

ESTABLISHING A CULTURE OF ACADEMIC OPTIMISM IN RESPONSE
TO CHANGING STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS WITHIN
A MISSOURI ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

A Dissertation
presented to
the Faculty of the Graduate School
at the University of Missouri-Columbia

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

by
CHRISTINE JOHNSON
Dr. Barbara Martin, Dissertation Supervisor

DECEMBER 2016

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled
ESTABLISHING A CULTURE OF ACADEMIC OPTIMISM IN RESPONSE TO CHANGING
STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS WITHIN A MISSOURI ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

presented by Christine M. Johnson, a candidate for the degree of doctor of education and hereby certify, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

Professor Barbara Martin

Professor Sandy Hutchinson

Professor Doug Thomas

Professor Carolyn McKnight

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Barbara Martin for supporting my research endeavors while instilling in me a passion to recognize and serve marginalized student populations. My leadership journey, while always evolving, has been strengthened by her guidance, knowledge, and encouragement. Furthermore, I would like to thank my dissertation committee, Dr. Sandy Hutchinson, Dr. Doug Thomas, and Dr. Carolyn McNight, for the feedback, experience, and time required to successfully complete the research study.

This dissertation would not be possible without the inspiration of the individuals, young and old, at Sterling Elementary School. Additionally, I want to thank the Warrensburg School District for providing opportunities and access in support of the research focus and purpose. A special word of thanks goes to the elementary administrative team for creating a network of support, and necessary humor, leading to the completion of the dissertation process.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ESSA: Every Student Succeeds Act

NCLB: No Child Left Behind

PLC: Professional Learning Community

PD: Professional development

SES: Socio-economic status

ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study was created to study the established and embedded culture of one elementary school experiencing changes in student demographics. The identification of cultural components effective in closing the academic achievement gap among students living in poverty and their more affluent peers was the basis for the research. Therefore, focus groups, interviews, and document analysis sought to uncover certified faculty and classified staff's perceptions related to organizational culture. The conceptual framework for this study is academic optimism, which falls under the broader theory of positive psychology (Hoy & Tarter, 2011; Peterson, Park, & Sweeney, 2008; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The three constructs of academic optimism were extracted during the research, which included academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust in parents and students (Hoy & Tarter, 2011; Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006). Additionally, the elementary's application of Professional Learning Communities led research participants to apply an understanding of academic optimism when interpreting their experiences within the organization.

The triangulation of three data sources, focus groups, interviews, and document analysis, uncovered themes related to organizational culture as determined by the artifacts, beliefs and values, and assumptions uncovered during analysis (Schein, 2010). Moreover, data analysis revealed components of the culture conducive to that of academic optimism, while also pinpointing elements in need of support.

CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION TO DISSERTATION-IN-PRACTICE

Introduction to the Background of the Study

Public schools within the United States have been challenged with increasing demands for higher student achievement since the beginning of the 21st century (Brown, Benkovitz, Muttilllo, & Urban, 2011; Harris, 2009; Jenson, 2009; Muhammad, 2015). Consequently, increased accountability resulted in federal laws mandating standardized testing and yearly, minimum, progress levels for all public school students has emphasized districts' need for school improvement (Daly, 2009; *Every Student Succeeds Act*, 2015; *No Child Left Behind*, 2001; United States Department of Education). Historically, such federal, state, and local policies, standards, and legislation aimed at school improvements resulted in swift reform initiatives (Sansosti & Noltemeyer, 2008); however, Fullan (2003) challenged that educators rarely change in light of accountability policies and structures.

Accountability places an increased focus on school and student success as measured by state standardized tests (US Department of Education, 2015). Subsequently, test scores are disclosed annually, leading to public scrutiny. Lacour and Tissington (2011) reported,

Communities have become consumed with the practice of comparing one school to another in a manner some would describe as unfair and even unjust.

Particularly disturbing for educators is the practice or simply the idea of comparing student achievement of schools with high socioeconomic status (SES) to those with low SES. (p. 523)

In the United States, the gaps in academic achievement among poor and advantaged students are substantial (Harris, 2009; Jensen, 2009; Muhammad, 2015). As an example, Lacour and Tissington (2011) pointed out that, “Poverty directly affects academic achievement due to the lack of resources available for student success” (p. 522).

