempting to implement a professional development program. If there is an attempt to change school culture where the end result is a higher level of student achievement there needs to be a leader that possesses and demonstrates certain characteristics. A leader must be able to model learning, be able to build positive relationships with teachers and students, and they must also listen to what the faculty members have to say (Clark & Clark, 2002). In addition to good leadership professional development also needs to be specialized. More specifically the following elements of professional development are geared towards specialized middle level skills and knowledge that are designed for school improvement for student achievement. These elements are site based and focused on school improvement, must include a variety, facilitates and values collaboration, focuses on improving student learning and achievement, assesses needs of teachers and principals, provides enough time, uses accepted adult learning strategies, and evaluates and assesses effectiveness.

If the goal is to focus on student learning through professional development, the actual learning must pertain to the difficulties that are encountered by real students within real classrooms (Elmore, 2002). Many schools have assigned one or more people to coordinate

the school's professional development program. Sometimes this person is assigned to oversee the coordination of school improvement and professional development (Richard, 2003). The opposing strategy is to have an entire committee assigned to professional development and a school improvement council. In other situations it may be a leadership team that consists of department heads, team leaders, and administrators (Clark & Clark, 2004). A variety of professional development activities might help to combat the tedium of some professional development activities. Some traditional approaches may always be a part of professional development programs. Among these are courses at a university, in-service meetings provided by the district, workshops, and professional conferences. While it is an option to continue these programs researchers have also provided us with some interesting alternatives. These alternatives are staff development activities with the team, grade level staff development, exchanging lesson plans, and simply having sessions that are structured to let teachers participate in discussions about best practices and school improvement (Mertens & Mulhall, 2002).

New Culture

The support and the creation of a new culture that embraces collaboration may be another result from professional development programs. The program should ensure that it makes an attempt to engage all of the administrators, faculty, and staff members while addressing student achievement and overall school goals (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Having a sense of belonging or being a member of a team is an important factor in professional development. Research has shown that professional development programs are more effective if they contain teachers from

the same grade level, team, department, or school instead of consisting of people from various schools (Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon & Birman, 2002).

Focusing on improving student learning and achievement could possibly be the most vital part of a successful professional development program. Important parts of attempting to increase student achievement are having strong instructional leadership that focuses on standards (Clark & Clark, 2002). Effective leaders or principals have attempted to find different ways to focus directly on student achievement. Some leaders meet weekly with teams to examine instructional and curricular planning while ensuring that school and district standards are being followed by the faculty members (Clark et. al, 2000).

It is also important for professional development programs to meet individual needs in conjunction with organizational needs. These needs should also be discovered through administrative and teacher input (Clark & Clark, 2002; Flowers, Mertens & Mulhall, 2002). One problem may be that a group of individuals will not be able to agree on what they perceive as existing problems throughout the school. It seems that many times principals want to focus on school improvement topics through professional development while teachers often want to receive professional development in relation to instructional strategies. If there are differences, there should be program that will enable both administrators and teachers to receive both kinds of training (Flowers, Mertens & Mulhall, 2002).

Adequate Time

Providing adequate time to attend professional development activities can be a very complex problem. When taking many different strategies and program specifics into account it becomes even more daunting. Considerations for an effective professional development program

are coaching, providing feedback, monitoring instructional practices, visiting classrooms, as well as designing, implementing, and assessing curriculum and instruction (Valentine, Clark, Hackmann & Petzko, 2000). Adding these various components to existing responsibilities and scheduling conflicts and providing teachers with professional development opportunities is a difficult process.

Using accepted adult learning strategies is a key area of professional development topics need to be interesting to the people that are learning the theories. The adult theories should also consist of activities and methods that are engaging to administrators and teachers while at the same time promoting mutual inquiry (Clark & Clark, 2004). Learning the strategies and practices that are needed should actually be done in the school and the classroom. Curriculum development, assessment, and some of the major decision making that needs to occur should be viewed or perceived as major opportunities for learning (Clark et. al., 2004).

The final part of a successful professional development program is that it needs to evaluate and assess effectiveness. This evaluation and assessment process needs to consist of gathering information or data using a variety of procedures while using multiple sources (Clark et. al., 2004). The evaluation process should also examine teaching practices as they are related to school, district, and state standards. Evaluation should also gauge teaching practices in a non-threatening manner while at the same time being conducted in both formal and non-formal manners. Finally the evaluation process should also assess the progress, the overall effectiveness of the professional development program, and how it is affecting school improvement (Clark et. al., 2004).

Mediated Learning

One possible solution to contributing to closing the achievement gap may be to use mediated learning. Mediated learning makes an attempt to bond the student and the teacher through interactive processes. It attempts to create nurturing relationships by focusing on lessons or learning considered culturally important to African American students (Jackson, 2005). There are also attempts on the part of the teacher to establish learning concepts that create personal motivation for students. Another goal of the teacher is to further engage student by using certain activities that will build confidence and guide them through discussions while at the same time making relevant connections to the students' personal experiences (Jackson, 2001). Discussions that encourage Black students to learn about cultural themes and lessons while also learning about important and relevant academic subjects may help bonding occur between the teacher and the student that is very important during the learning process (Jackson, 2005). The mediation theory states that the interaction between the teacher and the student is the most important aspect due to the fact that it helps to assess learning to be part of the instructional process as well as learning the concepts (Jackson, Lewis, Feurstein & Samuda, 1998).

While it is important to examine methods that may be used to improve performance more specifically it is necessary to take a look at how SMS proposed to close the achievement gap in reading that was and is still occurring between African American students and their White peers. The following are two goals and a table that shows anticipated barriers, strategies, person or people responsible for monitoring, process used to determine effectiveness of strategy, and evaluation tool.

Instructional Strategies

Cultural connections are another important factor to consider when attempting to close the achievement gap. This becomes especially true when we examine what the future may consist of. Some experts have predicted that by the year 2020 nearly half of the nation's school population will consist of non-Caucasian cultural groups (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2000). Important and relevant questions might be what do educators need to know in order to educate this growing student population? How are educators supposed to be able to effectively address a range of abilities and talents, many different languages, and a variety of cultures (Irvine & Darling, 2005)? Some educators and researchers view the current mismatch of race between educators and the students as a problem. In 2002, the National Education Association reported that almost 90% of the teachers in the United States were White, around five percent were Black, and the rest consisted of other races (National Education Association, 2002). While we cannot change the race of educators we can strive to have more of an understanding about cultural differences. Culture can be described as consisting of social values, cognitive codes, behavioral standards, worldviews, and beliefs that give order and meaning to our own lives as well as the lives of others" (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991). While multiple cultures can be a part of every classroom they are also partly responsible for creating a multitude of different environments. These environmental interactions include negative and positive relationships, acceptance or rejection, accommodations and conflicts, and group and individual behaviors (Irvine & Darling, 2005). In order to close the achievement gap there must be an opportunity to learn, culturally relevant pedagogy, and fostering good relationships between minority students and teachers.

The opportunity to learn may not be adequately provided to African American students at many schools. Some researchers appear to believe that in order to provide more opportunities educators need to focus on factors that are needed to create a relationship between the teacher and the student as well as the use of culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lee, 1995). One particular area that may be ignored by researchers is how students actually feel about their environment and the teachers that they spend the school year with. Lee (1999) identified three different areas that he felt contributed to the underachievement of minority students. He found that African American and Latino students listed the following structures and practices that hindered their learning. Components of teacher apathy were identified as a lack of caring teacher and student relationships, the perception of discriminatory and racist patterns or expectations, and teacher centered classrooms (Lee, 1999).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Culturally relevant pedagogy can be defined as, “A theoretical model that posits effective pedagogical practice through addressing student achievement, helping students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequalities that schools perpetuate (Ladson & Billings, 1995, p.469). According to Heflin (2002) there are three different areas that need to be addressed when attempting to engage African American students in reading literature. The three areas that were identified pertain to cultural relevancy. The three components are intertwining the cultural patterns of the student’s lives with the material, relating the methods to home and community patterns that the students are accustomed to, and having the curriculum represent the culture and background that African American students live in.

