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CULTURE IN SUCCESSFUL TITLE I MIDDLE SCHOOLS

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A Dissertation

Presented to

The College of Graduate and Professional Studies

Department of Educational Leadership

Indiana State University

Terre Haute, Indiana

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

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May 2013

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the culture of successful Indiana public

Title I middle schools. This study examined differences in similar schools of poverty achieving

adequate yearly progress as defined by No Child Left Behind. The study explored the cultural

differences that allow for student success using middle schools with student populations from

urban and rural areas. Schools at the middle level showing student success and growth as

defined by adequate yearly progress should exhibit a school culture with a high degree of

collaboration among the school staff. Schools showing little student growth or no student

growth should show a somewhat negative relationship among staff which, to a degree, defines

the school's culture. Common themes which emerged from this study were

- clean and well-maintained building and grounds,

- school pride,

- school community trusts school,

- minimal turnover,

- traditions passed to younger staff,

- trust among staff,

- data guides instruction, and

- Title I not a label.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

guidance into and through the Ed.S. and Ph.D. programs; and Dr. Bobby Jo Monahan was a source of support and guidance.

Finally, my thanks to my wife, Julie, who has believed in my abilities and supported me to pursue a Ph.D. Her support throughout the process has been overwhelming as my time away from family activities has increased her workload. It is my hope that my children Ty, Jake, and Case will recognize the work ethic I have dedicated to this program and let it be an inspiration for them to pursue their own educational advancements.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Problem

"Don't they all start to look the same to you?" (Thompson, 1993, p. 1). "Where once I had been hopeful, even enthusiastic, about the potential benefits of testing, accountability, choice, and markets, I now found myself experiencing profound doubts about these same ideas" (Ravitch, 2010, p. 1). No Child Left Behind (2002) promised a new era of high standards, testing, and accountability during which not a single child would be overlooked (Ravitch, 2010). Title I has been a popular federal funding source for public education to close the achievement gap. Over almost five decades, this popular federal compensatory education program has invested money into public education and is being criticized for failing to have done enough to close the gap in achievement between disadvantaged students and their more fortunate counterparts (Vinovskis, 1999). Title I has been a tool for federal funding to help public education close the achievement gap. The formula for the disbursement of Title I is complex and based on many factors. For 2010, Title I funding to public education accounted for over 8.5 billion dollars (New America Foundation, 2010).

All schools may look the same; however, they are extraordinarily different. And the closer you get, the more different they look. Each has a different feel (Thompson, 1993). Strong leadership and a strong faculty are associated with more motivation and sustained commitment

(Mintrop, 2010). "The paradox of culture is that it is so often difficult to articulate what we have experienced in a school; of course, some anecdotal events are easy to describe" (Thompson, 1993, p. 1). You feel a culture most strongly when you are a stranger (Thompson, 1993).

Cultures are manifestations of people sharing values. Values are the enshrined solutions to organizational and human problems that arose in the past and were solved. The solution becomes beliefs and prescriptions: "You ought to do it this way. This is the right way to do it" (Thompson, 1993, p. 6).

This research focused on the school culture in successful Title I middle schools. A Title I label applies to schools that apply for the program and have a free and reduced lunch population of 25% or higher. This research addressed cultural response to collaboration as a reason Title I schools are or are not achieving adequate yearly progress (AYP), as defined by state standardized tests.

Statement of the Problem

American society will continue to pay the price of not properly ensuring equity within our schools. Lack of equity is cited as a key component resulting in many individuals lacking the skills to be successful in the labor market, increased financial resources being used to deal with the rising crime rates, and the continued rising costs of public assistance (Belfield & Levin, 2007). The Title I mindset for closing the achievement gap and helping students in poverty-stricken schools is to increase spending on public education. The U.S. federal government spent over 8.5 billion dollars on education in 2010 (New America Foundation, 2010). The keys to improved academic achievement are professional practices of teachers and leaders, not the economic, ethnic, or linguistic characteristics of the students (Reeves, 2003). This would suggest school culture trumps funding when looking at how well students perform. It is not a

lack of money being distributed by the Title I Act of 1965 to school districts across the U.S., it is each school's culture that determines the school values, thus determining success or failure of their students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to study the culture in successful Title I middle schools. Middle schools from Indiana ranging from one to seven years of experience as a Title I school were selected for the qualitative portion of the study. Title I middle schools were chosen from information gathered and analyzed from the departments of education offices in the Midwest. Looking through the lens of school culture, this qualitative research investigated how a school's culture may be responsible for a middle school achieving AYP. The research attempted to reveal any patterns in the selected middle schools relative to the degree to which there is a collaborative school culture.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What is the culture of a successful Indiana public Title I middle school?

2. How has the culture evolved in successful Indiana public Title I middle schools?

3. What role has the school leadership taken in developing the culture in the successful Indiana public Title I middle schools?

4. How does change occur in successful Indiana public Title I middle schools?

Definitions

For the purpose of this study,

Adequate yearly progress (AYP) is an obtained measure for schools to determine effectiveness and student progress.

Choice refers to an option that allows a parent to choose a more highly performing school in a given school district.

Effective school refers to a school that has met the criteria to AYP.

Ineffective school describes a school that has not met the criteria to achieve AYP.

Middle school is defined as a school with sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students in the same building.

Midwest indicates middle schools in Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky, Michigan, and Tennessee invited to participate in this study.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002) is the federal legislation that allows the government to impose sanctions on schools based on low standardized test scores of individual state's standardized tests.

Poverty includes students who qualify for free and reduced lunch based on reported parent income.

Public schools are funded through state taxation.

RISE refers to the Indiana teacher evaluation instrument.

Sanctions pertain to discipline taken against a school or a school district for failing to meet progress measures on state standardized tests.

School culture is culture that consists of the stable, underlying, social meanings that shape beliefs and behavior over time (Deal & Peterson, 1990).

State standards refers to curriculum standards set by a state in which students are tested and expected to obtain a passing score in a given school year.

Successful relates to AYP as defined by state standardized test scores.

Title I is a U.S. federal funding source to public schools based on a complex formula that takes into account a student's free and reduced lunch status.

Significance of the Study

This research contributes to the field of education by examining Title I middle school cultures and leadership. There was a need for further study in the area of Title I schools during the first through the seventh year of being labeled Title I and the leadership that transformed or failed to transform student academic achievement as based on AYP determined by that state's standardized testing. The research contributes information and the need for deeper understanding about school culture and transformational leadership, which determine student academic outcomes.

Limitations

The information and data gathered for this research were limited by the criteria chosen for the study. Because only Indiana public Title I middle schools were sampled, the results of culture and success of a Title I middle school may not be generalizable to other schools without some caution. Additionally, each state claims passing or failing status based on an arbitrary cut score set forth by that state. The research did not take into account ethnicity or gender of the students in the public Title I middle schools due to the fact that poverty transcends ethnic, gender, urban, and rural boundaries.

Delimitations

The schools investigated were all Indiana public Title I middle schools. The study did not differentiate between public school settings such as rural or urban.

Summary and Organization of the Study

This study is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduced the problem, gives the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, research questions, definition of terms, significance of the study, limitations, and delimitations. Chapter 2 presents a review of literature related to the topic of school culture, Title I, and transformational leadership. That chapter is divided into subheadings of history of school culture, characteristics of school culture, research definitions of school culture, impacts of school culture, transforming school culture, history of Title I, Title I funding, school improvement under Title I, and criteria for successful Title I schools. Chapter 3 presents the methodology of the study, divided into the subheadings that cover the purpose of study, research questions, description of sample, data sources, data collection procedures, and method of data analysis. Chapter 4 presents the findings through qualitative data gathered and analyzed themes of Indiana public Title I middle schools. Chapter 5 presents the summary of findings, conclusion, implications, research question answered, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE AND RESEARCH

History of School Culture

Many authors have described school culture and the effects a culture has on a public

school or organizational setting (Cameron & Quinn, 2006; Connors & Smith, 2011; Cunningham

& Gresso, 1993; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Deal & Peterson, 2009; Fullan, 1998; Munro, 2008).

The components of a school's culture help to define a school and provide its members an identity

(Barth, 2002; Dantow, 2005; Fullan, 1998; Gruenert, 2005; Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996).

Deal and Peterson (2009) made an observation that the past is closer to us than it often

seems to be. All schools have histories, and without a well-known historical map, the school

loses its way. Waller (1932) observed that schools have distinct cultures and that culture is their

own. Culture in successful organizations is the glue, the hope, and the faith that holds the

organization together. Deal and Peterson (2009) stated that past events may influence present

cultural practices in dramatic fashion; "Culture takes form over the years as people cope with

problems, stumble onto routines and rituals, and create traditions and ceremonies to reinforce

underlying values and beliefs" (p. 48).

Kubler-Ross (1970) believed organizations have varied responses to the past. Some

negative cultures perpetuate anger, unsettled slights, missteps, fads, and bad leadership. Wounds

are left to fester, infecting the present with a pessimistic, negative tone. Still others use the past

to springboard to the future, embracing events that formed their unique circumstances and learning experience.

Organizational culture has been a topic of discussion since the 1930s. It has been confused with school climate. It has become an important aspect to consider as leaders address issues of change. It is a force many do not understand and some may try to ignore.

Deal and Peterson (2009) described the elements of culture in their book, *Shaping School Culture.* "It is clearly time to reconsider and rethink the importance of school culture in today's educational environment" (Deal & Peterson, 2009, p. vii). Barth (1991) suggested too little attention has been paid to schools and how they can be shaped from within. Deal and Peterson (2009) stated, "It's difficult to take pride in your work when you are persistently reminded that your efforts don't measure up" (p. 1). Deal and Peterson made an observation that the lessons learned by educators today seems to be the wrong lessons, coming from mediocre businesses that focus on only making a profit and measure short-term financial goals instead of long term strength. "If schools want to emulate other successful organizations, then parents, teachers, and administrators need to take a look at their local traditions, folkways, and dreams" (Deal & Peterson, 2009, p. 2). Consequently, shifts in schools have been caused by legislative mandate as much as local neglect. Standardization, test scores, and research-based methods have replaced local discretion, faith, creativity, and teacher ingenuity. As a U.S. Department of Education spokesperson remarked in 2007, "If it can't be measured we're not interested in it" (as cited in Deal & Peterson, 2009, p. 4).

> Schools have cultures that are definitely their own. There are, in the school, complex rituals of personal relationships, a set of folkways, morés and moral codes based upon them. There are games, which are sublimated wars, teams, and an elaborate set of

ceremonies concerning them. There are traditions and traditionalists waging their world-

old battle against innovators. (Waller, 1932, p. 96)

It is believed the term *culture* provides a more accurate and intuitively appealing way to

"help school leaders better understand their school's unwritten rules and traditions, norms and

expectations. It shapes how they interpret hundreds of daily transactions. Culture consists of the

stable, underlying social meanings that shape beliefs and behavior over time" (Deal & Peterson,

1990, p. 7). One reason so many dimensions have been proposed is that organizational culture is

extremely broad and inclusive in scope (Cameron & Quinn, 2006).

Schein (2004) stated that explanations are offered in detail why something different must

be done, yet people continue to act as if they have not heard us.

As leaders who are trying to get our organizations to become more effective in the face of

severe environmental pressures, we are sometimes amazed at the degree to which

individuals and groups in the organization will continue to behave in obviously

ineffective ways, often threatening the very survival of the organization. (Schein, 2004, p.