A targeted approach to closing the poverty achievement gap occurred when the reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965*, known as the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 (McKinnon, 2012), addressed the notion of adequate yearly progress for all students, to include those categorized within sub groups. At the time NCLB (2001) was introduced, the United States was unconsciously and systematically creating inequalities within the public education system, resulting in a visible achievement gap (Muhammad, 2015). The convergence of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2001) changed the educational landscape while purporting increased state assessments, standardization of curricular standards, high levels of accountability for school districts, and sanctions for schools struggling to address the achievement gap between student subgroups (Daly, 2009; McKinnon, 2012). Complementary to this, the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA, 2015) reauthorized the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965* (ESEA) and replaced the NCLB Act of 2001. Similarly, the bill addressed issues such as accountability and testing requirements intended to further the United States interest in eradicating the achievement gap within public schools (Muhammad, 2015).

The intention of ESSA (2015) was to increase achievement of all students in the United States, but the pressure to ensure accountability had adverse effects within

educational organizations. Despite an awareness to ensure achievement for all students, NCLB (2001) and ESSA (2015) had unintended outcomes: (a) teachers had a diminished efficacy in their ability to teach all learners; (b) organizational pressure to increase yearly performance created a sense of pessimism; and (c) public recognition of schools' deficiencies and weaknesses reduced morale (Brown, Benkovitz, Muttillio, & Urban, 2011; McKinnon, 2012; Sansosti & Noltemeyer, 2008). Lacour and Tissington (2011) highlighted one area in which a teacher's optimism may be impacted due to increased accountability, "Some of the most substantial negative effects of the No Child Left Behind law are found to be a reduction in the teacher's sense of autonomy and an increase in teacher turnover" (p.522). It can be argued that such structures created feelings of resentment, with the added pressure of achievement, leading to a sense of pessimism among public school educators (Lacour & Tissington, 2011). Such a pessimistic school culture carried a disbelief in the ability of its staff to overcome the socio-economic barriers of its students (Brown, Benkovitz, Muttillio, & Urban, 2011; Hoy & Tarter, 2011; Muhammad, 2009), and is not conducive for students of poverty to be successful.

When considering NCLB (2001), Muhammad (2015) found that only 1% of schools identified as failing in 2002 reached adequate yearly progress by the designated year of 2011. The evidence suggests that the accountability efforts of NCLB (2001) in closing the achievement gaps among student sub-groups did not produce the intended results. Muhammad (2015) confirmed, "Even when the government mandated that all students achieve, the gaps still existed" (p. 35).

The urgency for schools to demonstrate adequate yearly progress on measures of standardized tests may have influenced educational leaders to place less emphasis on developing a healthy, optimistic organization, to that of depleting funds on test scores (McKinnon, 2012). While past research (Coleman, 1968) exuded the notion that school characteristics are unable to overcome the effects of poverty and family background, educational stakeholders have exhausted resources and energy to identify characteristics which benefit the academic achievement of all students (Hoy & Tarter, 2011; Jenson, 2009; Muhammad, 2015).

Eliminating the achievement gap requires an organization to challenge long withstanding beliefs about education, ultimately leading to a shift in culture (Muhammad, 2009; Schein, 2010; Trice & Beyer, 1993). Conversely, the academic achievement disparities between increasingly diverse student populations create a moral obligation to enact change benefiting all students. (Fullan, 2003; Muhammad, 2015). Fullan (2003) described, “Moral purpose of the highest order is having a system where all students learn, [and] the gap between high and low performance becomes greatly reduced” (p. 29). Seemingly, the ideas of Hoy and Tarter (2011) confirmed the central role of an optimistic organizational culture to school success, with specific indications of improved student learning and increased academic achievement for those living in poverty (Connolly, James, & Beales, 2011; Goddard, Sweetland, & Hoy, 2000; Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004; Hoff, 2012; Hoy, 2012; Hoy & Tarter, 2011; Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006; McKinnon, 2012; Smith & Hoy, 2007).