While it may be possible to implement culturally relevant pedagogical practices it may be more difficult to understand how to foster positive student and teacher relationships. It may be necessary to attempt to improve school climate or culture through the improvement of relationships within the school. A researcher named Madhere came up with a model of cultural nesting in 1998. His model attempted to identify how relationships between students and teachers actually occur. His theory of nesting states that culture usually involves associating visible and or assigned characteristics as well as psychological characteristics (Madhere, 1998). The theory of nesting also believes that ethnicity, race, national origin, and language are the most common ways that educators determine what culture an individual comes from. The manner in which the teacher or the student interprets all of these factors together might determine how willing the teacher or the student is to fostering a relationship with the individual (Madhere, 1998). When attempting to improve or change the attitudes and behaviors of teachers there are multiple factors that may get in the way. Davis (1996) identified three different barriers that may inhibit changing attitudes and behaviors in relation to instructional practices for culturally diverse students. The three barriers were listed as social class membership, race, and gender. The other two subgroups were the prior experiences that the teachers had with diversity, and the actual support of individualism and individuality (Garcia & Pugh, 1992; Sleeter, 1995). One of the most profound challenges in attempting to increase the number of culturally relevant lessons is that no two schools are the same. Not only are the students different there are also differences in structures, processes, and culture as well as the needs of the community that they are located in (Irvine & Darling, 2005).

Collaboration

Many researchers have stated the importance of common planning time or teaming when addressing the topic of collaboration. The most important goal of teaming might be when teachers work together in an attempt to integrate and coordinate the kind of instruction that will be delivered to the students in the classroom (Mertens & Flowers 2003). Some researchers believe that there is a strong association between integration, interdisciplinary practices, and curriculum coordination. Mertens and Flowers (2003) concluded that when the frequency of one practice increases, the level of the other one increases as well. Another way of saying this is for curriculum to be successfully coordinated as a team, the integration of interdisciplinary approaches and subject matter need to happen on a regular basis. Interdisciplinary teaming can be defined as, “A group of teachers from different subject areas who work together to coordinate and integrate curricula and instruction for a common group of students” (Mertens & Flowers, 2003).

Another important factor or aspect of collaboration is the forming of Professional Learning Committees (PLCs). This term has been used in many different ways. It can represent a variety of different groups that have been assembled including subject area departments, interdisciplinary teams, and grade level groups (Teague & Anfara, 2012). Perhaps the best working definition of a professional learning community was provided by a team of researchers in 2006. “Organizational structures in which teachers work collaboratively to reflect on their practice, examine evidence about the relationship between practice and student outcomes, and make changes that improve teaching and learning for the particular students in their classes” (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006, pp. 3-4). One of the key factors of professional learning

communities is that simply instructing or teaching is not enough. Educators are also responsible for making sure that the students in their classroom are actually learning (DuFour, 2004). To take it a step further a team of researchers has identified common characteristics of successful schools. These characteristics are a focus on student learning: collaboration among administrators and teachers, shared values and goals, and supportive working conditions. It was determined that various groups of educators that possessed these skills or qualities would become known as professional learning communities. (Little, 1982, 2006; Rosenholtz 1989a, 1989b; Wenger, 1998, 2000). Having examined different components of successful schools we must now examine different areas of professional learning communities. These areas consist of shared values and vision, shared and supportive leadership, collective learning as well as application to practice, shared personal experience, supportive conditions, and barriers to developing and sustaining effective professional learning communities (Hord, 1997, 1998, 2008).

Shared Values and Vision

Shared values and vision encompass more than simply having a mission statement that is passed on from one school year to the next. Some researchers believe that it is more important to have and develop a particular vision for the school that has a primary goal of focusing on student learning (Pankake & Moller, 2003). There needs to be a sense of ownership as well as teamwork involved in developing and implementing shared values and a vision. Two researchers named Priny and Marks believe that the administration and the teachers at a school need to desire more than simply making changes. These researchers found that when the administration and teachers had common beliefs regarding providing an excellent education for their students that schools no longer attempted innovation simply for the sake of change (Priny & Marks, 2006). This might be

explained in a more specific manner by the following quote. “When schools passionately and sincerely adopt the mission of ensuring high levels of learning for all students, they are driven to pursue fundamentally different questions and work in significantly different ways” (Eaker & Keating, 2008, p. 15). When pursuing these questions and using different practices, student achievement improves as does the efficacy of the administration and the teachers (Andrews & Lewis, 2007; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Hipp & Huffman, 2010).

Shared and supportive leadership has been used in hopes of making school improvements for a great deal of time. Administrators that work at schools that have successful PLCs have some common characteristics. These characteristics include but are not limited to shared responsibility, authority, and leadership. The final commonality is that the administrators also participate in nurturing relationships with the teachers at their schools (Hord, 1997; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). In order for an administrative team to build capacity that will lead to improving learning the team must make a conscious effort to clearly state the expectations for teachers and monitor and review all pertinent processes (Teague & Anfara, 2012).

Collective learning and application to practice is another important element of professional learning communities. According to Hord (2009) the learning that occurs within professional learning activities needs to become a habit and the group must ensure that learning occurs on a continuous basis. Seeking answers to the question of what students should be learning is part of the process of collective learning and application to practice. Additional parts of this area are what the students should be learning, how teachers will know that it has in fact been learned, and what to do when students are struggling (Cohen & Hill, 2001;

DuFour, 2004). A PLC must also take place in a democratic environment that encourages discussion amongst its members while at the same time allowing dissent and debate in a healthy environment (Teague & Anfara, 2012).

Supportive Conditions

Supportive conditions could possibly be the factor that binds all of the other elements of a PLC together (Huffman & Jacobson, 2003). The conditions that need to be supportive in order to be successful are both structural and relational conditions (Hord, 1997, 2008). Relational conditions would consist of reflective dialogue, risk taking, celebration, recognition, caring relationships, respect, and trust. Structural conditions on the other hand would simply consist of time and space that are needed to complete specific tasks (Hord & Sommers, 2008). In previous research studies many teacher have felt that there are too many other deadlines and things to do instead of participating in professional learning communities. In order to combat these limitations common planning times, considerations of scheduling, and proximity of the people in the PLC were identified as important factors to take into consideration (Teague & Anfara, 2012).

Capacity Building

Capacity building has been deemed an important factor of professional learning communities in addition to collaborating with other faculty members. Capacity building throughout a school is much more than block scheduling, teaming, and common planning times (Brown, Anfara, Jr. & Rooney, 2004; Mattox, Hancock & Queen, 2005; Van Zee, Lay & Roberts, 2003). According to Fullan (2007) capacity building can be defined as, “the policy, strategy, or action taken that increases the collective efficacy of a group to improve student learning through new knowledge, enhanced resources, and greater motivation on the part of the people working

individually and together” (p.58). Five components have been identified for all forms of capacity building. These components are leadership, technical resources, program coherence, professional communities, teacher knowledge, skill, and disposition (Anfara & Mertens, 2012). It is also important to note that all five components are interrelated and all of the factors have the ability to affect one or more of the other factors in a positive or negative manner (Anfara & Mertens, 2012).

Effective Leadership

Leadership is possibly the most important of all of the components that are needed in order to have success when attempting to build capacity. If there is not quality leadership provided in a school environment, any attempts to build capacity will be impeded (Anfara & Mertens, 2012). According to some researchers leadership could possibly account for up to one fourth of student achievement (Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005). Some also view the principal as being the facilitator and the person responsible for the other four components of capacity building. This is evidenced by a quote from an educational researcher. Fullan(2006, 2007) claims that “The role of the principal is to cause the previous four factors to get better and better in concert” (2007, p.164). It might be more beneficial to break the roles and the responsibilities of the principal into different areas. Leithwood (2004) identified three different domains that he considered to be at the heart of capacity building. The three different domains consist of developing people; setting directions, expectations, and goals; and redesigning the organization.