9)

A school's history affects the school culture of today (Collins, 2001; Deal & Peterson,

2009; Schein, 1992, 2004). Culture develops as people cope with problems, establish routines

and rituals, and develop traditions and ceremonies that strengthen and sustain values and beliefs

(Deal & Peterson, 2009). Surely a school's mission should serve as the bedrock of its culture

(Deal & Peterson, 2009). Most important is that people share beliefs in what the school wishes

to realize. Culture is a system of shared values defining what is important and norms defining

appropriate attitudes and behaviors (Munro, 2008). Teaching is successful only when students

learn what they need to know to thrive (Deal & Peterson, 2009). Achievement scores are a poor

substitute for what schools can contribute to young lives and a vibrant, democratic society (Deal & Peterson, 2009). Fog, Butz, and Yakaboylu (2005) claimed that if a school does not stand for something more profound than raising achievement levels, then it probably does not make a memorable difference to teachers, students, or parents.

Characteristics of School Culture

Munro (2008) stated strong cultures are based on two characteristics, high levels of agreement among employees about what is valued, and high levels of intensity about these values. More common, however, are organizations in which members agree about what's important but do not care much. As such, these organizations are unwilling to go the extra mile to deliver on strategic objectives or to sanction others for a failure to uphold those norms. These are called *vacuous* cultures, and their prevalence probably reflects the faddish nature of organizational culture and the lip service such organizations pay to it. They are weak cultures due to a lack of commonalities, yet these are easiest types of cultures to change (Gruenert, 2005).

Munro (2008) discussed a selection process in a culture. First, the selection is based on emphasizing a person's culture and job fit. Second, people are attracted to people who are similar to themselves. Most of us like ourselves and think we are doing a pretty good job. Third is the selection process in light of the organizational culture. Culture is an organization's informal reward system and needs to be intricately connected to formal rewards (Munro, 2008). Culture works best when it is clear, consistent, and comprehensive (Munro, 2008).

Norms consolidate assumptions, values, and beliefs (Deal & Peterson, 2009). Positive norms vary from school to school. The following is a list of positive school norms as described by Deal and Peterson (2009):

- Treat people with respect.

- Be willing to take on responsibilities.

- Try to initiate changes to improve performance.

- Encourage those who suggest new ideas.

- Be conscious of costs and the use of resources.

- Speak with pride about the school and your unit.

- Enjoy and be enthusiastic in your work.

- Be helpful and supportive of others.

- Share useful information and new ideas.

- Solve problems together when they occur.

- Place the needs of students above personal agenda.

- Be trustful, authentic and honest.

- Feel a sense of responsibility for students' learning. (pp. 67-68)

The same researchers also listed negative and/or dysfunctional norms that may exist.

- Don't disagree with the principal.

- Don't make waves and remain in your silo.

- Treat women and minorities as inferior.

- Put your school down.

- Hide new ideas and information from others.

- Treat colleagues poorly.

- Look busy and innovative when you're not.

- Reward or recognize others on the basis of politics.

- Laugh at and criticize those who are innovative.

- Grouse constantly about everything.

- Distrust colleagues.

- Do what will serve personal needs, worry about students later. (p. 68)

Identifying the positive and negative norms is a key task of principals and teacher leaders. The key is to address these honestly, reinforcing the positive and working to transform the negative (Deal & Peterson, 2009). As a result, toxic cultures are those in which these discussions are not allowed (Deal & Peterson, 2009).

Christensen, Horn, and Johnson (2008) discussed culture in a different way. They spoke of schools having isolated, lightweight groups that make decisions based on their own needs. A lightweight group member is defined as a person who is associated with a group in the school who does not have the authority to make in-depth change for the school, thus only encouraging behaviors based on their own needs. According to the authors, the problem comes when improvement requires a different architecture, and administrators fail to allow schools to set up heavyweight teams. These are teams with the authority to make decisions that initiate whole school change, not just cliques in the building.

Schlechty (1997) stated that when the mission becomes unhitched from the guiding vision, it is likely that the organization will get into the wrong business—one that will not inspire the loyalty or commitment that was present when the mission and vision were linked. This suggests vision is a part of the culture; any subculture without the same vision is fragmented which will cause issue for improvement. Indeed, a vision without beliefs is nothing more or less than dreams and fictions (Schlechty, 1997). The structure of an organization consists of the relatively permanent and predictable relationships that exist between and among the people who interact in the context of the organization, the roles that define those interactions, and the rules that prescribe and proscribe what those roles and relationships will be (Schlechty, 1997). In fact,

one of the primary reasons school reform has generally failed is that individual schools, no matter how vital and responsive their present programs are, do not have the capacity to support and sustain change independent of the support of larger political and social units (Sarason, 1996; Schlechty, 1997). Rules, roles, and relationships and the beliefs, commitments, meanings, values, lore, and traditions in which schools are embedded determine how time, people, space, information, and technology will be organized, deployed, and used (Schlechty, 1997). These are all under the jurisdiction of the culture.

Cameron and Quinn (2006) proposed four culture types: hierarchy, market, clan, and adhocracy. As a result, a hierarchy culture consists of clear lines of decision-making authority, standardized rules, control, and accountability mechanisms. Cameron and Quinn credited Weber (1947) for his work on hierarchy culture. Market culture refers to a type of organization that functions as a market itself. Profitability, the bottom line, and strength in market niches are the objectives of the organization. Clan culture symbolizes shared values and goals, cohesion, participativeness, individuality, and a sense of *we-ness* (Cameron & Quinn, 2006). The fourth type of culture is adhocracy culture. Adhocracy implies something temporary, specialized, and dynamic. The major goals of adhocracy are adaptability, flexibility, and creativity where uncertainty, ambiguity, and information overload are typical (Cameron & Quinn, 2006).

Gruenert (2005) studied 81 Indiana elementary, middle, and high schools using culture, leadership, and student achievement as factors for the study. Gruenert found significant correlations between factors of school culture. Accordingly, his study was based on a school culture survey developed in 1998 and standardized test scores.

Research Definitions of School Culture

Organizational culture is a concept originally borrowed from ethnographers. Taking this concept to the organizational level has provided new insights into the behaviors of people in groups, especially schools. Hofstede (1997) stated culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group from another group. Finally, Schein (1992) wrote that culture is a pattern of assumptions that a group has learned as it solves problems over time, adapting what worked well and teaching to other members as the correct way to address problems faced by the group. Schein (2004) also described culture as having many levels of artifacts that include the visible products of the group: the language, its technology and products, its artistic creations, and its style, clothing, manners, emotion, myths, values, rituals, and ceremonies.

What makes school culture somewhat difficult to research is the lack of a universal definition. While it is a form of organizational culture, many have struggled with what it really means, some even confusing it with organizational climate. Cunningham and Gresso (1993) believed the definition of school culture "is an informal understanding of the way we do things around here" (p. 20). "Culture is a strategic body of learned behaviors that gives both meaning and reality to its participants" (Cunningham & Gresso, 1993, p. 20). Deal (1990) viewed school culture as the stable, underlying, social meanings that shape beliefs and behavior over time. According to Carr (2000), there is a distinct difference between teaching and a trade or vocation. A key difference between the trades and teaching could be the ethical principles that are actually constructive to professions. The modern concept of a profession is good practice and defined by codes of conduct as duties and moral obligations.

Impacts of School Culture

Schools have always been fertile ground for stories. Many leaders use stories to send their message inside and outside the walls of the school (Deal & Peterson, 2009). Marzano, Waters, and McNutty (2005) linked school culture with leadership and student achievement. These authors believed fostering a school culture that indirectly affects student achievement is a strong theme in principal leadership (Marzano et al., 2005). The school leader in both formal and informal settings shapes school culture (Leithwood, 2005). Deal and Peterson (2009) understood that students and teachers do not leave their humanity behind when they come to school, they bring their personal problems, conflicts, hopes, and dreams to the classroom which impacts school culture. Deal and Peterson stated that school improvement rituals signal the importance of collegiality and change yet can bump into a culture not ready to improve. Playful rituals provide opportunities for people to let their hair down and laugh, providing a non-threatening approach to change. In schools, accountability and high-stakes testing have taken their toll on playful rituals (Deal & Peterson, 2009); yet in some schools educators manage to improve. Ceremonies and traditions carry keys that can impact the feel or meaningful elements of culture (Deal & Peterson, 1994; Trice & Beyer, 1985).

Deal and Peterson (2009) provide a list of ceremonies that communicate values and celebrate accomplishments:

- a special and value-linked purpose;
- symbolic clothing and adornment;
- symbols, signs, banners or flags;
- a distinctive manner of speaking;
- ritual acts and ongoing traditions carefully enacted; and

- the recounting of the core legends or stories about the school.

When a toxic culture exits, it will define and impact a school in negative ways (Deal & Peterson, 2009). Schools that have sharp changes in student demographics can experience a decline in morale, which over time can impact the school culture. Rather than changing to meet the educational needs of their new clientele, teachers and administrators may take refuge in the perceived glory of the past (Deal & Peterson, 2009). A key point may be when a principal begins to think that his or her chief function is to maintain order and keep angry parents at bay (Deal & Peterson, 2009). In fact, negative teachers tend to rule the roost. Consequently, teachers who believe students can achieve are ostracized (Deal & Peterson, 2009). According to Deal and Peterson (2009), principals in today's punitive environment of high standards and standardized testing are forced to deal with more elements of toxic cultures, some embedded deeply in subcultures. Negative, isolating, and hostile cultures sap energy, motivation, and commitment of staff and students. Deal and Peterson (2009) observed that the negative school culture can possess the same characteristics as a positive culture. Both cultures may have values, rituals, stories, and traditions and a network of players, values and beliefs that pervade the group and direct behavior.

Schlechty (1997) stated that structural and cultural change consists of changing the nature of the work itself—reorienting its purpose and refocusing its intent. Such changes require alterations in rules, roles, and relationships as well as in beliefs, values, and orientations. For this reason a systems perspective requires one to accept the causal forces, such as attitudes and intellectual abilities, residing within us that determine the roles we play (Schlechty, 1997). Educators must understand how these rules, roles, and relationships will become the habit of people and organizations (Schlecty, 1997). Schlechty (1997) stated culture is a part of this

system and must be included in any discussion of systemic change. To make lasting change in the structure, corresponding changes must occur in the shared beliefs, commitments, meanings, values, lore, and traditions (Schlechty, 1997). When structural change is not supported by cultural change it will eventually be overwhelmed by the culture; it is in the culture that organizations find meaning and stability (Schlechty, 1997).

Connors and Smith (2011) stated, "Either you manage your culture, or it will manage you" (p. 7). Organizational culture is the way people think and act. Every organization has a culture, which either works for you or against you (Connors & Smith, 2011). Managing the culture so it produces results has become essential to leadership and management competency. Organizational culture tends to be ignored as an important factor in performance because of its taken-for-granted values, underlying assumptions, expectations, memories, and definitions. It is best described as "how things are done around here that provides the unwritten and unspoken guidelines for the organization" (Cameron & Quinn, 2006, p. 16). Cameron and Quinn (2006) also stated people are unaware of their culture until it is challenged. Each culture generally reflects a unique language, system, and set of rules and feelings about the organization. An organization's culture is reflected by what is valued, the leadership style, and the language, symbols, and routines that make the organization unique (Cameron & Quinn, 2006).