Conventionally, socioeconomic factors are powerful influencers when it comes to student achievement; however, the present study will highlight school cultural factors that make a difference in closing the achievement gap (Jacobson, 2008; Jensen, 2009; Lacour, & Tissington, 2011; Muhammad, 2009; Muhammad, 2015; Murakami, Garza, & Merchant, 2010). Specifically, by understanding factors needed to create an academically optimistic environment in pursuit of improving student achievement, the study will expand on previous research efforts of Hoff (2011), Hoy and Tarter (2011), McKinnon (2012) and Murakami, Garza, and Merchant (2010) within the elementary school setting.

In response to a growing number of students living in poverty (Harris, 2009; Jacobson, 2008; Jensen, 2009; Lacour & Tissington, 2011), the proposed research will seek to operationalize a culture of academic optimism within a school experiencing a shift in student demographics. Establishing an organizational culture to one whose artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, and underlying assumptions, (Schein, 2010) demonstrate the construct of academic optimism will have the most positive impact on student achievement (McKinnon, 2012).

Statement of the Problem

Nationally, there is a growing awareness of the heightened accountability standards and policies impacting public schools' improvement strategies, whereas educational improvement for all students is an endeavor which must transcend demographic variables (ESSA, 2015; Jensen, 2009; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; NCLB, 2001). Beginning with the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2001) and continuing through the

adoption of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (2015), state and district school reform efforts resulted in substantial gains in student achievement. However, students representative of low socio-economic and ethnic sub groups were still denied an equitable public school education (Muhammad, 2015).

Historically, national poverty rates fluctuate based on periods of economic growth and recession (Muhammad, 2015). The most recent recession which began in 2007 led to the following statistics reported by the US Census Bureau (2015): (a) 15% of Americans earn income below the national poverty line; (b) 21.8% of children in the United States live in poverty; and (c) 11.8% of families live in poverty. Equally important, students living in poverty lack access to food, healthcare, and are typically deprived of travel experiences (Muhammad, 2015).

Within the nation's lowest performing (5%) elementary schools, there is a 31% achievement gap in reaching grade level proficiency in reading and a 36% achievement gap in mathematics with their peers in higher performing, and often higher socio-economic, schools (US Department of Education, 2015). Muhammad (2015) maintained it is within these same struggling schools that nearly two thirds of the students being served do not meet adequate yearly progress, demonstrating the accountability sanctions placed by NCLB (2001) and ESSA (2015) have not yet dissolved the risk of low academic performance for students living in poverty.

Schools have an expectancy to increase access and opportunity for all students, specifically closing the poverty achievement gap as a means of providing an equitable education (Brown, Benkovitz, Muttillio & Urban, 2010; Harris, 2009; Muhammad, 2015).

Schools must actively seek strategies for organizational improvement which exceed the variables of socioeconomic status, family background, and ethnicity (Muhammad, 2009; Muhammad, 2015). Jensen (2009) concluded, “the effects of poverty are not automatic or fixed, they often set in motion a vicious and stubborn cycle of low expectation. Poor academic performance often leads to diminished expectations, which spread across the board and undermine children’s self-esteem” (p. 38). While the effects of poverty are pervasive within public schools, especially within urban and rural districts, new constructs give hope to school leaders, teachers, and students that they can overcome these circumstances (Hoy, 2012; Jensen, 2009; Lacour, & Tissington, 2011).

Brown, Benkovitz, Muttillio, and Urban (2010) suggested academic failure leading to social inequity happens when “[students] are “left behind” without hope, without vision, and without equal access to the excellent education to which all children are entitled” (p. 58). A school culture which embraces high levels of learning for all students, regardless of demographic variables, will enhance the optimistic mindset of all students (Dweck, 2006). Additionally, Peterson and Deal (2009) argued, “Culture affects all aspects of a school. It influences informal conversations in the faculty lunchroom, the type of instruction valued, how professional development is viewed, and the shared commitment to ensuring all students learn” (p. 12). Therefore, a change in organizational culture is essential for school improvement in closing the achievement gap of students, and one which is increasingly complex (Connolly, James, & Beales, 2011). Arguably, this problem of practice is for school leaders to identify the most effective strategies for

establishing and embedding a culture of academic optimism (Hoff, 2012; Hoy, 2012; McKinnon, 2012).