Technical resources play a vital role in achieving capacity building in order to improve schools. Having a quality staff of teachers and support personnel is not enough for school

reform. Building capacity at a school may require more resources than the school currently possesses. Additional materials and resources such as time, space, and equipment may be needed to facilitate change (Fullan, 2007). More specifically, teachers need to be provided with tools that will enable them to not only begin but also maintain their individual efforts that are aligned with the instructional goals of the school (Anfara & Mertens, 2012).

Program coherence can be defined as, “the extent to which a school’s programs for students and staff learning are coordinated, focused on clear learning goals, and sustained over a period of time” (Newmann, King & Young, 2000). Many feel that the stronger the program coherence, the easier it is at a later date for the organization to run in a smoother fashion. If the school programs are aligned in a consistent manner with instructional goals, the school organization will be more effective as well as more secure (Hughes, Copely, Howley & Meehan, 2005).

As stated earlier in this Dissertation in Practice, professional communities can be an essential part of improving schools. However, it is not sufficient to simply meet at a designated time without having clear goals. According to Hord (2009) there are three characteristics that need to be present in a successful professional community. The first characteristic is that the group itself should be small and meet on a weekly basis. The second present characteristic needs to be a reliance on data before making any important decisions. The third and final characteristic is that the topics that are discussed should focus on curriculum and instructional strategies while at the same time considering student needs.

The Design

In order to develop the new School Improvement Plan for Suburban Middle School, the six essential components of school climate, utilization of data, parental involvement, professional development, instructional strategies, and collaboration were defined. This Dissertation in Practice will present a model that includes tools for educational professionals to use when designing a plan to impact achievement in academic performance, more specifically the reading performance of African American students.

Table 7 describes the six elements and specific strategies that impact reading achievement, reading achievement of African American students, and specific evidence and goals that describe performance outcomes.

Table 7: Proposed New School Improvement Plan Essential Components to Improve the Reading Proficiencies of African American Students at SMS.

	Effects on reading achievement	Effects on reading achievement of African American students	Evidence and goals
School Climate	One of the main goals of using Social Emotional Learning in order to improve school climate is to begin or attempt to create a foundation for fewer disciplinary issues while improving academic performance at the same time.	There may be a higher percentage of African American students that attend Title I schools where the school climate may need more improvement than schools in more prosperous areas.	Decreased detentions, referrals, and suspensions. Decreased dropout rate. Needs assessment survey results at the end of the year as compared to results at the beginning of the year.
Utilization of data	A data driven approach needs to be utilized when focusing on specific areas of achievement.	Ensures that the needs of individual subgroups can be met by utilizing disaggregated data.	Identifies the current problem areas. Evaluate data after progress reports, report cards, FAIR testing, and FCAT testing to determine areas that need improvement.
Parental Involvement	Parental involvement has been found to be associated with positive gains in a student's academic and cognitive outcomes.	Researchers have found that parental involvement and cultural capital or socioeconomic related social processes are a greater predictor of achievement for African American students.	Number of parents that attend school events compared to the previous years numbers. Parents are participating in specific academic activities. Counselors, ESE teachers, and assistant principals follow students throughout their career at SMS.

	Effects on reading achievement	Effects on reading achievement of African American students	Evidence and goals
Professional Development	Professional development is viewed by some as being one of the most important aspects when it comes to reform. The reform may in fact rely on the teacher learning that occurs that ultimately result in greater student learning.	Training could be related to diversity and culturally relevant materials as well as culturally relevant pedagogy.	Focused development content on coherence. Proper duration of training.
Instructional Strategies	Improves reading strategies that affect student engagement.	Can help avoid the disidentification of African American students. Culturally relevant pedagogy is considered a theoretical model that posits effective pedagogical practice through addressing student achievement.	Examine lesson plans for culturally relevant topics. Examples of student work, rubrics, benchmark testing, and standardized testing.
Collaboration	Encourages the use of interdisciplinary teams which can teach reading concepts in all areas. Some researchers believe that there is a strong association between integration and interdisciplinary practices and curriculum coordination.	Capacity building increases the efficacy of the entire group in order to increase the reading achievement of African American students.	Meeting minutes, lesson plans that are designed jointly and by interdisciplinary teams and consist of relevant curriculum. Professional learning communities that meet consistently. Focus on student learning, collaboration among teachers and administration, shared values and goals, and supportive working conditions.

Having studied the effects on reading achievement of African American students and their peers it is now necessary to write an actual School Improvement Plan for Suburban Middle School. The letters TBD are used for 2014 target percentages due to the fact that these numbers will depend on which school is using the SIP.

Proposed New School Improvement Plan
FDOE SIP 2013-2014

This section meets the requirements of Sections 1114(b)(1)(A),(H), and (I), and 1115(c)(1)(A), P.L. 107-110, NCLB, codified at 20 U.S.C. 6314(b).

Area 1: Reading

Table 8: Students Scoring at or above Achievement Level 3 on FCAT 2.0, or Scoring at or above Level 4 on FAA (Florida Alternative Assessment)

Group	2013 Target %	2013 Actual %	Target Met?	2014 Target %
African American	43%	33%	No	49% TBD
White	63%	55%	No	66% TBD

Overarching goal

G1. To improve the percentage of African American students scoring at or above Achievement Level 3 on the new state reading assessment.

Supporting goals to improve reading performance of African American students

- G2. Decrease the percentage of students demonstrating early warning systems (School climate).
- G3. Increase specific parent involvement in academic activities.
- G4. Improve professional development program.

- G5. Improve upon collaboration efforts.
- G6. Improve faculty knowledge of the utilization of data.

Action plan for Improvement

Problem Solving Key: G= Goal S=Strategy

Area 1: Reading

G1. To improve the percentage of African American students scoring at or above Achievement Level 3.

on the new state reading assessment. (There will need to be a concordant score utilized to correlate FCAT from the prior year and the new assessment).

G1.S1-Teachers will use culturally relevant pedagogy and content.

Targets Supported

- Learning Gains, CELLA, Postsecondary Readiness

Resources Available to Support the Goal

- Lesson plans
- Thinking Maps
- Mini Assessments
- Data chats

Plan to Monitor Progress toward the Goal

- Administrators will examine lesson plans, Fair testing, new standardized test (AIR).

Person or Persons Responsible for Monitoring

- Literacy Coach
- Reading teachers
- Administrators (Checking lesson plans)

Target dates or schedule

- Every nine weeks

Evidence of completion

- Examine the lesson plans of reading teachers every nine weeks

Table 9: Early Warning Systems Middle School Indicators

	2013 Actual number	2013 Actual %	2014 Target%
Students who miss 10 percent or more of available instructional time	100	12%	5% TBD
Students who fail an English Language Arts course	25	3%	1% TBD
Students who fail two or more courses in any subject	75	9%	4% TBD
Students who receive two or more referrals	200	24%	10% TBD
Students who receive one or more behavior referrals that leads to suspension.	50	6%	1% TBD
Students who failed a mathematics course	30	4%	1% TBD

G2. Decrease the percentage of students demonstrating early warning systems.

G2.S1 Implement Social Emotional Learning strategies with the current practices of School Wide Positive Behavioral Supports.

Targets Supported

- Referrals, detentions, progress reports, report cards, attendance reports

Resources available to support the goal

- Mentoring and Instructional strategies that encourage Social Emotional Learning

Plan to Monitor Progress toward the Goal

- Check to see if the number of referrals, detentions, failures, and absenteeism have decreased at the conclusion of each nine week grading period.

Person or Persons Responsible for Monitoring

- Administration, data clerk, Family School Liaison

Target Dates or Schedule

- Ongoing

Evidence of Completion

- FCAT testing results

G3. Increase specific parental involvement in academic activities.

Area 9: Parent Involvement

Title I Schools may use the Parent involvement Plan to meet the requirements of Sections 1114(b)(1)(F) and 1115(c)(1)(G), P.L. 107-110, NCLB, codified at 20 U.S.C. 6314(b).

Parental Involvement targets for the school

The following are current practices that SMS uses, many of these are useful. The highlighted portion of the current SIP states that a research-based approach will be implemented when in fact a multitude of the research shows that parents need to be specifically involved in academic pursuits.