Transforming School Culture

Many researchers have described a school culture as a set of norms, values, beliefs, rituals, ceremonies, and symbols. These ingredients make up a school persona (Muhammad, 2009). As each school has its own culture, which has taken many years to develop, it is important for the school leader to make sense of the culture in order to move the school forward. A transformation has to happen to stay current and sometimes decisions are difficult for the

leader. A key point is that dysfunctional school cultures can create systems that maintain the achievement gap (Muhammad, 2009). Frequently, terms such as *research based* and *best practice* have been no match for the deeply ingrained disbelief in student ability that cripples many struggling schools (Muhammad, 2009).

Transformational leadership is a key to changing the culture of a school. An important notion is if a toxic culture exists, leadership will need to understand how it evolved to that point and try to shape it to a more positive, collaborative culture. This task may require a destabilization of the current culture which is not much fun.

Muhammad (2009) said in order to effectively diagnose and eliminate toxic school culture, one must take an honest look at the internal and external factors that create the conditions that make any culture transformation difficult. Leaders must be adept at gaining cooperation and skilled in the arts of diplomacy, salesmanship, patience, endurance, and encouragement. Brower and Balch (2005) suggested when the barriers are so persuasive and profoundly influential, good leaders rely on capacities within the institution to minimize impact rather than mandating short-term solutions inconsistent with the common good and sound decision-making pedagogy. Clearly, the effective leader guides the institution toward a collaborative alignment of the vision and mission (Brower & Balch, 2005).

Muhammad (2009) broke from the notion of there being a toxic to collaborative continuum. Another key point is, rather than view types of cultures as good to bad, we can look at them as simply different. With this in mind, Muhammad described four distinct groups in a school that can frame a culture. The first group is the believers; they believe that all of their students are capable of learning and that they have a direct impact on student success. They are actively engaged in a constant battle of ideas with other groups. The second group is the

tweeners; these are the honeymoon period people. They are trying to learn the group norms and are in the middle of the battle between the believers and the fundamentalist. The third group is the survivors; this group is usually small and represents the people that are *burned out*. The fourth group is the fundamentalists; they are opposed to change and organize to resist and thwart any change initiative. They can yield tremendous political power and are a major obstacle in implementing meaningful school reforms. They work against the believers (Muhammad, 2009).

Brower and Balch (2005) believed that if everyone in an institution understands the concepts of sound decision-making, then the stakeholders will comprehend the reasoning behind decisions and the culture will ultimately begin to reflect this comprehension. Decision-making is complex; not all decisions will be correct (Brower & Balch, 2005). Brower and Balch asked these questions: Is your decision making aligned with the institution's vision and mission? and, Is there stakeholder buy-in for the vision and mission? A key point is if a leader can find no clear, compelling path to decide a certain way, then he or she must look at historical data, use past experience, consider the institutional culture, and employ instinct to act in decisive ways that best serve the common good (Brower & Balch, 2005).

Culture is a framework for solving problems; thus, when competing demands arise we find the cultural values leading the way. As an example of culture versus money being spent for achievement, the Institute of Education Sciences revealed the highly regarded Reading First literacy initiative has had little to no effect on student reading proficiency (Muhammad, 2009). Important to realize is that given a one-billion-dollar annual budget and availability for many students, the students receiving the intervention still scored no better than students who had not been exposed to the program (Muhammad, 2009).

Cultural change is a difficult form of change to accomplish. It cannot be gained through force or coercion (Muhammad, 2009). Muhammad (2009) stated the evidence is clear: research-based strategies are no match for elements of culture that help maintain gaps in student achievement. Another key point is if members of the group believe they have weak students, and that becomes part of the identity of the school, then the culture will insure they have weak students.

The significant impact of school culture is when students are nurtured in a culture where educators believe in their potential to do the extraordinary and work together to achieve this end; all children can be successful (Muhammad, 2009). A culture of respect is an essential institutional ingredient (Brower & Balch, 2005). No doubt disagreements and conflicts will occur; cultures underscored by transformational decision-making will survive short-term obstacles, creating improved capacities for teaching and learning to prosper (Brower & Balch, 2005).

"The buck stops here" (Truman, 1945, para. 1) implies that leadership is the part of the organization that stops problems from returning. It can be understood organizational culture is a collection of all pieces in an organization, and the leader will have influence on many things, but not all. Friedman (1999) stated there is an emotional system at play in cultural leadership: nuances that can send messages without the leaders' awareness. Examples are

- lean on others vs. stay accountable,
- keep distance vs. stay connected,
- seek stability vs. take risks, and
- blame others versus be objective.

Heifetz (1994) of Harvard University stated adaptive leadership for today's organizations requires leaders with the courage to interrogate reality. Heifetz continued, a leader role is twofold: first, to help people face reality and conflict and second, to mobilize them to make change.

Munro (2008) stated one of the most difficult cultures to contend with is a passive-aggressive culture. A key point is that in passive-aggressive organizations, people pay lip-service to mandates, putting in only enough effort to appear compliant. Additionally, employees feel free to do as they see fit because there are rarely unpleasant consequences, and the directives themselves are often misguided, seemingly worthy of defiance (Munro, 2008). Passive-aggressive cultures are hard to contend with because the people in them are the most cynical about reform attempts (Munro, 2008). They believe they are performing sufficiently;, that is, compliance becomes the ceiling.

Theoretically, some steps to fixing problems of culture are identifying it first then bringing in *new* blood to run the organization. Second, one must leave no building-block unturned. This is accomplished by changing everything at once in the organization. Third, decisions must be made, clarified, articulated, and adhered to. Fourth, word must be spread and data provided to back it up. Relevant data are the information needed to make good decisions. However, people rarely change their minds due to a spreadsheet as much as the need to hear the story behind it. Lastly, motivation must be matched with contribution; this would be performance bonuses and an alignment of how they are to be paid (Munro, 2008).

Whitaker (2003) stated effective principals understand they are the filters for the day-to-day reality of school. Whether they are aware of it or not, their behavior sets the tone. The most effective principals choose their filters carefully. As for teachers, great teachers have high

expectation for the students but even higher expectations for themselves (Whitaker, 2003). A step to change a culture is to identify the best teachers in the group and allow them to lead the way. Great leaders cultivate an environment to make sure the correct teachers are on the pedestal; this is essential to developing a great school (Whitaker, 2003). With this in mind, no matter what others want, the focus should be on what is right for our students (Whitaker, 2003). There are really two ways to improve a school significantly: get better teachers or improve the teachers you have (Whitaker, 2003).

History of Title I Education

This study is concerned with how cultures of middle schools are impacted by the arrival of Title I resources and the potential stigma it may bring. The following provides information regarding Title I funding. Can a large sum of money actually change the way teachers teach? Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 was amended so that schools qualify based on demonstrating that the K-12, ages 5-17, membership has a sufficiently high percentage of economically disadvantaged students. Title I regulations require school districts to provide services to all schools where at least 75% of students qualify for free or reduced price meals. (Title I—Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged Act of 1965, 2004).

Research studies over the past 30 years show schools with high concentrations of economically disadvantaged students generally demonstrate lower levels of achievement than do schools with lower concentrations of economically disadvantaged students. As a result, Congress, in the reauthorization of Title I under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, now requires districts to allocate Title I funds to those schools with the highest concentrations of such students, particularly to those schools rising above 75%. Districts may extend Title I benefits to

schools lower than 75% yet not below the district average percentage of free/reduced price meals.

Green (2009) wrote that most educators, parents, and community members have heard the term Title I school. Being able to define a Title I school, as established by the U.S. Department of Education, however, is more difficult. Title I is the nation's oldest and largest federally funded education program, according to the U.S. Department of Education. Annually, it provides over seven billion dollars to school systems across the country for students at risk of failure and living at or near poverty.

Title I was enacted in 1965 under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act with the intent of closing the achievement gap between low-income students and other students. The policy was rewritten in 1994 to improve help to at-risk students. With the implementation of No Child Left Behind, schools must make AYP on state testing and focus on best teaching practices in order to continue receiving funds (Green, 2009).

The purpose of Title I funding is to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high quality education. Students should reach a minimum proficiency on state academic assessments based state academic achievement standards, which will indicate student achievement (Title I, 2004).

Title I Funding

The basic principle of Title I is that schools with large concentrations of low-income students receive supplemental funds to assist in meeting students' educational goals. Low-income students are determined by the number of students enrolled in the free and reduced lunch program. For an entire school to qualify for Title I funds at least 40% of students must enroll in the free and reduced lunch program (Title I, 2004).

Title I funds can be used to improve curriculum, instructional activities, counseling, parental involvement, increase staff, and improve programming. The funding should assist schools in meeting the educational goals of low-income students. Title I funds typically support supplemental instruction in reading and math. Annually, this program reaches over six million students, primarily in the elementary grades (Title I, 2004).

Types of students that might be served by Title I funds include migrant students, students with limited English proficiency, homeless students, students with disabilities, neglected students, delinquent students, at-risk students, or any student in need (Title I, 2004). Students can be classified as at-risk for numerous reasons, including high number of absences, single-parent home, low academic performance, or low-income family.

New America Foundation (2010) reported Federal Title I funding has increased by $7.7 billion, or 88% since 2001. All of the new Title I funding (i.e., amounts above the fiscal year 2001 level) has been distributed through the Targeted Assistance and Education Finance Incentive Grant formulas (New America Foundation, 2010). These are the two formulas that most closely focus funding on the disadvantaged students Title I is supposed to help. Funding for the basic grant formula was the least targeted of all Title I formulas, as a percentage of total Title I funding declined each year between 2001 and 2009, thus shifting funding to the Targeted Assistance and Education Finance Incentive Grant programs. However, from 2009 to 2010, the proportion of Title I funding for basic grants increased from 48% to 52% while the share of Targeted Assistance and Education Finance Incentive Grant programs decreased by 3%, falling from 23% to 20% for both grant types (New American Foundation, 2010).

The purpose of Title I is to ensure all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on state

academic assessments. This purpose can be accomplished by ensuring these points are addressed:

- high-quality academic assessments;

- accountability systems;

- teacher preparation and training;

- curriculum; and

- instructional materials which are aligned with challenging state academic standards so that students, teachers, parents, and administrators can measure progress against common expectations for student academic achievement. (Title I, 2004).

Federal funding overseen by the U.S. Department of Education looks at meeting the educational needs of low-achieving children in our nation's highest-poverty schools, limited English-proficient children, migratory children, children with disabilities, Native American Indian children, neglected or delinquent children, and young children in need of reading assistance (Title I, 2004). Closing the achievement gap between high- and low-performing children, especially the achievement gaps between minority and nonminority students, and between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers is the goal of Title I established in the original form in 1965. Accountability for the resources issued holds schools, local educational agencies and states accountable for improving the academic achievement of all students. By identifying low-performing schools that have failed to provide a high-quality education to their students based on state standards, schools have to react and provide the educational quality asked for in the entitlement language (Title I, 2004).

The Title I program distributes and targets resources sufficiently to make a difference to local educational agencies and schools where needs are greatest and improves and strengthens

accountability, teaching, and learning. Using state assessment systems designed to ensure that students are meeting challenging state academic achievement and content, standards ensure quality public education for disadvantaged students (Title I, 2004). For this reason, giving authority and flexibility to schools and teachers in exchange for greater responsibility for student performance is the intent of the accountability. Educational personnel are to provide children an enriched and accelerated educational program. Additional services should increase the amount and the quality of instructional time. Research-based instruction and strategies are expected with the use of the money (Title I, 2004). According to the Title I document monitored by the U.S. Department of Education, professional development has to be delivered at a substantial level for all teachers (Title I, 2004).