Purpose of the Study

The challenge in transcending the economic barriers within school improvement (Murakami, Garza, & Merchant, 2010) creates frustrations as historically achieving school organizations face increased accountability standards (Daly, 2009). Seemingly, mature, public school, organizations maintain symbolic artifacts, long standing beliefs and values, and underlying assumptions, commonly referred to as a school's culture (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Schein, 2010). Equally important, efforts in maintaining high levels of achievement reflect the changing demographics of students and require educators to change the embedded culture of school (Muhammad, 2009; Peterson & Deal, 2009).

With the understanding that academic optimism overcomes the effects of SES on student achievement (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004; Hoy & Tarter, 2011; Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006; Smith & Hoy, 2007), the current research seeks to unveil literature concerning the leader's ability to establish the three constructs of an organizational framework of academic optimism: academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust in parents and students. In response to prior quantitative studies distinguishing the relationships between the three constructs of academic optimism (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004; Hoy, 2012; Hoy & Tarter, 2011; Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006; Smith & Hoy, 2007) the current research will fill a void in available qualitative research identifying the factors contributing to a change in culture within its

artifacts, beliefs, values, and assumptions (Bolman & Deal, 2009; Peterson & Deal, 2009; Schein, 2010).

Research, uncovered through a synthesis of related literature, indicated a connection between an organizational culture of academic optimism and student achievement (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004; Hoy, 2012; Hoy & Tarter, 2011; Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006; Smith & Hoy, 2007). With the current focus on academic accountability among public schools within the United States, additional research citing effects of school level variables impacting student achievement, such as academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust, were considered (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004; Hoy, 2012; Hoy & Tarter, 2011; Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006; Smith & Hoy, 2007). Moreover, it is the intention of the current study to identify how school leaders enhance school culture, as well as strategies used to establish an optimistic educational organization. In response to the changing student demographics, representing increased poverty, the pressure of public school accountability and the moral obligation (Fullan, 2003) to provide an equitable education to all students, organizational culture (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Peterson & Deal, 2009; Schein, 2010) will be analyzed. In short, the purpose of this study will be to provide educational leaders with the tools necessary to establish a school culture (Connolly, James, & Beales, 2011) reflective of academic optimism, incorporating academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust, in order to address the growing poverty achievement gap (Jensen, 2009; Muhammad, 2015),

Research Questions

Four research questions will guide data collection and data analysis for the present study, while each research question will be addressed through qualitative inquiry.

1. What are the perceptions of certified faculty concerning the established or embedded culture of academic optimism?
 - a) With regard to academic emphasis.
 - b) With regard to collective efficacy.
 - c) With regard to faculty trust in parents and students.
2. What are the perceptions of classified staff concerning the established or embedded culture of academic optimism?
 - a) With regard to academic emphasis.
 - b) With regard to collective efficacy.
 - c) With regard to faculty trust in parents and students.
3. What cultural components influence the development of academic optimism?

Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

Hoy and Tarter (2011) cited the benefits of using positive psychology as a new lens by which to study the collective, positive traits of an organization. In consideration, applying the construct of positive psychology (Peterson, Park, & Sweeney, 2008; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) to further understand the complexity of organizational culture within an educational setting will be explored. Likewise, analysis of similarities and differences of three potential theoretical frameworks, positive psychology (Peterson, Park, & Sweeney, 2008; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), hope theory (Snyder, 2002), and academic optimism (Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk, 2006),

will deepen the focus for the proposed research. After careful consideration and comparison, one lens will be selected and applied to the case study.

Positive Psychology

Positive psychology is the study of human strengths and successes (Peterson, Park, & Sweeney, 2008; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Historically, analysis of human behavior focused on the unpleasant and negative aspects of life or, rather, an individual's weaknesses. In contrast, positive psychology studies hope and optimism, shifting focus from what's wrong to what's right (Hoy & Tarter, 2011; Peterson & Deal, 2009; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Furthermore, positive psychology signifies the traits of hope and optimism, enabling individuals to envision a successful future, while setting goals to overcome potential obstacles (Helland & Winston, 2005; Snyder, 2002).