Parent involvement Plan

Students with involved parents perform more successfully in academics.

Academic meetings/workshops will be provided for parents throughout the year to increase parent involvement and student achievement. Research based approaches to parent involvement that will be implemented may include the following.

- Open House
- School Advisory Council (SAC) meetings
- PTO meetings
- Title I Nights
- FCAT Night
- AVID Nights

- Band Performances
- Acting Play
- F.A.M.E.

Method for Tracking Parent Involvement

- Sign in sheets for all parent involvement meetings are on file. Family School Liaison has data portal to track parent contacts.
- Coordination with Title I and District Parent Involvement Council:
- School Family Liaison attends quarterly District Parent Involvement Council.
- School Family Liaison attends monthly Title I District meetings.

Table 10: Specific Parental Involvement Targets

Target	2013 Actual Number	2013 Actual %	2014 Target%
Open House	2	25%	30% TBD
SAC Meetings	6	10%	30% TBD
PTO meetings	6	10%	30% TBD
FCAT nights	2	30%	40% TBD
Avid Nights	1	10%	30% TBD
Band Performances	3	25%	30% TBD

G3.S1-Attempt to improve school climate as well as recruit tutors from parents by using surveys.

G3.S2 Keep surveys short and efficient, hand them out before non-academic events, and collect them before the event begins.

G3.S3 See if it is within the budget to mail items home instead of trusting students to deliver flyers to their parents.

Targets Supported

- Attendance at various events, survey results

Resources Available to support the goal-Open house, SAC meetings, PTO meetings, (AIR) nights, Avid nights and Band Performances.

Plan to Monitor Progress toward the Goal

- Analyze data after each Open House, SAC Meeting, PTO meeting, (AIR) nights, Avid Night, and Band Performances.

Person or persons Responsible for Monitoring

- Family School Liaison
- Data clerk
- Administration

Target Dates or Schedule

- Ongoing

Evidence of Completion

- Final numbers reported on sign in sheets, Surveys will be at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year

G4. Improve Professional development program.

G4.S1. Five core components will be used when implementing professional development activities. 1. Content focus. 2. Active learning. 3. Coherence. 4. Duration. 5. Collective participation. “A Primer on Effective Professional Development.” (Desimone, 2011).

G4.S2- Ensure that each faculty member is scheduled for a minimum of 20 hours of professional development per semester.

Targets supported

- Proper scheduling to ensure that required amount of attendance is possible.

Resources available to Support the Goal

- Professional Development meeting minutes
- Evidence of learning after completion of professional development

Plan to Monitor Progress Toward the Goal

- Each professional development activity will be screened to see if it contains the 5 identified key components 1) Content focus 2) Active learning 3) Coherence 4) Duration 5) Collective participation

Person or Persons responsible for Monitoring

- Department Heads and Instructional Coaches

Target Dates or Schedule

- Planning times need to be coordinated during pre planning. Professional development- A minimum of 10 hours in the first semester and 10 hours during the second semester.

Evidence of Completion

- Logs maintained to record actual number of hours of professional development have been completed.

G5. Improve upon collaboration efforts.

G5.S1- Implement interdisciplinary professional learning communities.

G5.S2 Planning times should be based on “pods” in order to promote interdisciplinary teaming. Math teachers could collaborate with Science teachers while Language Arts teachers would collaborate with Social Studies teachers. Exceptional Student Education teachers would collaborate with Reading teachers.

Target supported-

- One teacher for each core subject has a room in each pod.

Resources available to support the goal

- Lesson plans
- Meeting minutes

Plan to monitor progress

- Outcomes within curriculum design

Person or persons responsible for monitoring

- Designated leader within each professional learning community

G6. Improve faculty knowledge of the utilization of data.

G6.S1- New training will be implemented to examine data. In addition to more training a five step process will be used to examine data. 1). Review your school improvement plan. 2). determine how the data will be used.3). Identify relevant data. 4). Examine and discuss the data. 5). set goals and evaluate the data (Flowers, 2009).

Targets supported

- School improvement plan

Resources available to support the goal

- Standardized test results
- Report cards
- Fair testing
- Mini assessments
- FCAT Star

Plan to monitor progress toward the goal

- Real world data analyzing by faculty members to show mastery

Person or persons responsible for monitoring

- Literacy Coach
- Department heads
- Administration

Target dates or schedule

- Beginning of the school year

Evidence of completion

- Completion of data tracking logs

CHAPTER 3

Goals of the Plan

This Dissertation in Practice was originally designed to focus on improving the achievement gap that existed between African American students and their peers at Suburban Middle School. It morphed into a School Improvement Plan that addresses components and strategies that will benefit African American students and possibly others. In order to examine the School Improvement Plan in more depth we must first discuss what the goals of the SIP were and what the expectations and desired outcomes were.

While the main goal was to close the achievement gap between African American students and their peers at Suburban Middle School there needed to be supporting goals or key concepts that would also influence reading performance. Within this process one of the areas that needed to be addressed was the need to improve school climate. The other critical concepts were proper utilization of data, parental involvement, professional development, instructional strategies, and collaboration. After completion of the school improvement plan it was realized that that if the latter five concepts were addressed that should in turn help to improve or enhance the school climate and the reading performance of African American students.

Target Audience

The target audience of the school improvement plan was all of the stakeholders that are involved with Suburban Middle School. The stakeholders consisted of the administration, the faculty, the students, the parents, and all of the support personnel that work at SMS. In addition to the main stakeholders it is possible that this Dissertation in Practice may help other schools that are located in Suburban County. Reading performance may often influence performance in

other subjects in school as well. Outsiders in addition to stakeholders were expected to benefit from the model by being able to improve school climate, utilize data in a more effective manner, improve community relations through more parent involvement, improve upon instructional strategies, and by collaborating in a more efficient and beneficial manner. One interesting area that was recognized in the 2013-2014 School Improvement Plan was that if some goals were not met and the percentages fell short the answer seemed to be to further increase the desired percentage in hopes of “doubling up and catching up.” An example of this was when the 2013 targeted percentage for African American students to score at or above achievement level 3 on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) was 43%. The actual percentage of this particular subgroup achieving this level or above was 33%. The 2014 Target percentage of African American students achieving level 3 on the FCAT was then set at 49%. It was a little bit baffling to expect a 16% increase after the initial goal of 43% was not met in the first place. In the newly proposed SIP the desired increase of students performing at or above achievement level 3 on the new state reading assessment has been addressed as to be determined (TBD). This was done because all schools are different and the setting of goals will depend on the desired outcomes of that particular school. Some educational researchers feel that educators need to experience some success initially and then build upon that. The percentages of these goals were determined in an effort to have realistic expectations of success. One of the most important factors is that change is actually occurring throughout the school.

Anticipated Changes

The anticipated changes in reading performance were attributed to teachers utilizing culturally relevant pedagogy practices as well as using culturally diverse lesson plans. This was done in an effort to increase student engagement. The desired changes in performance were that students may have more of a desire to learn if they could relate to some of the content that is presented in reading instruction. The only performance goal was the desire to increase reading performance among African American students at SMS. Students were also expected to learn more about self-control through obtaining more coping skills by using social emotional learning.

Outside of the performance goal there were five other goals that were expected to improve school climate and reading achievement. One example of a learning experience is that faculty members were expected to participate in professional development activities. Although it is difficult to quantify learning gains, the quality of professional development programs is expected to improve. There are also anticipated changes in the learning experiences of the parents. This will occur with greater parental involvement. In the parental involvement sections of this Dissertation in Practice it was mentioned that parents need to participate in more academic endeavors throughout the school.

The actual organizational structure itself was not expected to change but there were anticipated changes in the overall school climate. School climate was expected to change through the use of discipline measures teaching skills instead of strictly being punitive. One of the main concerns is that disciplinary issues take away from valuable instructional time that can be used to attempt to close the existing achievement gap. School culture and climate are believed to be major contributor to the performance of the individual. As previously mentioned, academic or

school climate is different than a student's individual characteristics but it can still have a positive influence on outcomes and student achievement (Mickelson & Greene, 2006). In order to influence student achievement, the faculty members at SMS needed to acquire new knowledge and skills.