The U.S. Department of Education expects coordination under Title I between educational services and other agencies providing services to youth, children, and families. The last goal of the Title is that parents should be afforded substantial and meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children (Title I, 2004).

School Improvement Under Title I

Accountability for the program must be provided by each state. Each state must establish a system ensuring that all local educational agencies and public elementary and secondary schools make AYP. Each state's accountability system shall be based on the academic standards and academic assessments as mandated by the U.S. Department of Education. For accountability, each state must use the sanctions and rewards, such as bonuses and recognition, for all public elementary and secondary schools. The state will expect the school receiving money to make AYP in accordance with No Child Left Behind (NCLB), where AYP is defined by each state that applies high standards to all public schools. To meet the standard of AYP the

standardized testing must be considered statistically valid and reliable (Title I, 2004). The achievement of economically disadvantaged students, students of color, students with disabilities, and limited English-speaking students is the area of measure to determine a school success.

Title I funds must be used to promote high academic achievement for all children with a focus on teaching and learning. The responsibility for student achievement is to stimulate initiatives and flexibility while involving parents and the community (Title I, 2004). In general, funds cannot be used to purchase, lease, rent, or improve facilities or for the transportation of students to and from school.

As indicated in the NCLB Act, the intended purpose of these funds is to improve the school. This is why funds are allocated to schools and not to children. As a result, if a child leaves a Title I school and transfers to another school there is no transfer of Title I funds to the receiving school. Again, the goal of the NCLB Act is to strengthen the core academic program and increase the amount of quality instruction for the improving school (Title I, 2004).

Sanctions for Lack of Improvement

In general, public school choice becomes an option when a school receiving Title I funding fails to meet AYP as determined by standardized testing. Students are given the option to transfer to another public school served by the local educational agency (LEA). Lower-achieving and low socioeconomic students are to be given highest priority when school choice is offered (Title I, 2004).

Another sanction associated with failing to meet AYP is the restructuring of the school. Throughout this time the school is expected to provide services in accordance with the act. Closing and reopening the failing school as a public charter school is an option under the

restructuring guidelines. Replacing all or most of the school staff, which may include the principal, is also an option under the guidelines to restructure the school. A school corporation may contract with a private management company or turn the operation of the school over to the state educational agency (Title I, 2004).

Once restructuring takes place in accordance with the policy, scientifically based research strategies that strengthen the core academic program in the school must be in place. Again, professional development for staff and identifying actions that have the greatest likelihood of improving student achievement becomes the priority focus (Title I, 2004). Before- and after-school activities are also offered as part of the school restructuring effort.

Successful Title I Schools

There are schools where Title I funding has benefited student achievement. The intended resources help students in high poverty schools. Reeves (2003) studied schools in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where 90% of students were on free and reduced lunch and 90% of students were of ethnic minority, yet 90% passed district and state academic standards testing. Reeves found five characteristics common in all those schools. The characteristics found were (a) a focus on academic achievement, (b) clear curriculum choices, (c) frequent assessment of student progress and multiple opportunities for improvement, (d) an emphasis on non-fiction writing, and (e) collaborative scoring of student work.

Reeves (2003) observed a profound difference between the assessment and instructional practices of the above mentioned schools and low-achieving schools. In the above mentioned schools there was a laser-like focus on student achievement; charts, graphs, and tables in the hallways displayed student achievement. Additionally, trophy cases full of academic work—essays, science projects, and mathematics papers—promoted student achievement. An attitude

in the 90/90/90 Wisconsin schools was connected to student encouragement of finishing strong

in academic work. Many hours of a student's day would be involved in literacy.

A strong curriculum was covered by the teachers; however, the teachers emphasized the

core skills of reading, writing, and math. It was recognized that virtually every subject area

tested reading and writing. Student achievement skills coming into the school were low, but

multiple opportunities for students to improve their performance helped student growth. None of

the 90/90/90 schools relied on a fad or the *magic bullet;* that is, the schools relied on

implemented standards that were monitored and assessed.

Reeves (2003) pointed out teacher quality is the most dominant factor in determining

student success. Poverty is not the key element, teacher quality is. The characteristics and

demographics of the 90/90/90 schools were not extraordinary. Accountability was shared

throughout the school system at every level. Collaboration was found along with a value of

feedback and constructive time. It appears a positive school culture, and thus student success, is

at work when the school leadership understands how to use data and make decisions for the good

of the organization and the employee pool supports and embraces the shared responsibility of the

work.

<div align="center">**Summary**</div>

Vinovskis (1999) asked, "Do federal compensatory education programs really work?"

Vinovskis (1999) suggested after more than four decades, programs like Title I are being

criticized for failing to close the achievement gap between the disadvantaged and fortunate

students. According to Vinovskis, Americans have always valued education. In fact, the

summary of the literature review from both school culture and Title I funding begs the question,

what is more important for student success, the additional funding provided by Title I or the culture in every school?

Authors such as Deal and Peterson (2009), Marzano et al. (2005), and Schein (2004), to name a few, wrote and reported from research that the school culture sets the tone of the school and, thus, determines student success and academic achievement regardless of funding. The counterpoint to this review is government funding under the Title I Act of 1965. Some seven billion dollars annually are directed to improve low-income student achievement in public schools.

Transforming schools has been the objective of much research. Brower and Balch (2005), Muhammad (2009), and Munro (2008) wrote about the importance of the leadership role in every culture. With this in mind, the leader must recognize the culture and manage accordingly. These authors described many types of cultures and the effects from toxic and passive-aggressive, to collaborative. Munro (2008) may have the most direct plan of attack to correct the organizational culture: identify the problem and bring in *new blood*, leave no building block unturned, change everything at once, make decisions and stick with them, share relevant data, spread the word, and finally, motivate with offering bonuses.

Educational funding initiatives and legislation will continue to evolve in the United States. Though there are many success stories about student achievement from school districts that receive Title I funding, culture in those buildings plays an important role in the outcome of success based on AYP.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the culture in successful Title I middle schools based on AYP. The focus was middle schools that have held a label of Title I school from one to seven years. The study included Indiana public Title I middle schools that were showing success based on data from the Indiana Department of Education findings that the school was successful at meeting AYP. The student populations were rural and urban. Schools were chosen for a visit and faculty interviews and observations were made. Title I middle schools achieving at or above the state cut scores (making AYP status) should indicate that the school is successful in meeting student academic needs. This may be indicative of a school culture as the driving force behind the scenes instead of relying on the funding of Title I to be the solution.

Criteria for Selection

For the purpose of this study, Title I middle schools that showed academic success by making AYP were selected. Initially, schools from the Midwest were targeted; however, that effort was too large in scope, and thus middle schools in Indiana were used for the study. Upon contact with the Indiana Department of Education, a list was compiled of the successful Title I middle schools in the state. Preliminary results revealed few middle schools matching the research criteria for the study. Indiana reported 89 Title I schools achieved AYP in the 2010-

2011 school year. Of the 89 Indiana middle schools reported as Title I, only eight public middle schools met the criteria. There were several middle schools that were above the 70% free and reduced lunch population; however, those schools may not have been Title I schools. Of the eight meeting the criteria, three agreed to be part of the study.

Qualitative Research

A qualitative research design was chosen as it allows the researcher to observe and interview subjects that are involved in the culture being studied. Creswell (2009) defined qualitative research as a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. Qualitative research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, which build general themes that are interpreted by the researcher. "One of the chief reasons for conducting a qualitative study is that the study is exploratory" (Creswell, 2009, p. 26). "Qualitative researchers ask one central question and several sub-questions" (Creswell, 2009, p. 141). Qualitative researchers pose broad, general questions to allow participants to explain in their own words what they believe relative to the issue under study. Creswell described examples of a potential design in the following way.

- Use purposeful sampling as a strategy for sites and individuals identified to insure you have people who have lived the issue being investigated.

- Establish protocols for data collection.

- Use coding methodology.

- Build themes.

Qualitative researchers collect data in the field where participants experience issues being studied (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative researchers collect data themselves through examining

documents, observing behavior, or interviewing participants. This collection of data builds patterns, categories, and themes that can be organized. Creswell (2009) stated the researcher needs to identify the purposefully selected sites for study. Furthermore, the following questions were considered: Why was the site chosen for the study? What activities occurred at the site during the research study? Was the study disruptive? How were the results reported? What will I gain from the study? These questions resonated throughout the study to insure quality. Once the data collection was concluded, I organized the field notes. Creswell suggested that the researchers transcribe the notes from interviews, sort, and arrange the data, and decide what general ideas the participants are suggesting. "Coding will be the process of organizing and bring meaning to the data" (Creswell, 2009, p. 186). By using the participants' wording in the coding phase, themes will appear (Creswell, 2009).

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What is the culture of successful Indiana public Title I middle schools?

2. How has the culture evolved in successful Indiana public Title I middle schools?

3. What role has the school leadership taken in developing the culture in successful Indiana public Title I middle schools?

4. How does change occur in successful Indiana public Title I middle schools?

Description of Sample

The participants in this study were a sample of Indiana public Title I middle schools showing success, based on achieving AYP. Sample schools had students located in urban and rural settings. Another condition that seemed relevant was having Title I middle schools between the one and seven year timeline under Title I so that the memory of school practices

prior to Title I resources could be accessed. Interviews were conducted with the administrative team, certified staff, and non-certified staff of each selected school. The interviews and observations helped define aspects of the school's culture.

The study focused on the Title I middle schools' culture and the impact of standardized test scores may have had in determining a successful academic outcome for the students. Collectively, interview samples revealed a piece of the school's culture and how it potentially impacted student academic success in that school. Title I provides schools with funding, which is designed to close the achievement gap of low socioeconomic students, yet may also bring with it a stigma. This study revealed how school culture responds to change in three schools.

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Data Sources

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Data sources for this research included Title I funding information from the U.S. Department of Education. Standardized test scores from Midwestern states were reviewed as data to determine academic success of the school, i.e., schools making AYP. For the purpose of this study, AYP scores from each school selected were reported as passing and not passing. The qualitative data were transcribed, coded, and thematically supported.

<div align="center">

Data Collection Procedures

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Data collection resulted from information gathered using qualitative methodology. The research focused on interviewing individuals and groups associated with the selected Indiana public Title I middle schools that fit the criteria of the study. Interviews and observations allowed me to develop and analyze themes. The interviews were based on availability of individuals. Letters (Appendix B), phone contact, and emails were used to contact selected schools to participate in the study. Successful contact with the selected schools allowed me to choose a willing sample from the schools to interview. A sample list of questions was sent to the

interviewee prior to the visit and interview (Appendix A). The Institutional Review Board (IRB) was involved in the oversight of the study. Interviews at the schools included the administrative team, certified staff, and non-certified staff. All interviews were transcribed, coded, and filtered for common themes indicative of the cultural aspects of the schools.

Method of Data Analysis

A qualitative analysis of schools selected for this study was conducted. Based on criteria, Title I middle schools information was obtained from the Indiana Department of Education. Interview questions were prepared that reflected salient features of school culture and were administered to the stakeholders of the selected schools. Data from interviews and observations were transcribed into text to allow for open coding. Key words were identified to represent each sentence or phrase from the text. Axial coding was the next step which filters the open coding into a more condensed set of terms while still maintaining the essence of the whole text. Thematic coding was the final process as text was reduced into categories.

Qualitative research by definition is designed to discover and explore the chosen subject. Interviews and observations allowed the school's culture to be exposed. Although this method is exploratory in nature some common threads were anticipated. Findings should allow middle school administrators of Title I schools to understand how culture affects the overall academics of the students they serve.