Originally, associated with individual interests, Peterson, Park, and Sweeney (2008) suggested that positive psychology embodies the notion of morale. When addressing the positive experiences within organizations, morale promotes the collective well-being of all members within the group. Positive psychology has an impact on an organization's well-being and overall optimistic mindset, and has the potential to increase the individual satisfaction (Peterson, Park, & Sweeney, 2008; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). However, the researcher could not find significant research on the specific properties of positive psychology affecting student achievement. For this reason, positive psychology was ruled out as the framework for the study.

Hope Theory

Positive psychology (Peterson, Park, & Sweeney, 2008; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) has contributed to the understanding of hope theory. Snyder (2002) provided a clear and measurable definition of hope as, “a positive motivational state that is based on an interactively derived sense of successful (a) agency (goal-directed energy), and (b) pathways (planning to meet goals)” (p. 249). Subsequently, Snyder (2002) identified the central tenet of hope theory as goal directed thinking, in contrast to the perceived ability to attain such goals as with optimism. Arguably, hope within organizations enables members to sustain efforts toward shared goals (Brown, Benkovitz, Muttillio & Urban, 2011).

In relation to the field of education, teachers exhibiting high levels of hope remain enthusiastic about teaching and place emphasis on instructional planning (Snyder, 2002). Based on the findings of Snyder (2002), hope theory can be used as a catalyst for effective leaders to influence followers, ultimately leading to hopeful and optimistic thinking. While hope theory addresses the strengths and optimistic characteristics of an organization, it was concluded that it would not be the best framework to use to analyze the case study school. In summary, there is limited evidence linking the conceptual framework of hope theory (Snyder, 2002) with that of increased academic achievement with relation to addressing the economic disadvantages within schools (Jensen, 2009; Muhammad, 2015).

Academic Optimism

Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk (2006) claimed that, “There is real value in focusing on potential with its strengths and resilience, rather than pathology, with its weakness and

helplessness. Academic optimism attempts to explain and nurture what is best in schools to facilitate student learning” (p. 443). Furthermore, Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk (2006) confirmed the relationship between three school properties (academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust in students and parents) as one conceptual framework: academic optimism. Specifically, the three organizational facets of academic optimism consistently predicted student achievement (Hoff, 2012; Hoy, 2012; Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006; McKinnon, 2012).

School leaders looking to improve the organizational culture of their school to one which embraces academic optimism have three avenues through which to approach the task: collective efficacy, academic emphasis, and faculty trust in parents and students (Hoy, 2012; Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006; Smith & Hoy, 2007). Each of the emerging organizational attributes of academic optimism refers to the capacity of the group, or collective efficacy, versus the individual at maintaining high levels of student achievement (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004). A key aspect of collective efficacy, and one which aligns with the intent of this case study, is an organization’s level of motivation and perseverance when faced with a challenge (Bandura, 2000; Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006). For instance, teachers are held to rising standards of accountability, varying student demographics, and a multitude of local, state, and federal mandates (ESSA, 2015; NCLB, 2001). As a result, the theoretical framework of academic optimism can act as a motivator with its attempt to nurture the collective strengths of an organization.

When experiencing failed school reform efforts and minimal increases in student achievement as measured on standardized testing, educators generate a pessimistic attitude regarding the organization's capability (Peterson & Deal, 2009), namely its collective efficacy to teach all students (Hoy & Tarter, 2011). Notwithstanding, the consequence of organizational pessimism (Hoy and Tarter, 2011) is a lack of hopeful or optimistic thinking, affecting an individual's perceptions of his or her capabilities, while impacting confidence and self-esteem. Conversely, Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk (2006) concluded that,

Optimism is an appropriate overarching construct to unite efficacy, trust, and academic emphasis because each concept contains a sense of the possible...Thus, a school with high academic optimism is a collectivity in which the faculty believes that it can make a difference, that students can learn, and academic performance can be achieved. (p. 145)

Therefore, the potential of an organizational culture reflective of academic optimism has the capacity to improve the academic achievement of all students (Hoff, 2012).