Knowledge and Skills Acquired

The new knowledge that faculty members gained was in relation to enhancing the reading performance of African American students, early warning systems that middle school students demonstrate, parental involvement, and key aspects of a quality professional development program. The steps that were needed to accomplish improving the reading performance of African American students was really dependent upon all of the six different areas that were addressed early in the Dissertation in Practice. These areas were school climate, utilization of data, parental involvement, professional development, instructional strategies, and collaboration.

One of the main knowledge components or skills that were developed was the implementation and utilization of social emotional learning. Many of the faculty members may not be familiar with this concept. Traditionally many schools have focused more on the punitive side of discipline instead of empowering students to improve their behavior through making good choices. School climate can realistically be improved by all five of the other components of the proposed school improvement plan. The utilization of data is to ensure that faculty members are made aware of students that either need the most assistance or are possibly being underserved at Suburban Middle School. Parental involvement is included not only to keep parents informed but also to improve the academic performance of their children. Professional development influences the school climate by enabling the faculty members to understand culture differences

and provides them with the ability to make connections with the African American student population. Instructional strategies consist of culturally relevant pedagogy and strategies that will engage students thus avoiding disciplinary issues and improving the overall school climate at SMS. Collaboration was implemented as interdisciplinary teams in order to increase overall knowledge, skills, and the practice of all faculty members. If teachers are not familiar with the practices of others it becomes extremely difficult to have a shared mission or vision for the school.

The knowledge and skills acquired concerning the utilization of data was twofold. The first aspect was that faculty members as well as administration need to be aware of the importance of breaking down the data by using disaggregated data. The second important concept was to utilize the five step process of properly using the data. This process consisted of 1) Reviewing the school improvement plan. 2) Determining how the data will be used. 3) Identifying relevant data. 4) Examining and discussing the data. 5) Setting goals and evaluating the progress. In addition to breaking down data and using a specific process, faculty members should also be able to prioritize goals and be used as a resource that all members of the team have access to on a regular basis.

The main importance of increasing parental involvement at Suburban Middle School was to improve the academic performance of African American students in reading. This was expected to be accomplished by having attitudes and expectations of parents influence the academic achievement of their children. Researchers have found that the gains pertaining to

academic achievement increase when parents are participating in specific academic activities instead of extracurricular ones.

The knowledge that was gained through implementing new instructional strategies was the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy. Faculty members were made aware of three areas that need to be addressed when trying to engage African American students in reading education. The three areas are relating the methods to home and community patterns that the students are accustomed to, having the curriculum represent the culture and background that African American students live in, and intertwining the cultural patterns of the student's lives with the material.

Collaboration is a broad concept but there were still some identified areas of knowledge of which faculty members needed to be made aware. In order for the curriculum to be successfully implemented by the team at SMS the integration of interdisciplinary strategies needs to happen on a regular basis instead of simply being an afterthought. An additional desired outcome was that teachers would know what to focus on during the meeting of professional learning communities. Far too often professional learning communities meet and the ensuing discussion consists of irrelevant topics. According to (Hord, 2009), when professional learning communities come together they need to focus on four different specific areas. These areas are 1) A focus on student learning. 2) Shared values and goals. 3) Supportive working conditions and 4) Collaboration among teachers and administrators.

Changes in Attitude

Expected changes in attitude were not only directed towards African American students. There were also expected changes in how the faculty members would view future school

improvement plans. Previous school improvement plans were often convoluted documents that were difficult to understand. These documents were often more than eighty pages in length and it felt like a chore to read them. With the advent of shorter and more precise school improvement plans, hopefully the faculty and staff members at SMS will realize that SIPs can actually serve as important tools for middle school reform. Professional learning communities should actually be examining the school improvement plan to know what expectations and goals exist within the school. It is the job of the administration to effectively communicate these visions and goals to the teachers in order to achieve specified goals. Changes in attitude in relation to African American students consisted of wanting to inform teachers that if they have negative perceptions towards students the chances of academic failure increase. This can be evidenced by some beliefs of researchers that were stated earlier in this Dissertation in Practice. If there are teachers that feel a student is not performing well due to atypical codes of speech or behaviors or feels that an African American student is of lower than average intelligence then the chances of academic failure increase (Marks, 2005).

Steps, Measurement Tools, Procedures, and Activities

The overarching goal was to improve the reading performance of African American students. When examining the research six critical areas were identified. It later became apparent that all of the individual areas could be implemented in hopes of improving school climate. It also became apparent that some school improvement plans are written in very vague terms. The proposed new school improvement plan is sometimes lacking measurement tools due to the fact that all schools are different. That is why TBD (To be determined) is included in the charts. All

existing data from the time of attempting to implement a new school improvement plan will vary from school to school. Procedures and activities were taken directly from supporting research in an effort to ensure accountability and to have a focused approach in regards to improving academic performance. Examples of these procedures are the identification of five steps to utilize while analyzing data as well as five critical components that every professional development program should contain. The duration of adequate professional development training was also included. The effectiveness of lesson plans designed to increase the reading performance of African American students can be determined whether or not culturally relevant lessons and culturally relevant pedagogy are being implemented or not. The measures for parental involvement are whether or not parents are starting to be included in academic activities instead of volunteering in a multitude of other activities.

The measure for the utilization of data is whether or not faculty members are able to demonstrate proficiency when examining real world data in an effort to improve academic achievement. Finally, the measure of collaboration is whether or not interdisciplinary teaming is being used to shape and guide the curriculum.

Tangible Results

Tangible results would be an improvement in school climate based upon survey results, not only the recognition of the importance of data but also the utilization of it in a beneficial manner. Keeping parents informed and being in the know by increasing the levels of parental involvement would hopefully result in improved performance and grades throughout the school year. Overall school reform was also an expectation through improving the school climate. Lower incidences of detentions and referrals were a result of teachers and administrators using

social and emotional learning in conjunction with school wide positive behavior supports. Student engagement was another tangible result once lessons were tailored to attract and hold the interest of African American students. A final tangible result was a better informed and trained faculty that hopefully had an increase in efficacy when it came to improving the performance of African American students in reading. This could be determined by whether or not the five different aspects of professional development had been implemented on a consistent basis.

Model Modification

One particular area that would need to be modified is the target percentages for African American students that are scoring at or above achievement level 3 on the Florida state reading assessment. Realistically all six of the goals could be modified in the school improvement plan. Target percentages could be set for early warning systems, parental involvement, increasing specific parental involvement, and hours spent in professional development based on the needs of the school from year to year. School Improvement Plans can consist of many different factors; there are an unlimited number of modifications that could be made to the SIP. The plan to modify any area would be to analyze data from the previous year as well as the previous school improvement plan. Examples of data that could be analyzed were included in the DiP earlier. Standardized testing, FAIR results, surveys, mini assessments, portfolios, projects, and a multitude of other items could be analyzed in order to determine what changes in goals and or a school improvement plan need to occur. The group or subgroup of students that is targeted for improvement could also change from year to year depending on performance. If the desired outcomes are not being experienced then the manner in which groups collaborate could be changed. Collaboration could occur as interdisciplinary teams or could be done based on subject

or grade level. Additional needs assessment surveys could also be administered to determine which areas need to be addressed. There are so many different areas that may have an effect on school improvement and reading performance that additional research could be conducted to determine other components or strategies that could be utilized to make changes for the following year.