Summary

In this chapter, the methodology for this research was explained. The purpose of study, research questions, description of sample, data source, data collection procedures, and method of data analysis were presented. The purpose of the study was to investigate school culture as a key player of student and school performance receiving Title I funded middle schools from one to

seven years. This study is important due to the value of educating all students and closing the achievement gap in low socioeconomic school districts. Funding is always needed; however, school culture may be the most important determiner of student academic success. School leaders need to be able to understand and transform school culture to assure student academic success. Change in the school culture takes time; the goal of this study was to determine if there is a noticeable change during the one- to seven-year period. It was my goal to provide school leadership with insight that will guide schools to faster student academic success.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

In Indiana there are 81 schools within 58 school districts receiving Title I money. Free and reduced lunch populations, which typically determine if a school receives Title I funding, ranged from 40-80%. Eight schools fit my criteria; three schools were chosen from the original list based on willingness to participate in this study. All three schools chosen were sixth-through eighth-grade public middle schools that received Title I funds. These schools were deemed academically successful by the Indiana Department of Education based on the annual yearly progress model. All have shown academic success based on the annual yearly progress model. Personnel from three public Title I middle schools in the state of Indiana were chosen for interviews and observations.

Data Analysis

The purpose of the study was to increase the knowledge base of how a public Title I middle school can be academically successful and how the school culture can impact that effort. Data from observations and interviews at the chosen schools were analyzed by organizing the interviews and observations using coding methodology, creating themes. The themes allow for a picture to develop regarding what is happening at these schools, relative to what the literature suggests is the cause.

Some researchers have described a school culture as a set of norms, values, beliefs, rituals, ceremonies, and symbols (Deal & Peterson, 1996; Gruenert, 2005). These ingredients make up a school's personality (Muhammad, 2009). Interpretation of the themes can be a subjective process. Information related to school culture typologies has helped in defining some aspects, such as cultures describes as (a) toxic, (b) fragmented, (c) balkanized, (d) contrived collegiality, (e) comfortable collaboration, and (f) collaborative (Deal & Peterson, 1996; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). Field notes, interviews, and observations were used to gain insight that illustrated how a successful Indiana public Title I middle school culture operates. Coding and themes derived from the information from the school visits framed the themes that evolved for this study.

It was anticipated that each school in the study exhibited traits that placed that school on the positive end of a continuum representing effective and ineffective schools. Many of the themes that evolved from this study can be found in any school. The intent was not to isolate factors that separate some school from others, rather to explore possible combination of traits that seem to exist in better schools.

The positive school climate in each school was an obvious construct that provided a foundation by which many of the themes were built. The interactions of the adults in each building helped to dramatize how effectively the schools operated and preformed. All participants spoke about how they interacted with each other and how school values seemed to guide the school. Relationships were at the forefront of how each school operated. The relationships and traditions seem to give the staff permission to create an environment for the school to be successful.

Data Interpretation

I did not want my own bias to influence the information collected for the study; however, it was easy to see how data from the school visits, interviews, and observations fit patterns from previous research. As participants shared their stories, some obvious themes began to evolve in my thinking. This was almost a distraction to the method. It is possible I may have missed something due to some information affirming my own beliefs.

In qualitative methodology, it would be rare for any two researchers to walk away with the same coding and themes. To gain a sense of validity, transcriptions were shared with participants to insure what was recorded represented their values and beliefs. This technique is called member checking (Creswell, 2009) and is used to establish internal validity. There is a temptation to make generalizations from this study; however, the themes that emerged seem to make intuitive sense and perhaps could help guide school leaders as they attempt to build more collaborative school cultures.

Research Questions, Interviews, and Observations

The research questions guided the study and the interviews. The research questions were established from the literature review and guidance from my dissertation committee (Appendix A). I asked open-ended, semi-structured questions that would hopefully reveal insight about each school culture. As a qualitative study, observations and the interviews of subjects in their natural environment—in this case their school—was essential. Setting the participants' minds at ease and making them comfortable was important to ensure trust for the interviewing process. The questions developed for the interviews at each school addressed the research questions. The research questions developed for this study asked what made a successful Indiana public Title I middle school.

1. What is the culture of a successful Indiana public Title I Middle schools?

2. How has the culture evolved in successful Indiana public Title I middle schools?

3. What role has the school leadership taken in developing the culture in successful Indiana public Title I middle schools?

4. How does change occur in successful Indiana public Title I middle schools?

Schools Chosen for this Study

Three Indiana public Title I middle schools were chosen. The study schools are identified in this study as PA, PAA, and PAAA. School PA was a small rural building in west central Indiana. School PAA was a large urban building in northern Indiana. School PAAA was a small rural building in eastern Indiana. All schools gave verbal and written permission for me to visit the school and conduct the study. The process of consent was well outlined in the IRB package. All adults involved in the study gave signed consent to participate in the research and the study.

Interview Questions

These interview questions allowed for a dialogue to begin between the interviewee and myself. The actual questions can be viewed in Appendix A. Although the same questions were asked of all interviewees, the responses were different. The common themes that emerged were

- Clean and well-maintained building and grounds,

- School pride,

- School community trusts school,

- Minimal turnover,

- Traditions passed to younger staff,

- Trust among staff,

- Data guides instruction, and

- Title I not a label.

It is important to note that some themes may have been further collapsed by other researchers. It was my feeling to allow the magnitude of a trait to determine strength of themes as well as frequency (saturation). To have a clean school will certainly contribute to members having pride, and, possibly, trust from community may be joined with trust among staff. Yet each carried sufficient weight on its own merit.

These themes are not exclusive to better-performing schools. A weak-performing school can be clean and will certainly pass traditions on to younger staff. Many schools will have several of these themes embedded in their cultures; few will have all of them.

Observations of Study School PA

Interviews and observations from study school PA revealed interesting insight into how a public Title I middle school can be determined successful as measured by the annual yearly progress model. School PA had a student body of approximately 390 students. School PA was in a rural setting in west central Indiana. The school's demographics were 97% Caucasian and 44% free and reduced lunches as reported by data from the Indiana Department of Education. The following are highlights of those observations.

Upon arrival at school PA, I observed a clean and orderly facility and grounds. The office staff were prepared for work and welcoming of persons visiting the building. After adhering to safety and security procedures, I was taken on a tour and given a location to conduct interviews. Students arrived by school bus and were given the opportunity to have breakfast or sit in the gymnasium until the first bell. Staff members were on hand in supervisory roles before

the first bell. As students moved to classrooms and settled into their first class, the morning announcements and the pledge began the school day.

I had an opportunity to stroll around the school and make observations. Banners hung from the ceiling with a plethora of college and university names. I was later told these banners represent colleges and universities that former students and staff attended. The message to students was higher education is important and attainable. Along with the banners were several inspirational and positive quotes posted on the walls.

Another observation of significance was the amount of student work posted on walls in each hall to celebrate good student work. When I asked why the focus on posting work, the response was that students need to be proud of the work they do. "We want to show the students we appreciate and believe in them." This contributed to the overall school pride and feeling of family. Pictures, awards, and trophies were well displayed throughout the school. These displays spoke to the tradition of the school.

The structure of the school day was typical of most schools: bells dictated movement of students from class to class. Teachers were in the hall "on duty" and ready to receive the next class. Student movement in the hallways was typical for the age group. Staff monitored passing periods and spoke to students as they passed. This interaction was positive and provided a venue for students and staff to interact outside of the classroom.

I observed a staff carry-in when I was at the school. The event was well attended at lunch. Through interviews I discovered the carry-in activity was a common occurrence for the building. The carry-in involved all school staff, teaching assistants, custodians, and cafeteria staff who were invited to gather at lunch. As stated in interviews, the carry-in lunch was a nice way for the adults to interact during the day.

Interviews in School PA

Those who contributed to the study were eager to share why the school was successful, possibly suggesting those with negative comments were not available. School pride and a sense of belonging was a constant theme undergirding most interviews. I asked them to discuss the traditions and culture of the school. Other questions, such as what are the expectations of the school and what are the operational procedures of the school, helped the interviewee focus on my study. Some were unsure of what was meant by school culture.

Participants spoke about trust among the staff. They also talked about having a work ethic coming from being part of a close community that helped get the job done. Peer pressure is a critical component of any culture. All interviewees spoke positively about their time in the school. Older staff shared seeing changes and having to do things differently over the years. However, the changes did not hamper the collaboration and activities that guided values and beliefs, and day-to-day operations. "Everyone on a team cannot be a star, but everyone on the team can become an important member" (Butcher as cited in Olsen, 2007, p ii).

Observation of School PAA

School PAA was a large urban school and located in the northern part of Indiana. School PAA served 750 students, of which 64% were Caucasian. The free and reduced lunch recipients reflected 59% of the overall population. This information was obtained from the Indiana Department of Education. The following are some highlights of my observations.

My initial observations of the school were focused on the age of the building and the surrounding area. The building appeared to have been originally built in the late 1960s to early 1970s. There appeared to have been several renovations and upgrades over the years. For a facility of this age, the building seemed to be well maintained, clean, and orderly. Upon entering

the building, floors and common areas were clean. The office was located at the front commons area, which made it easy for the office staff to manage visitors.

After I was admitted into the building and filtered through the security procedures, an immediate visit with the school principal followed. The office staff members were friendly and very helpful. Students were held in the gymnasium, alternate lobby, and cafeteria, awaiting the first bell. An interesting observation was the lack of students eating breakfast. When I delved into the lack of breakfast participants, the principal said they rarely serve more than 50 breakfasts a day. I found this odd as school PAA had a 59% free and reduced lunch population. The principal stated, "The students just don't want to eat. They have the opportunity to eat. The students just don't take advantage of the free breakfast."

Morning announcements and the Pledge of Allegiance followed the bell to begin the school day. I was introduced during the morning announcements as a guest in the building. The beginning and ending bell were the only bells of the day. Students passed from class to class on the clock. Teachers had to be aware of the time to make sure students moved to the next class on time. The day moved smoothly and all seemed to be aware of time.

The large amount of student work posted in the halls was noticeable. It gave the impression of how teachers respected their students' work. In the hallways there were postings of student recognition, including "students of the week" and signs posted on individual lockers indicating what activity or team the student was involved in. As students passed in the hall, I noticed some students were dressed in shirts and ties. These students were dressed this way due to having a basketball game that evening. This tone was set by the coach to make sure his players represented the school with class and respect.

From the earlier observation of the surrounding neighborhood, I noted the neighborhood seemed older than most and contained much rental property. Later conversations with staff revealed there were many social challenges surrounding the school. However, students were on time to school and dressed appropriately for school.

I observed the school building was used on a Sunday afternoon. I arrived in the town the day before the scheduled visit. Upon checking out the school address, I noted that a community activity was to be held at the school. I met the school counselor as she was in the school parking lot attending the event.

Interviews in School PAA

Staff members were eager to speak about the school and what makes it special. A veteran teacher spoke about seeing many academic changes and initiatives over the years. He was quick to reveal that, even though their teaching practices have changed, using data to drive decision making, for example, the core values of the school still remain intact. The veteran teachers spoke of a now retired principal who instilled a sense of family in the school many years ago. That philosophy focused on student needs first and learning the curriculum second. Though new academic standards focus teaching on student academic achievement, the family atmosphere ensures that the student is cared for and supported.