A positive academic environment operates within an organizational culture of academic optimism (Hoy & Tarter, 2011). Smith and Hoy (2007) proposed, "Academic optimism can be learned in the same way as individual optimism is learned" (p. 565). Therefore, the theoretical underpinnings of academic optimism provided the researcher with a conceptual framework in which to guide the current study. Due to the purpose of the research, citing the need to increase the collective organizational culture of an

educational setting in order to garner greater student achievement, the lens of academic optimism will be used.

Design of the Study

The researcher utilized the framework of academic optimism with a qualitative research design in order to study the factors which establish, enable, and hinder the development of an organizational culture of academic optimism (Creswell, 2009; Hoff, 2012; Hoy, 2012; Merriam, 2009). Academic optimism and its components has been the subject of several quantitative studies (Goddard, Sweetland, & Hoy, 2000; Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004; Hoy, 2012; Hoy & Tarter, 2011; Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006; McKinnon, 2012; Smith & Hoy, 2007); however, missing within the studies are the rich and descriptive stories of the teachers involved in the research (Hoff, 2012). Utilizing a qualitative paradigm (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009) for subsequent data collection will enable the researcher to closely study the emotions and meanings associated with an organizational culture of academic optimism.

One form of qualitative research implemented within the current study will be the use of case studies. Merriam (2009) and Creswell (2009) described case studies as a holistic description and analysis of a single bounded unit, while implementing an ongoing examination and interpretation of the data. Additionally, case studies within qualitative research are beneficial in that they provide a thorough description of all variables, as well as how the variables interact with each other (Merriam, 2009).

Within a case study, the researcher explores a case, through detailed data collection and observations, consisting of multiple sources of information (Creswell,

2009). To elaborate, it is with an observational case study that the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection, seeking meaning and understanding within the chosen organization (Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) described the cornerstones of an observational case study as one which, “could focus on a particular place in an organization, a specific group of people, or a particular activity” (p. 48). Therefore, focus groups and interviews will have taken place within the organization of Heartland Elementary (Krueger & Casey, 2009), a pseudonym, which will be used for the case study school.

Setting

The research site for the study, Heartland Elementary, a pseudonym, is located in in the Midwest. While the central Missouri town is not geographically located near an urban city, the rural town is home to a large university. The university adds an interesting element within the Midwestern town, as it brings cultural events, businesses, and additional traffic to the thriving community. Specifically, the town has experienced increased population growth in the last five years with a current population of 19,983 (United States Census Bureau, 2015), an increase of 5.9% from 2010. Furthermore, the rural community demographics for families living in poverty, 26.6%, are above the state average of 15.9% (US Census Bureau, 2015). According to Muhammad (2015), “The fastest-growing poverty areas are in suburban areas and traditionally stable small-town areas” (p. 32). It is with this national trend, the town has experienced an increase in families living below the poverty line (US Census Bureau, 2015).

Growing poverty rates within the town have a direct impact on student demographics at Heartland Elementary and within the local school district. Heartland educates students in third, fourth, and fifth grade and has a student population of 385. The socioeconomic status (SES) of the district and case study school was determined by using the percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch rates as reported by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Schools (DESE, 2015). Reviewing district reports from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education database revealed a growing free and reduced lunch rate (DESE, 2015) of 31.6% in 2006, 42.7% in 2014, and current student demographics consisting of 48% free and reduced lunch participation. With the establishment of an organizational culture of academic optimism (Hoy & Tarter, 2011), Heartland Elementary will close the achievement gap among economically diverse student body (Muhammad, 2015), acting as the first line of defense against a debilitating cycle of poverty (Jensen, 2009; McKinnon, 2012).

Participants

Merriam (2009) defined purposeful sampling as based on the assumption that the researcher wants to discover specific information, at which a selected sample will provide the opportunity for deeper understanding. Additionally, Patton (2002) described purposeful sampling as a way to engage in information-rich data collection. Selection of participants which align to the central purpose of the research leads to deeper understanding (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, the researcher will utilize a purposeful sample to examine the specific constructs which emerged as a result of the review of literature.

In investigating the research questions, certified faculty and classified staff were studied in order to understand their perceptions of their current organizational culture, as it is related to academic optimism. The researcher collected factual and perceptual data from participants at Heartland Elementary.