Anticipated Impact

The anticipated impact was to improve the reading performance of African American students at Suburban Middle School. The strategies that were examined and changed in order to make an impact were the six identified strategies in the proposed school improvement plan. Those six areas consisted of school climate, utilization of data, parental involvement, professional development, instructional strategies, and collaboration. School climate was expected to improve due to many different factors but one of the key components was the addition of social emotional learning to the current practices of school wide positive behavioral supports. The reading performance of African American student was supposed to be impacted by the utilization of data ensuring that all faculty members became proficient in analyzing data by using a research based approach. The anticipated impact on parental involvement was not only to increase the amount of parents that are involved in school activities but to increase the number of academic activities that they are involved in. Ultimately changes in professional development were that teachers were expected to learn more during these training sessions. In the past, professional development has consisted of simply attending an event with no follow up afterwards. Often the teacher is only responsible for completing a survey that rates the quality of the professional development. There is usually no follow up to determine if the strategy, skill, or

concepts have actually been mastered by the participant. By ensuring that attendees to professional development sessions are actively involved, that training is coherent, and that the proper duration of training is received the anticipated changes are better trained and prepared faculty members. Anticipated changes springing from culturally relevant pedagogy strategies are simply better relationships between the African American students as well as the faculty and staff members at Suburban Middle School. When students feel that their cultural differences are being ignored or not given importance, they may become disengaged and disenchanted with the academic programs at SMS. By using culturally relevant pedagogy and lesson plans, an anticipated change is that African American students will feel that the teachers are more committed to their success and increasing the level of their reading achievement. Anticipated changes concerning collaboration are that it will be easier for a team to identify possible deficiencies and set goals than it would be for an individual. If there is not collaboration occurring throughout the school teaching can be a very isolating experience. All faculty members bring different strengths and weaknesses to the table. It is important to have multiple people analyze data and discuss their practice in order to be successful as a school. Another important factor is that many of the new faculty members can reap benefits from collaborating with more experienced faculty members concerning teaching practices.

Supporting Research

The supporting research identified six different aspects or components that have an impact on the reading performance of African American students. These six factors are school climate, utilization of data, parental involvement, professional development, instructional strategies, and collaboration.

While school climate was expected to improve due to the other five strategies, one important part that was expected to improve school climate was social emotional learning. Some people have estimated that there are over 200 types of classroom based social emotional learning programs in the United States (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2003). In addition to this in 2001 a resolution supporting the teaching of social emotional skills in schools was passed at the National Conference of State Legislators (Hoffman, 2009). Following that resolution Illinois became the first state to actually have specific social emotional learning standards for k-12 students in 2004 (Hoffman, 2009). There may be many educators that have not even heard of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) but that could be quickly changing. Social Emotional Learning has started to be taught in various in service programs as well as teacher preparation programs. An organization named the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE) developed a program involving ethical and moral issues that teachers face, included in this program was a section on SEL (Imig, 2007). One existing problem is there are many different definitions or explanations of what social emotional learning actually consists of. Some believe that it is simply a prevention program that includes information from juvenile justice, mental health, and public health agencies. While others claim that SEL includes emotional awareness, handling difficult interpersonal situations effectively, establishing positive social relationships, and making responsible decisions (Hoffman, 2009). The latter seems to be a tailor made approach that would benefit the students in addition to improving the school climate at Suburban Middle School. No doubt some educators will view SEL as another task or burden added to an already existing laundry list of things to do on a daily basis. Perhaps some of the new

research concerning SEL would help to change their minds. There is starting to be an increased number of research articles that explain positive outcomes related to the implementation of social emotional learning programs. More specifically, there have been links shown between the use of SEL programs and improved feelings of competency among teachers, increases in student academic achievement, and improved student behavior with a reduction of referrals (Brown, Roderick, Lantieri & Aber, 2004; Cherniss et. al., 2006; Cohen, 2001; Elias & Arnold, 2006; Greenberg, Kusche & Riggs, 2004; Rimm-Kaufmann & Sawyer, 2004; Schaps, Battistich & Solomon, 2004; Solomon, Battistich, Watson, Schaps & Lewis, 2000; Zins, Bloodsworth, Weissberg & Walberg, 2004).

The overarching goal of this Dissertation in Practice was to improve the reading performance of African American students. Jackson and Davis (2000) recommend using ongoing assessments as well as data to improve classroom practice that will later help to increase learning. This concept states the importance of the proper utilization of data in a very basic manner. While this may be a well-known concept, there is still one existing problem. The problem is that not many people are paying attention to teachers actually learning how to use the data in order to improve learning. Often teachers that have not been supported, trained, or prepared to analyze the data to the instructional strategies may become resistant to examining data (Trimble, Gay & Matthews, 2005). That is why the proposed new school improvement plan included steps to follow when collecting data as well as the need to provide additional training with faculty members actually working problems that involve data analysis. In a recent study, sixteen principals were interviewed in order to determine what kind of data they gathered as well

as what they used the data for. The majority of the principals answered that data was used primarily for accountability. One existing problem is that only about half of them answered that they used data for the sake of school improvement (Shen, Cooley, Reeves, Burt, Ryan, Rainey & Yuan, 2010). In addition to school improvement there is another area that is often being overlooked at the same time. The researchers determined that the utilization of data was often focused on tracking and outcomes instead of attempting to influence the learning process (Shen et. al, 2010). While there are some negatives or possible corrections needed in the utilization of data there are still many positive outcomes. For instance, federal, state, and even local systems understand the importance of not only collecting but using data to improve learning and instructional practices in conjunction with final outcomes such as standardized testing (Shen et. al, 2010). According to Salpeter (2004), student achievement data is just one of the many different kinds of data that can be collected in hopes of making improvements or changes. This is confirmed by Bernhardt (2003, 2004, 2005). She claims that in fact four different types of data need to be collected. These types of data are 1). Perception data, this actually describes what people think about the learning environment. 2). Student learning data, this pertains to student performance. 3). School process data which defines what the school is actually doing and what the results are. 4). The final and fourth type of data that should be collected is demographic data that attempts to provide educators with background information on the school itself, staff members, and students (Bernhardt, 2003, 2004, 2005). When reviewing these four different types of data it was discovered that this Dissertation in Practice has addressed all four of these areas. Perception data was addressed when conversations occurred between reading teachers and the

literacy coach. Student performance was the overarching goal and current data was examined to determine the achievement gap between African American students and their peers. School processes were identified and examined within the previous five years of school improvement plans at Suburban Middle School. The demographic data was also examined in chapter 1 of the DiP.

Parental involvement is a very complex matter when it pertains to student achievement or the lack thereof. Parental involvement and the collaboration between schools and the parents of students have been deemed important because society has begun to recognize that students cannot be educated by schools alone (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006; Machen, Wilson & Notar, 2005). An existing problem is that some African American parents may be critical of the different agendas of schools because of bad prior experiences (Williams & Baber, 2007). Teachers may respond to this criticism with distrust or apathy when they feel that the parents of their students are not willing to support their goals and plans for success (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2008). Prior research has also shown that the working class and poor African American parents are more likely to criticize schools than affluent or middle class African American families (Diamond & Gomez, 2004). On the positive side, parents of African American students that are high achievers are able to use various strategies to ensure that this success continues. Among these strategies are close monitoring of homework, additional academic work, and tutoring (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000). This refers back to a relevant point in the DiP when it was determined that parents need to be involved in more academic activities instead of simply attending extracurricular activities (Clark, 1983; Epstein, 1995; Lareau, 1987). One interesting

factor is that social class appears to play a major part in levels of parental involvement with schools. Some researchers believe that working class and middle class African Americans deal differently with environments within schools (Diamond & Gomez, 2004). Also according to Diamond and Gomez (2004) working class and middle class African American families are often responsible for customizing the experiences of their children's school experiences. A better way of saying this is that middle class parents often appear to be more involved in the course selection and the actual selection of the school than working class parents. Working class parents are less willing to intervene on the behalf of their children and are more confrontational than middle class parents (Diamond, 2000; Lareau & Horvat, 1999).