Many interviewees spoke about issues and influences the students in their care dealt with on a daily basis outside of school. One interviewee spoke about not only teaching the students but also parenting the students. One respondent gave insight of this parenting/teaching when she said that she had no idea who receives free and reduced lunch nor does she care. Her attitude was she treats all kids with the same care and respect and if a student needs money for lunch she made sure they had money. This attitude seemed to pervade the culture, creating an ideal setting

for helping kids. This aspect of the culture influenced the focus of the school more than being Title I.

The school embraced the habit of posting student work in every possible place in the school. This gave the students a sense of accomplishment and that translated into relationships with their teachers. This was a way to encourage students to do their best work. This almost has a family feel to it as school walls serve the same purpose as the family refrigerator.

The staff spoke of the current administration in high regard. Observations of administration interactions with staff and students reflected a positive feeling among members. The building administrators made a choice to meet with each grade-level team once a week; this allowed for opportunities to stay in touch with students and staff issues, a form of collaboration. I was told that the administrators allow teachers to work hard and try new things with the students in mind. If a new program is not deemed effective for the student, teachers are encouraged to continue trying new ideas and strategies without feeling like a failure. The basis of this trust came from teachers and administrators relying on each other to put students at the forefront of decision making.

Staff and student recognition was important to the family atmosphere at school PAA. Staff were recognized for hard work within the school community through awards. "Feed the teachers so they don't eat the students," was the motto of the principal at school PAA. The staff at school PAA appreciated the recognition for work well done; however, they were quick to state they worked at PAA because of the students who were served at PAA. An example of this sentiment was that all students are expected to obtain scores higher than 80% on all assessments. If a student fails to reach the 80% mark, he or she is retaught and then retakes assessments. The same ideology was held with any homework assigned. The mark for homework was set at 50%.

Teachers understood that the students they served may not have the support at home to excel on the homework assignments. The message was about the knowledge gained and not the pace in which the instruction was delivered. This pointed to the responsibility of the staff. One teacher at school PAA said, "Don't teach content, teach kids."

A custodian interviewed spoke about the culture of the building being family-like. He stated he had been in other buildings in the district where the students had come from more affluent environments. The staff culture of those buildings was that of isolation. He spoke about his surprise when he moved to school PAA and had teachers invite him to carry-ins and outside activities. He believed that environment made him work harder to make sure the school looked nice. When I complimented the custodian on how the floors shined he smiled with pride in his work as well as in the school.

Interviewees spoke much about respect of parents and guardians. Several participants spoke about dealing with upset parents stating that by meeting and treating parents with respect usually the problem was resolved. They complimented several of the veteran staff members for their calm demeanor in team meetings. The veteran staff imparted a belief, though at or below the poverty line, they wanted and expected their kids to be respected and taken care of.

In one interview the participant stated, "All jobs are for everyone" and "Everything is fixable." These statements were about ownership of the whole school process that guided the staff to be team players who made sure their school and the students it served were successful each day. This aspect of the culture develops relationships and trust among the adults.

Many interviewees spoke about the same culture structures. Respondents spoke about how lucky they were to work at this school and serve the students. There was only one negative response during the interview process about school PAA. An older staff member stated that

school PAA had always been looked down upon by others in the school corporation because of the type of student that attended the school. It was stated there was an impression of being second best. However, staff members clearly stated that they believed the school staff had continued to make changes and worked with kids. They felt the other schools in the corporation sat back and did not need to work as hard to maintain scores. As the state alters criteria for how a school is determined to be academically successful, school PAA staff believe they have laid the ground work to show their school corporation they have worked hard to meet student's needs. This "underdog" attitude is the unwritten rallying cry that seems to create cohesion among the staff members.

Traditions are the center of culture. One tradition at school PAA that stood out was the candlelight dinner. This tradition began 20 years ago by a teacher who simply wanted to have the entire school eat a Thanksgiving meal together before the Thanksgiving break. Twenty years later, the staff members have continued the tradition and shared the responsibility of setting it up. On the day before Thanksgiving break, during the lunch periods, the entire school stops and joins each other in the school gymnasium to celebrate together. Cafeteria staff helped prepare the food, administration contacted the parks department for chairs and tables and members of the committee made sure plates and eating utensils were ready. As one staff member said, "It is a lot of work and everyone looks forward to it. We just try to help make it happen." A total of 750 students and 50 staff come together for an annual meal. This was a great example of tradition passed to the younger teachers, which created a culture that impacts the school in a positive way.

Surveys and feedback from former students of school PAA were shared and indicated how alumni miss the feeling of belonging at school PAA. Other past students, who are now

teachers in the school system, made it a point to transfer to school PAA to teach. They wanted to continue the school family culture and traditions they learned as students.

Observations of School PAAA

School PAAA was located in the northeastern portion of Indiana. This school was a newly built facility and had gone through a recent consolidation of two smaller town schools. The consolidation closed a smaller school in an adjacent small town, which caused concerns and anxiety at the time. The building was impressive new construction and the "new" middle school finally had its own identity. The new middle school was physically attached to the elementary school and high school, all sharing the same campus. It was made clear from interviews that this building was important for the staff and administrators of the middle school. The new building gave the middle school an identity separate from the high school and elementary school. School PAAA enrolled 350 students. The school population was 86% Caucasian with the remaining population Hispanic, Black, Asian, and multi-racial. School PAAA was 51% free and reduced lunch as reported by the Indiana Department of Education. The following represent some highlights of those observations.

The new building and grounds were well maintained with landscaping. Because of the new construction, the new entrance and foyer area had good visibility for security. The principal and office staff were very friendly and welcoming. The morning announcements were led by students and had music to accompany the information. The principal and assistant principal were eager to talk about the school and how the school operated.

The principal had been promoted through the ranks in the building. The assistant principal was new to the staff and lived in another community. The assistant principal spoke to

the culture from a fresh set of eyes. She was observed working on teacher evaluations and conferencing with teachers.

There was student work displayed and information about upcoming events. Students seemed happy to be there as did the teachers. The place was noisy and appeared chaotic at times, which can be very much a part of a healthy middle school.

Interviews in School PAAA

The data from notes revealed many unique qualities in school PAAA. Interviewees were eager to brag about the culture of the school. They seemed to know something of what the concept meant. The most common belief was how staff trusted each other and worked for the common purpose of the students. Because of the small rural atmosphere, many respondents reported that younger teachers were typically from the community. I was told as teaching positions were filled, those who came to the school either "fit or they don't." "The new people coming to the school need to adjust to our school culture or they are welcome to leave." I thought this was interesting; it spoke to a culture so strong that some external interference was not welcome. I gathered from comments that new staff members were made to feel welcome; however, the new staff member eventually had to show they shared the same belief system teaching kids as the veteran staff.

Elements of the culture of this school were made clear from the multiple interviews I completed. One conclusion I made while there was that this school culture worked for school PAAA due to the student academic success, which was affirmed by the annual yearly progress model. The school's values of trust among the community and each other were echoed in each interview. School PAAA cultivated a family atmosphere by diligently pursuing staff and student

activities, which allowed a bond to form. Staff birthdays and special occasions were regularly celebrated.

I learned in one interview that the staff believed middle school was a special time for students and tried to make it as such. "We as teachers choose to teach in middle school." To make the time in middle school memorable for students, staff traditions allowed for activities that everyone looked forward to. As stated in an interview, during the first week of school all students were bussed to a local waterpark for the day. This was a school-sponsored event and teachers attended and supervised the day. This activity provided an opportunity to form relationships and create memories before the school year commenced. Each nine-week grading period brought a variety of field trips and activities for the students. The staff referred to these days as "escape days." Students with no missing homework and zero behavior issues got the afternoon off or were eligible for trips, such as a minor league baseball game. Sometimes there were kickball games involving the teachers versus the students. As an interviewee said, the teachers worked hard to make sure the students qualified for these reward days. In the spring, trips to colleges and universities were scheduled and all students made a visit. On each Monday staff wore college or university clothing to reinforce the idea of a higher education for the students.

Another interesting tradition was the award walk. This walk was reserved for those academic, music, and sports teams that won championships or distinguished awards. The team reported to the coach or sponsor's room with the award or trophy. The office announced the accomplishment of the group and the walk around the school began. Interviewees believed this was a bonding experience and allowed those who were unable to witness the victory to enjoy the school win.

Teachers believed they needed to set aside time before and after school to help students succeed academically. An interviewee stated that communicating with the parent, through phone calls, as to the need for the student usually meant the student received the extra help. This communication with the student's home allows the community to trust the school. It also symbolized the work ethic of the community; the extra work instilled in the students that hard work is important and respected. It's "on them to work hard and we are here to support them," stated an interviewee.

The interviews revealed how teachers and staff at school PAAA continued to support the students in the summer. Staff members regularly attend baseball and softball games to support students. Summer also allowed staff to continue activities to build and maintain the family atmosphere. Activities such as cookouts and boating keep the staff connected. "Having fun together is a special thing," one interviewee stated.

One respondent spoke about the school culture by comparing it to his previous work environment outside of education. He stated the comparison was night and day. At the other place there was no trust between coworkers and management. He gave examples like "feeling like a number that was expendable." He also talked about not being able to leave personal property out without locking it up. He stated how nice and relaxed the feel of school PAAA was. He also was very complimentary of the staff and the way new people felt welcome. This sentiment was shared by an interviewee who had an opportunity to teach in a different school district. The respondent stated she had gone an entire school year in isolation, only speaking to teachers on each side of her classroom. She stated the culture was very poor and staff had no connection with the students.

School administrators were spoken of highly. Relationships were the focus of building administrators. Many responses to interview questions and conversations revealed that building administrators supported the staff on a regular basis. The interviews determined a trust between the staff and building administrators. Building administrators was there to guide the school through new processes such as the RISE evaluation. The administrators' guidance set a tone of leadership and calmness. Responses from interviews concerning building administration leaders stated there was not a power struggle in the building. Administrators encouraged and trusted staff to create their own initiatives that helped students achieve success. Activities involving building administrators and staff members, such as working out, showed a team spirit and collegial mind-set. If an activity or new concept did not work, there were no hard feelings or frustration. This was considered the cost of innovation. The building administrators shared a passion for teaching kids. The term "our kids" was repeated throughout the interviews, indicating a family atmosphere.

Retired teachers regularly came to help and participate in staff activities. The retired teachers helped teachers maintain bulletin boards and set up for new curricular activities. This allowed the teachers to focus on lessons that benefitted students, plus it gave teachers the time to work with students individually. This concept was interesting given that the current working staff believed retired teachers have usefulness. Also interesting was the fact that retired teachers still felt a tie to the school and could sustain the culture they once helped define.

Common Themes for Schools PA, PAA, and PAAA

The following themes are a result of coding text from observations and interviews from all three schools. The temptation to draw on themes during the initial coding process was difficult as it was apparent some common threads occurred across all three schools. The list

below is not intended to be exclusive nor exhaustive of all school culture traits in effective Title I middle schools.

Clean, Well-Maintained Building and Grounds

The first observation I made after arriving at the selected schools chosen for this study was the appearance. The common trait of the three schools was that the buildings were neat, clean, and orderly. The outside of each school had well-kept lawns and nice landscaping. As I moved about inside of each school, the appearance of the inside showed pride in the cleanliness of the halls. Floors, windows, and overall appearance showed a clean environment. The cleanliness continued into restrooms, cafeteria, and classroom floors. In all three buildings trash cans were kept clear and custodians were seen sweeping and picking up paper after students had passing periods. I observed custodians picking up paper and clutter after students passed through the halls and into their next class. A custodian interviewee stated, "The people in the building appreciate the work we do; this make us work hard to keep the building clean."

Although most schools will exhibit a degree of cleanliness, it became obvious that this level of maintenance provided a sense of pride, which leads to the next theme. The two themes may have been collapsed by some researchers; however, the magnitude of effort put into providing a well-maintained property seemed stronger than most.

School Pride

In each of the research schools there were multiple examples of school pride. The school mascot and school colors were present in many locations. Students and staff showed support of the school by wearing clothing of the school colors or clothing that had the school name or mascot on the clothing. The hallways had organized displays of trophies and awards won by past school teams. Each school displayed an area in which students and staff were recognized as

outstanding members of the school. All three schools believed they influenced the students of the school by "doing it the (school name) way." The coach of a basketball team required players to wear shirt and ties on game days, displaying pride in themselves and where they are from. One interviewee said, "We see lots of poverty at this school, however, we make sure the kids have what they need to represent themselves and the school in a positive way."

The schools studied recognized staff and students for work and accomplishments. Each school recognized staff and students through announcements and administrative communication. Birthdays were posted. In display areas there was a space for recognition for achievement and good work. The display allowed anyone to see the accomplishments of the student or staff member. Also included in the displays were plaques that had been awarded annually to deserving staff. This type of recognition played a role in connecting the past to the present. "We want to recognize students and staff for work well done." "This helps with our family atmosphere." Some of the recognition is due to helping with community events.

Students at each of the research schools were spoken of as being the reason the school existed. Teachers and school administrators repeatedly said their jobs were to make sure students were successful. Successful meant both in academics and as middle school students in general. Teachers and administrators recognized an increased demand and academic pressure. This did not deter the adults from the challenge of teaching kids, many of whom had larger issues than attending school, such as bringing baggage to school with them due to the poverty situation. This demand was handled through staff communication and the use of data to guide the staff to ensure student success. Repeatedly, the message in each school was that all students count and it was up to the adults to guide students to success. An interviewee stated, "We want the students to know we appreciate the work they are doing."

School Community Trusts School

In each of the studied schools, a common theme was that the served community trusted the school and how it conducts the daily business of educating students. This was observed through parents coming to the schools and the positive attitude displayed. One conversation with an adult outside of the school confirmed the trust. The person stated she had attended the school and she believed the community supports the school. Each of the school's administrators made mention of past surveys that indicated the community trusts the school. Several interviewees stated the community is pleased with what the school is doing with the students, with one stating "our test scores and the number of students attending some form of education beyond high school is testament to the work being done."

Minimal Turnover

It was determined through interviews at each school that the staff and administration had been stable with not much staff turnover. Although in each school, retirements and movement had taken place, a large core of staff had stayed stable. This stability helped to maintain the culture in each building. In two of the research schools, the principal was promoted from within. Having middle-aged and veteran staff created an environment of trust and school tradition. One interviewee said, "Most of the positions are filled with younger teachers who have moved back to the community and stay." "This approach has worked for a long time; however, how long it will continue is the big question" was a concern for one interviewee.

Traditions Passed to Younger Staff

Through the interview process, all three research school staff spoke about traditions in their schools. Although the traditions were varied based on the school, a common denominator of broad encompassing traditions existed and was protected by the veteran staff. The veteran

staff interviewed in all schools shared a sense of responsibility to perpetuate the traditions and make sure the younger staff understood the importance of the tradition. The traditions helped to define and guide the school. The younger staff who were interviewed and asked about traditions seemed to understand that the traditions helped with the overall school health. One interviewee simply stated that "if a colleague was going to put so much time into organizing an event the least he or she could do was to support him or her."

Trust Among the Staff

All research schools showed building-level administrators as supportive of teachers and staff. It was understood in each school that the administrators had a job to do and expectations of their staff were high. Both administrators and school staff reported that communication, trust, and respect were a must for success. Teachers and staff reported that the school administrators showed a genuine caring for the staff. It was shown through positive interactions on a daily basis and a trust that allowed teachers to try innovative teaching methods. The teachers were not afraid of administrative wrath if a new concept did not work. Support staff also reported a sense that building administrators cared and trusted them to do their assigned tasks.

Teachers in all three study schools indicated through interviews that building administrators expected and strongly encouraged opportunities for students to work with teachers beyond the traditional class time. In each school, the teachers made sure students who needed extra help with curriculum had an opportunity. Whether it was an assigned time for students after school or a free-flow approach, students who needed the help had the opportunity to learn. This time also allowed the teacher, student, and parent relationship to develop. An administrator who was interviewed stated, "I feed the teachers so they don't eat the students."

Throughout the interviewing process in all three research schools, the theme of trust was echoed. Staff spoke about the trust among one another. The idea mentioned repeatedly was that trust ensures that the focus and energy is placed on the students. Teachers spoke of the trust and confidence that came with knowing others in the building were working hard and with the same shared purpose each day. Trust is not easy to obtain nor can it be forced. Fellowship is the catalyst for the trust to grow. Fellowship was included in the traditions, outings, and gatherings that took place throughout the year. One teacher interviewed stated, "I taught an entire year at another school and only spoke to the teacher next door. Here everyone speaks and there are activities for us to be involved with others in the school."

I immediately noticed in each of the research schools a welcoming atmosphere. The main office in each school was the first opportunity for me to get a "feel" of the school. In all schools, the office staff was welcoming and helpful during the visit. I noticed the office staff answered the phone, talked to students and parents, and tried to accommodate as best they could. Each time the interaction was positive and helpful. The welcoming atmosphere also was present throughout each school. Staff in each school were seen interacting with parents and students in a positive and professional manner. I was invited to a staff carry-in. I felt this gesture to be real and not contrived due to the school visit. An interviewee said, "We enjoy having the carry-ins; most of the time someone gets the ball rolling and decides the menu and we all chip in."

In addition to the welcoming climate in each school, respect of others was noticeable. In each school I observed acts of respect between adults and adults-to-students. The adults interacted with each other on multiple occasions during hallway supervision and team meetings. Each time an interaction was witnessed, the adults acknowledged each other to show genuine caring for the other person. On many occasions I observed adults talking about mutual interests

from activities outside of the work day. All adults spoke and acknowledged one another. It did not seem to matter the experience level or title of the staff member. Custodial, cafeteria, and secretarial staff interacted with each other as colleagues not just as workers. That said, everyone had a role to play in making the school a success. Each titled adult in the building expected each of his or her colleagues to do the job assigned them at the highest level possible. This created a team concept.

Data Guides Instruction

Teaching is expected to change and evolve as research and educational trends happen. How schools educate students has become sophisticated; educators learn from research and expectations from standardized testing. Any administrator and teacher knows that collecting and dissecting the school data is a must in today's environment. Interviews in all three schools revealed that administrators and teaching staff made decisions based on data. As I was told, the days of "I think or I feel driving lessons" is less popular when decisions about student growth are made. Data are used to monitor student progress in such classes as Reading Recovery, which is provided through the Title I money. Interviewees also talked about having the data to show parents and encourage students to continue to give their best effort. Data were used to "keep score" of success and to validate the direction of instruction. "We look at the student data from class work to test scores." "We use that information to see where students need more help and give them support." "We make students redo work until they receive an 80% on the homework."

Title I Is Not a Label

The most interesting information that came from interviews in all three schools was the fact that most staff, with the exception of administrators, had little to no understanding of what being a Title I school meant. Interview after interview indicated that they had no knowledge of

the amount of money their school received or how it was spent. A few respondents knew the Title I money provided extra teaching support, including Reading Recovery for students who need extra help. A couple of responders understood they were able to have some extra technology because of the Title I money. Being labeled a Title I building seemed to have little impact on how the staff taught and little to no influence on the school culture. The Title I label and the free and reduced lunch percentage, which contributes to the Title I label, have no bearing on how students are treated. The common belief is that all students will be successful while at school. There was no physical evidence in the school regarding being a Title I school.

Summary

Through observations and interviews in each of the schools chosen for the study, I found there were patterns across all three school cultures. Collaboration, tradition, and beliefs among the school staff set a tone and direction for the school. Through interviews, I was told each school had to work to keep a collaborative culture alive. Deal and Peterson (1996) and Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) wrote about various types of cultures: (a) toxic, (b) fragmented, (c) balkanized, (d) contrived collegiality, (e) comfortable collaboration, and (f) collaborative. The collaborative was considered as the ideal. These schools seemed to have a strong belief in the power of collaboration.

Though traditions varied in each of the schools, it was clear embedded traditions existed and were protected. Veteran staff passed the traditions to younger staff and the younger staff complied with the activities. Other actions that contributed to the collaborative status were aspects like trust, use of data in decision making, encouragement of others, school employee stability, and student-first thinking.

Thirty-two interviews were conducted in three Indiana public Title I middle schools for this study. The respondents from all interviews discussed aspects of their school cultures. Among the 32 interviews, there was a cross section of experience and curricular areas. All believed in their schools. The connection among the three schools was they all received Title I funds yet remained steadfast with the desire to teach students. The Title I label did not seem to provide an excuse to perform poorly. It was soon revealed that in all schools, the teachers had little idea of the students who qualify for free and reduced lunch. The repeated attitude was we teach all kids.

I did not find culture elements such as toxic, fragmented, balkanized, or contrived indicators from the interviews completed. This is important because these types of school cultures can neutralize collaboration. The negative culture elements can be as strong as the positive ones in some settings as toxic behaviors become the norm. School leadership, both administrators and teacher leaders, have to be aware of how valuable a positive school culture is and sell it each day.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Due to a local Title I middle school being placed on NCLB sanctions, the middle school

in which I worked was becoming a Title I school as students from the failing Title I middle

school were bussed through the Choice Rule to our school. This was at an additional cost to the

school corporation, and it took students outside of their neighborhood school. This issue was the

catalyst for me to do a research study on how schools are changed by Title I. This study has

shed some light as to why only a few middle schools are successful with Title I resources.

Source of Data and Study Criteria

The primary intent of this study was to look at schools in the Midwest; however, only a

few middle schools in Indiana responded. Thus, the Indiana Department of Education was the

early source of data for the study. This study then was built upon the following criteria: a study

school needed to be an Indiana public Title I middle school with Grades 6, 7, and 8 in the

building, and the school had to show academic success over several consecutive years based on

the adequate yearly progress model.

As reported by the Indiana Department of Education, 58 school districts had at least one

middle school receiving Title I funds. Of those 58 school districts identified, there were 81

Indiana middle schools receiving Title I funding. In addition, for an Indiana public Title I

middle school to be eligible for the study, the middle school had to show academic success for

several consecutive years as based on the adequate yearly progress model; that criterion set forth for this study decreased the eligible Indiana public Title I middle schools from 81 to eight.

The schools chosen for the study were located around the state of Indiana. Each school had a similar population due to free and reduced lunch percentages; however, the range in total number of students enrolled varied. The schools turned out to be diverse due to their locations and students served. Two schools were smaller and in rural settings versus one in an urban setting. The schools chosen for the study were denoted as PA, PAA, and PAAA. This identification was set forth through IRB protocols. As always, the identities of the school and the participants for the interview process were protected.

Significance of Study

Given the eight and a half billion dollars distributed through the Title I program, results in academic achievement to close the achievement gap is expected by those who distribute these funds. The essence of the Title I program is to financially supplement schools with high poverty levels and give students of these schools additional opportunities to achieve higher academics, thus closing the achievement gap between low and high socioeconomic groups. Title I funds can be used in a variety of ways. The rules for disbursement of Title I resources is not restrictive. Many schools will expend these funds in creative ways. School districts should be good stewards of these additional federal funds. Title I schools showing a decline in student academic success are watched closely and are at risk of losing the funding and could ultimately be closed due to poor performance.