Professional development has changed substantially over the last fifteen years or so. There has been a different way of thinking concerning the development and delivery of professional development in education in the United States (Cobb, 2005). Schools have been asked to start looking at professional from different viewpoints such as using a systems perspective even before No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Cobb, 2005), Systems approaches or thinking enabled teachers to see patterns in education instead of just single events that occurred (Senge, 1990). The advent of this way of thinking may have contributed to schools thinking in a more advanced fashion instead of just concentrating on single professional development events. This in turn resulted in professional development programs that would actually help to improve teacher learning and student achievement at the same time (Cobb, 2005). Possibly the best way to evaluate the effectiveness of professional development programs is to gauge how well the program increases the effectiveness of teachers as well as the student achievement outcomes

(Cobb, 2005). Another important factor in relation to determining the effectiveness of professional development programs is that schools need to evaluate the program at three different times. The programs need to be evaluated during planning stages, formatively, and finally summatively to study student achievement and teacher growth (Killion, 2002). One major problem is that this does not always occur. While many teachers participate in what is referred to as professional development, schools need to question the quality and value of many professional development programs. Many forms of professional development do not guarantee success, high quality delivery, or positive effects on teaching and learning (Hill, 2009). Some research has claimed that professional development can actually do harm instead of increase proficiency. In the past many district employees have expressed their disapproval of advice and strategies that are presented during professional development. At times training has been inconsistent with curricular and instructional approaches that were approved by the district (Hill, 2009). The ambiguous nature of professional development programs makes even more of a case to ensure that each program contains the five important areas that were mentioned earlier in this Dissertation in Practice. According to Desimone (2011) successful professional development programs need to contain the following 5 elements. 1). Content focus- meaning focused on subject matter and how students learn the content. 2). Active learning- activities such as observing and receiving feedback, analyzing student work, or making presentations. 3). Coherence or consistent with knowledge, beliefs, and with school, district, and state reform policies. 4). Duration- At least 20 or more hours of contact time. 5.) Collective participation- Same grade, subject, or school.

When attempting to increase the reading performance of African American students one critical component is culturally relevant pedagogy. With the current number of immigrants moving to the United States daily in addition to the number of U.S. born ethnic minorities educators need to be ready to make adjustments (Banks, 2001). Researchers have predicted that by the year 2020 nearly half of the school population will be non- Caucasian students (Bureau of Census, 2000). By the year 2050 it has been predicted that close to 57% of students in the U.S. will consist of Asian American, Latino, and African American students (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1996). One of the main reasons that teachers need to develop cultural understanding in addition to culturally relevant pedagogy is the fact that culture can easily be misunderstood. One researcher says, “Culture is complex, multidimensional, continually changing, and influenced by a wide variety of factors; this reality should encourage education professionals to develop positive caring relationships among minority students and their teachers and strive for cohesion, motivation, and achievement in schools” (Gay, 2000, p.47). Gay (2000) also provides an in depth explanation of what culturally relevant pedagogy entails and consists of. He says that culturally relevant pedagogy uses performance styles, frames of reference, prior experiences, and cultural knowledge to make learning more relevant and effective for students that are minorities. One of the main focuses of using culturally relevant pedagogy is to teach and increase the academic performance of culturally diverse students (Howard, 2003). With the overarching goal and the main focus of this Dissertation in Practice being increasing the reading achievement of African American students culturally relevant pedagogy is an important factor to consider when developing a new school improvement plan.

Attempting to improve a school without collaborating would be nearly impossible. The forming of professional learning communities is a very common practice among educators. The more challenging part is deciding which aspects of the PLC are the most important and what will help the community perform in the most effective manner. Simply meeting without common goals and shared visions might not be beneficial at all. There appears to be an increased number of schools that are using professional learning communities in hopes of making sustainable changes (Teague & Anfara, 2012). It is quite possible that the work of teachers in professional learning communities may increase the skills of all involved which will result in being able to assist students to improve academically (Bezzina, 2008). Professional learning communities need to meet on a regular basis and there needs to be guidelines in order to be successful. One important factor is that developing and sustaining PLCs requires leadership and direction (Teague et. al, 2012). A better way of stating this is,

As visionary leaders, administrators can incorporate the professional learning community model in their schools to increase understanding and communication, improve problem-solving capacities and develop an organized change process for collectively building “community” in the organizational structure of the school. (Huffmann & Jacobson, 2003, p.248)

The previous quote demonstrates that collaboration in schools is needed by all members of the faculty and the administration. Judith Little (2006) has studied the commonalities between school improvement and relationships among teachers. This was done in an effort to understand important foundations of professional learning communities. She found that professional

learning programs that are continuous and make an impact contain the following elements or principles. 1). Teachers teach others the practice of teaching. 2). Faculty members design, plan, research, evaluate, and prepare materials together. 3). Observations and useful critiques are implemented, meetings are frequent, continuous, and talk about teacher practices are concrete (Little, 1982, 2006). Additionally (Wenger, 2000) provides an additional insight into PLCs by saying that, “leading knowledge organizations are increasingly likely to view communities of practice not merely as useful auxiliary structures but as foundational structures on which to build organizations” (Wenger, 2002, p. 21). The aforementioned quote is evidence that professional learning communities are starting to be held responsible for making contributions to revamping organizations and improving schools.

CHAPTER 4

The first course in the doctoral program consisted of analyzing data and understanding standard based reforms as well as a general history of education in the United States. Studying the trends and current issues in education was beneficial in understanding how and why there is such an emphasis on accountability in education. The racial achievement gap was examined and later became the major focus for this Dissertation in Practice. A large portion of the class consisted of analyzing data that related to adequate yearly progress (AYP) in a K-12 setting. This was a great foundation in starting to understand the importance of analyzing data in an effort to later implement effective practices to increase student achievement.

The second course dealt with facilitating, learning, development, and motivation. This class served as an introduction to the gap analysis process. This Dissertation in Practice (DiP) actually has sections about each one of the topics that the name of the course lists. One important factor of the gap analysis was being able to understand performance goals as well as evaluation plans. In addition to those two important topics were goals, measures, standards, and existing gaps within the organization. Global goals, intermediate goals, intermediate goals, and solutions were also an integral part of the gap analysis process. The gap analysis for this course dealt with the achievement gap between African American students and their peers. There was a large part of the gap analysis that consisted of assessing learning and achievement. Since the DiP addresses student achievement, this was yet another building block to gaining knowledge that would be needed at a later date. In addition to learning and achievement, context and culture were addressed in the gap analysis in order to determine if there was a conflict in the activity setting

between background values, expectations, and beliefs. This was an interesting area to study, particularly as it relates to African American students. This course was also laying the groundwork for the Dissertation in Practice. In addition to the gap analysis a couple of assignments consisted of reviewing a peer reviewed empirical article on a work based problem. One of the articles was about persistence in the face of academic challenge for socioeconomically disadvantaged children. This article was chosen before I started to work at my current place of employment. It was interesting that this was the chosen topic before working at a Title I school. The second article that was reviewed dealt with comprehensive school reform, a major topic that was also addressed in the Dissertation in Practice.

The Organizational theory course was an important piece in order to understand a variety of different organizational structures. At my former school I was working in an environment that utilized vertical coordination. The principal had implemented a structure in which he controlled subordinates through his unquestioned authority along with specified rules and policies. At my current school I am working for his wife who operates under a completely different leadership style. At my current place of employment, collaboration is much more appreciated. I tend to think of the human resource frame when I think of my new principal. She seems to believe in investing time and training into her faculty members in hopes of developing quality educators and staff members. Organizational theory concepts have helped me to determine what practices provide the best results for student achievement. Organizational context was a section in the Dissertation in Practice and it was interesting to learn more about the organization that I have now been at for two years.

Identifying complex problems of practice focused on understanding the importance of conducting interviews, use sampling procedures, developing appropriate evaluation questions, and avoiding bias when attempting to gather relevant data to perform research. Not only were these a necessity to participate and finish the doctoral program all of those elements are applicable to school improvement efforts. One other important area was that we were required to make a mock Institutional Review Board (IRB) submission. Some of the students knew exactly what direction they were headed in and actually submitted the information that they would use for the DiP. This was not the case for me but I did learn and realize all of the expectations that the IRB had for submitting information and how much of a tedious process it can be at times.

Analysis of data for complex problems of practice was a very informative course that focused on research practices. This was an introduction to the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). We used SPSS to develop data bases, conduct independent samples t-tests, dependent t-tests, and mixed methods research. Deficiencies in research were analyzed as well as validity and reliability. While my DiP did not end up containing traditional research methods it was still very beneficial when conducting a review of the literature and analyzing research methods of various studies. It served as very beneficial classes to people like me who are new to the research process. It enabled me to develop hypotheses and differentiate between the various kinds. I became a better practitioner when I learned about descriptive statistics, standard deviations, various methodologies of research, purposes of research, and qualitative and quantitative research.

Leadership in a learning organization enabled me to better understand what the administration and district employees need to be concerned about on a daily basis. It provided us with a historical view of leadership as well as a modern day analysis of it. Challenges for leaders and capacity building were examined in great detail. My DiP contains a section on capacity building through the use of professional learning communities. Social aspect was another element that was examined. This is a relevant topic due to the fact that attempting to close the achievement gap between African American students and their peers can be considered a matter of social justice. Three article critiques were assigned and this was another chance to become proficient in analyzing research methods but this time it was from a leadership perspective. One of my article critiques contained aspects relating to school culture, collaboration, diversity, and equity which are also key factors involved in my Dissertation in Practice. Two other article critiques discussed authentic leadership and trust between administrators and teachers and leadership for learning, two more relevant topics.

It was a surprise when I took classes at the 6000 level for my specialization. Two out of the four courses were more difficult than some of my doctoral level courses. My specialization courses consisted of exceptional student education (ESE) courses. I attribute the difficulty of the courses to the fact that the majority of the work was application. My undergraduate and my master's degree were both in Sports and Fitness. Even though I have currently been working as an ESE teacher for three and one half years these classes exposed me to topics that I do not encounter very much. The overwhelming majority of my students are Specific Learning Disabled (SLD). My two most difficult ESE classes dealt with grant writing and writing curriculum based

assessment probes for Math, Reading, and Writing. Probably the most difficult course I took was titled Assessment, Diagnosis, and Curriculum Prescriptions for Students with Moderate and Severe Disabilities. The class consisted of conducting social and emotional assessments, assessing students with autism, and screening processes for assessment, diagnosis, and classification and placement. These concepts were very foreign to me and my initial work and assignments were probably evidence of this. Ultimately I succeeded and learned a great deal. While these courses may not have helped me directly with writing my Dissertation in Practice the work ethic that was developed in completing these courses helped me to continue on and not give up on the arduous process of writing a DiP.

The final experience that shaped me as a practitioner and a teacher has been the actual writing of the Dissertation in Practice. I feel that it has unconsciously taught me how to think about a large scale problem and break it down into smaller sections. My initial thoughts or research may not be fluid the first time but narrowing down, revising, and rethinking things with the guidance of Dr. Hopp has been a great experience. From what I understand, the process for writing dissertations is usually a very isolating experience. I know that our program has made great changes in this respect. For that I am thankful, I can't imagine being successful without the support I have received. The program has been challenging and consisted of a lot of hard work. It should be difficult to earn one of the highest degrees at the university. Moving forward I feel that the persistence and the knowledge that I have gained as a doctoral student is hard to quantify. I expect it to serve me well in any future jobs that I have in education.

Implications of the Plan

The implications for the proposed school improvement plan are that even though the design was developed for a Suburban Middle School it could probably be used in an urban environment as well. School climate, utilization of data, parental involvement, professional development, instructional strategies, and collaboration are elements that can be implemented into any school improvement plan. The categories or strategies of the plan could also be used to address any topic related to student achievement. After the completion of this Dissertation in Practice, I am required to submit the finished product to Suburban County. I am hoping that some of the people in the district will actually read it instead of simply filing it away somewhere. As stated earlier in the DiP, one of the problems that researchers are facing is that there is isolation between experts that are working on school improvement plans versus those that are dealing with the underachievement of minorities (Gallimore & Goldberg, 2001). It would be beneficial for the county as well as all of the stakeholders at SMS to try to learn more about school improvement plans and how they could guide school climate, the utilization of data, parental involvement, professional development, instructional strategies, and collaboration. By improving upon all of these areas, the desired outcomes are an improvement in overall school climate and the reading performance of African American students. The reading achievement gap between African American students and their peers has been a problem that has existed in the United States for a long period of time. While many research articles and studies address this issue it seems that often times this problem may be acknowledged but not directly addressed. We know there is a problem, we acknowledge the problem, but strategies to fix this problem are not implemented or understood. Implications are that by improving the six elements that were

discussed throughout the DiP, we will hopefully improve things for all student involved not just African American students. It is possible that many parents currently understand the importance of parental involvement. What they may not know is that it should be involvement in specific academic activities. While volunteering for working at the concession stands for a basketball game is a nice gesture, it will probably not improve academic achievement. I would also like for this Dissertation in Practice to guide some training throughout the county. Parental involvement is an area that can be addressed in a relatively short amount of time. I would like to have the county provide training to faculty members that addresses school climate and how to improve it, the utilization of data, professional development that consists of active participation, instructional strategies that contain culturally relevant lessons, and better ways to collaborate to increase academic achievement. Culturally relevant lessons may be the only area that pertains directly to African American students. I believe that improvement in all of the other areas would improve the experiences of all students. These are the plans for the implications of the entire county. Implications for Suburban Middle School are specifically to close the achievement gap in reading between African American students that currently exists within their own school. This can be done by examining current practices and how they relate to the African American student population. Guiding questions would be 1). How do we improve school climate in hopes of increasing the reading achievement of African American students? 2). How can we utilize our existing data to increase the reading achievement of African American students? 3). How do we reduce the number of African American students that are demonstrating early warning signs? 4).How do we increase parental involvement to increase the reading achievement of African

American students? 5). What specific instructional strategies will increase the reading achievement of African American students? 6). How do we collaborate in a more effective manner to increase the reading performance of African American students?

Recommendations for Further Research

Recommendations for further research include conducting more studies concerning perceptions and attitudes of teachers towards African American students. One problem with this is that it may be difficult to get participants to respond in an honest manner. In addition to perceptions it would be interesting to see the current levels of existing knowledge concerning what strategies can be used to increase the reading performance of African American students. It is very difficult to address gaps in knowledge if there is no baseline information. An additional area for further research might be to determine if there is a correlation between improving overall school climate and the reading achievement of African American students. Studying the effects of collaboration efforts on various kinds of professional learning communities might also be helpful. As educators, we need to experiment with different strategies and communicate what appears to be effective and what is not. In the previous SIP for Suburban Middle School and the proposed new one there have been early warning signs that have been listed to identify students that are at risk of failure. Those identifiers were 1). Students that miss more than 10% or more of instructional time. 2). Students that fail an English Language Arts course. 3). Students that fail two or more courses in any subject. 4). Students that receive two or more referrals. 5). Students that receive one or more behavior referrals that lead to a suspension. 6). Students that have failed a mathematics course. Future research concerning these identifiers and how successful they are at predicting the future academic success of African American students would also be a relevant

topic. Additional research could also examine the rates of suspension or expulsion of African American students compared to their peers. The end result is inevitably missed instructional time which would inhibit the performance of any student.

APPENDIX: IRB PAPERWORK



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board
Office of Research & Commercialization
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246
Telephone: 407-823-2901, 407-882-2012 or 407-882-2276
www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html

From : **UCF Institutional Review Board #1
FWA00000351, IRB00001138**
To : **Jason Hutchins**
Date : **January 14, 2014**

Dear Researcher:

On 1/14/2014 the IRB determined that the following proposed activity is not human research as defined by DHHS regulations at 45 CFR 46 or FDA regulations at 21 CFR 50/56:

Type of Review: Not Human Research Determination
Project Title: THE READING ACHIEVEMENT GAP BETWEEN
AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS AND THEIR
PEERS AT A LAKE COUNTY, FLORIDA MIDDLE
SCHOOL: THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL
IMPROVEMENT PLANS.
Investigator: Jason Hutchins
IRB ID: SBE-14-09945
Funding Agency:
Grant Title:
Research ID: NA

University of Central Florida IRB review and approval is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are to be made and there are questions about whether these activities are research involving human subjects, please contact the IRB office to discuss the proposed changes.

On behalf of Sophia Dziegielewski, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Joanne Muratori on 01/14/2014 03:33:08 PM EST

IRB Coordinator

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