Why are only a few Indiana public Title I middle schools academically successful? This study was designed to answer four questions.

1. What is the culture of a successful Indiana public Title I middle school?

2. How has the culture evolved in successful Indiana public Title I middle schools?

3. What role has the school leadership taken in developing the culture in successful Indiana public Title I middle schools?

4. How does change occur in successful Indiana public Title I middle schools?

School culture sets schools apart. "Don't they all start to look the same to you?" (Thompson, 1993, para. 1) can be heard many times from those in legislative committees. All schools tend operate in a similar manner, yet they each exhibit a distinction among them that creates differences. Culture has been identified as the reason schools succeed or fail (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). School culture is the unwritten road map by which school staff translate and understand the job of educating students. A positive school culture exhibits collaboration among the adults of the school.

Response to Research Questions

Research Question 1 was **"**What is the culture of a successful Indiana public Title I middle school?" For an Indiana public Title I middle school to have academic success as defined by adequate yearly progress, a school will benefit from having a collaborative culture. According to the findings of this study, successful school cultures should have the following in place:

- a clean and well-maintained building and grounds;
- school pride;
- a school community that trusts what school is doing;
- minimal turnover of staff;
- having traditions passed to younger staff;
- trust among staff;

- data that guides instruction; and

- the feeling that Title I is not a label.

What may be the most unique of these components is the last one. Title I schools can be stigmatized with the label of being a poor school. This sentiment can provide some weak educators an excuse to maintain a minimal effort. This level of effort may be one of the traditions passed on to younger teachers who arrive hoping to make a difference but quickly become indoctrinated with a sense of hopelessness.

School leaders may want to keep the Title I label hidden as much as possible. Expectations play a large part in how teachers and students will perform. To assert in any form that the school is ridden with misfits can deteriorate school pride. Or worse, create a new normal that members will protect—a shared belief that students and their parents do not care, so why should the teachers?

Research Question 2 was **"How has the culture evolved in successful Indiana public Title I middle schools?"** Successful Indiana public Title I middle schools seem to have a culture that has evolved and has been sustained as collaborative over time. Through interviews at the successful schools, it was determined their collaborative cultures have been sustained for many years. The free and reduced lunch percentage had risen yet had little effect as the culture was strong. The interviews revealed components of a collaborative culture existed prior to the Title I funds arriving and that the culture had continued. The fact that the students had more needs and that standardized test cut scores had risen over time had not deterred the staff.

A collaborative culture was well entrenched in these schools and, thus, the staff continued to teach all students, with the students' best interests in mind. One interviewee stated, "I have no idea who receives free and reduced lunch, if the student is in need of money for

'extras' at lunch; I make sure they have it." It would seem the strong cultures did not need to evolve much. A sustained collaborative school culture seemed to trump any circumstance that emerged.

For school leaders in schools about to become Title I schools, their task should be to shore up the values and beliefs of the faculty to insure coming changes to not detract from the good work they are doing now. The theme related to Data-Guided Instruction becomes more important. Teachers will need to refer to the data more than their intuition as the student population shifts. Those who have rarely worked with at-risk students will need to reflect on the assumptions they have regarding these students, and their parents.

Research Question 3 was "What role has the school leadership taken in developing the culture in successful Indiana public Title I middle schools?" Culture exists and is molded by all adults in each building. Every group eventually has a person who will step up as a leader. The official leaders in schools are either appointed or hired. In some schools, a veteran teacher may unofficially assume this role. Leaders make decisions, set the tone, and support traditions, values, and beliefs established in the school. The leader is only a part of the overall culture. I found in the three study schools that leadership was very stable and had typically been promoted from within. Principals had been teachers in those schools. The cultures in the three study schools demonstrated a strong support and trust between the staff and school leadership.

A defining statement of the school leadership involves trust and encourages staff to take educational risks to improve student learning. However, if the risk does not provide a desired outcome, the trust insulated all parties from sanctions. Each of the schools chosen for the study embraced the challenge of adjusting to new educational initiatives. The building leadership did not struggle to enforce mandates; they simply encouraged positive working relationships.

A caution from the theme concerning Traditions are Passed on to Younger Teachers is that all cultures tend to evolve and to assume doing nothing as a strategy can lead a school culture down the wrong road. Although strong cultures exhibit more stability, there will always be times when they are vulnerable to change. Leaders should know these leverage points and be ready to build on them.

Research Question 4 was "How does change occur in successful Indiana public Title I middle schools?" For the purpose of this study, the sample schools were already successful. Interviewees at these schools indicated all of the aforementioned traits of a positive school culture. The traits that were conspicuously absent from the interviews were themes such as toxic, contrived, and balkanized—those aspects described in the literature as inhibiting student performance. Traditions, values, and beliefs were the road map for the school rather than any deficiencies, change was not seen as an issue. That said, in one interview the interviewee stated, "It will be interesting to see how long the culture will remain as is; . . . there seem to be factors outside of our control wanting to redefine us."

What I believe was discovered through interviews at the selected schools for this study was that change had been happening in these schools for many years, nothing remains a constant, which became their *new normal*. From the interviews, it can be concluded that despite educational changes, remaining student-centered actually relieves some of the stress. The traditions and beliefs of the schools and adults remained steadfast. Change in these schools is about how the adults can meet the needs of students while protecting the values, beliefs, traditions, and trust that define the school culture.

Implications for School Leaders

The previous section provided some ideas as each research question was addressed. This study provided information regarding what successful Title I middle schools may look like. The concept of school culture was the lens used to examine these schools. The themes that emerged from the coding of interviews seem logical. We are not asking school leaders to work harder, spend more money, or fire teachers. Each of the themes will have a unique application for any school implementing them. The following thoughts may assist school leaders as they think about changing the culture of their schools:

1. Learn more about what school culture is.

2. Spend time learning and understanding their current school culture.

3. What traditions seem to be useful in advancing the school vision?

4. What is the level of trust within the school?

5. How do staff use data?

6. Is the building clean?

7. Is there evidence of student-centered attitudes among teachers?

The purpose of reflecting on the above issues is not to indict anyone, but rather to reveal those aspects of the current school culture that may be facilitating or inhibiting student achievement. Title I can bring a stigma to these settings if the culture is not strong enough to deflect it. All schools will have some weak teachers. Leaders will need to prevent them from becoming informal leaders.

Through observations and interviews at the three schools there appeared to be a collaborative network among the staff. By definition, collaboration means to work together ("Collaboration," 1980, p. 278). These schools embraced collaboration and relationships among

staff members. The staff in these schools believed relationships strengthened trust and an understanding as to how to teach the students they serve. Teachers also worked to develop relationships with students in their classes. These relationships foster trust; trust helps deliver academic results, which may explain in part how these schools are successful in making annual yearly progress. None of the schools relied on a *magic bullet* (Reeves, 2003).

Further Research

Further research is needed on the topic of successful Title I middle schools. Using financial resources to maximize student achievement is essential for the 21st century. New America Foundation (2010) reported federal Title I funding increased by $7.7 billion, or 88%, since 2001. Based on the amount of federal funds spent, the achievement gap is still widening.

It is the human factor, not necessarily the additional money spent, that decides the outcome for student success. The culture of a building will be more successful when they adopt criteria embedded within the themes found in this study. Future research questions may ask, how can we support school culture before they become Title I? Past research states that it takes from five to seven years to change a culture (Fullan, 1998). Is it possible a culture could be changed in less time, and if so, what might be the repercussions of destabilizing a school in short order? Interviewees had little understanding of how a school culture works. The staff just knew something was working and felt productive. What happens when a group is introduced to the concept of school culture prior to an intended change of that culture? Could knowledge of that dynamic slow the process?

Some themes found in this study may be present in unsuccessful Title I middle schools. Is it possible some traits are in all schools whereas some differentiate them? Additionally, themes reported in this study might be found in any school showing academic success as

reported by AYP. The themes reported in this study have the human factor at the center, meaning there are no programs guaranteeing successful culture change.

Summary

The information discovered in this study is important and provides insight into reasons why only a few Indiana public Title I middle schools are successful. Much research in the area of culture has been completed and written about; some of the research was identified in Chapter 2 for the literature review. Equally important to this study is the information concerning Title I and its impact on the education system in the United States. Title I funding is in the billions of dollars and yet the achievement gap has not decreased between high- and low-socioeconomic groups.

Further research in the combined areas of school culture and Title I funding could help the Title I funds be used in more effective ways, which may finally help to close the achievement gap. This study developed themes that seem to describe Title I middle school cultures and also gained some insight as to how the Title I funds for the study schools were spent. Interviewees had little understanding of the funding and how it is used. Interviewees also had little understanding of what school culture was and how it affected the overall school performance. Staff only knew there were traditions and beliefs, trust, and values that have sustained them through the years. Because there has been a positive culture in place for so long in each of the study schools, there was little or no understanding of how things could be different. Most go about their daily business and do not understand or realize how they are affected by the school culture.

There will always be a culture in every school; the question is what type of culture will it be and can the staff recognize it and make it a positive one for the students of the building? An

interesting aspect of school culture is that there has to be stability among administrators and

faculty. As embedded as some traditions and beliefs may be, a new staff person has the best

chance of seeing the true culture of a building and the possibility of a new one. These schools

had cultures where teachers supported one another and supported the students they teach. A

collaborative culture does not happen by accident, it takes the right people doing the right things

every day.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Describe your school's student population.

2. How has the school changed during the time the school has been a Title I school?

3. How has the staff adjusted and or changed with the change to Title I?

4. What are the expectations of student academic success?

5. How has the mind set of your school leadership changed since Title I?

6. How have the expectations of your school community changed since the Title I label?

7. Are the expectations by the students changing?

8. How have student expectations changed?

9. What direction does your school go from this point?

10. Describe your schools culture: traditions, values, stories, expectations, etc.

11. Describe your schools mission and vision statement. May I have a copy of these statements?

12. Do you believe your school culture follows the mission and vision statement?

13. Has Title I funding improved your school's student academics? How?

14. Have you seen a difference in culture for the school over the time you have spent at the school?

15. What transformation do you believe your school needs to make?

16. What drives your school – culture, Title I, Leadership?

17. What role do you see yourself playing in the school transformation?

18. What is the one statement that summarizes why your students are successful?

APPENDIX B: LETTER TO PRINCIPALS

Mr. Joe Principal
Study school USA
1234 success drive
School town, IN

Dear Mr. Principal,

My name is Bruce Lautenschlager and I am currently working toward a doctoral degree at Indiana State University. I am a middle school assistant principal with a very diverse population of students. I am writing to express interest in your school as a study school for my dissertation. Your school was selected for my study from data collected from your state's department of education.

The purpose of this study is to look at Title I middle schools in the Midwest. The schools for my study have been Title I schools from one to seven years. I will be studying school culture and determine how school culture has successfully impacted student success.

I would like to set a date and visit your school. During my visit I would like the opportunity to meet with you. I also would enjoy observations of your school day. The interview process will consist of questions which will be sent prior to my visit. Each interview will range between forty-five minutes to an hour. I would also like to meet with both certified and non-certified staff before or after school at their convenience.

Thank you in advance. I'm looking forward to seeing your school.

Bruce Lautenschlager   Dr. Steve Gruenert
                                                 Indiana State University