Heartland Elementary employees 32 certified teachers, with an average experience of 15 years and 67% having completed an advanced degree (DESE, 2015). There were 62 certified and classified staff members. A random sample (Merriam, 2009) of certified and classified staff members representing varying degrees of experience and roles within the building was selected for the study. Certified faculty and classified staff participated in focus group discussions and interviews designed to answer the four key research questions of the study. One focus group of classified staff and two focus groups of certified faculty, totaling fifteen participants, were conducted. Furthermore, interviews were conducted with one classified and four certified staff members selected from a random sampling of Heartland Elementary stakeholders not included in the focus group discussions. In conclusion, the staff members in the selected school will be sent an informed consent letter for the focus group interview, outlining the purpose of the study and the use of potential (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

Human Subjects Protection

Prior to data collection, gatekeeper permission was sought through the use of a letter describing the intent of the research (see Appendix D) as well as a request granting permission to contact study participants (Creswell, 2009). Additionally, participants were provided an informed consent document (see Appendix E) that identified the

researcher, the purpose of the study, the organization, as well as the benefits of the case study research (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009). Additionally, participants were guaranteed confidentiality and were able to withdraw from the research study at any point (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009).

Data Collection Tools

Interviews, focus groups, observations, and document analysis were utilized to uncover factual and perceptual information about Heartland Elementary (Merriam, 2009). All participants were consenting adults, with no foreseeable risks involved in the case study (Merriam, 2009). For that reason, the semi-structured interview and focus group format will avoid researcher bias through carefully worded questions and predetermined prompts (Creswell, 2009).

The researcher, leading all efforts of data collection and analysis, utilized interviews, focus groups, and document review (Merriam, 2009). However, the primary means of data collection consisted of focus groups to gather a variety of opinions and further understand the thoughts of each participant (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Merriam, 2009).

Focus Groups

Faculty and staff focus groups were conducted in groups of 5 participants and followed a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix A) consisting of ten questions (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009). In addition, the focus groups took place at the case study school and lasted an average of 45 minutes each. Interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed for analysis (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Three focus groups

were conducted with Heartland Elementary certified faculty and classified staff members, as their experiences as a group reacting to the current organizational culture are better gathered through a focus group rather than interviews (Merriam, 2009). Equally important, their experiences are shared and can lead to richer data on the subject (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, focus groups were audio recorded for future analysis.

Three focus groups were conducted, with each group consisting of 5 Heartland Elementary members. Certified faculty and classified staff participating in the focus groups represented varying roles within Heartland Elementary. The groups were formed randomly in order to represent varying degrees of personalities and experience (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009). Of great importance is the need for the researcher to rule out misconceptions and misinterpretations of the audio recordings. In regard to internal validity, member checking occurred by sharing the analysis results with participants (Merriam, 2009).

Interviews

Open ended interviewing is a common method to collect qualitative data to obtain information beyond what researchers uncover during participation within a focus group (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009). For the purpose of this study, experiences within the organizational culture were captured through individual interviews (Merriam, 2009). Of great importance within qualitative research, Merriam (2009) summarized, “questions are at the heart of interviewing...having fewer broader questions unhooks you from the interview guide and allows you to really listen to what your participant has to say” (p. 104). Interviews allow the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of how participants

view and interpret the world around them (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, interviews were conducted with three certified faculty members and one classified staff member who did not previously participated in a focus group session. The four interview participants will be selected randomly from those indicating a desire to participate in research. A series of semi-structured interviews asked participants to respond to open ended questions to gain a more detailed and descriptive response (Merriam, 2009).

With the notion that different types of questions will yield different responses, an interview protocol (see Appendix B) consisting of ten questions was utilized to maintain consistency in how each question was worded (Merriam, 2009). Interview protocols were created to assist the researcher in asking and recording questions (Creswell, 2009). A semi-structured interview sought specific data from each respondent, included less structured questions, and allowed for question flexibility (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009). Ultimately, questions aligned to the stated research questions, while avoiding leading questions which would uncover potential researcher biases (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, the researcher utilized probes or follow up questions in order to elicit additional responses from participants or seek clarification on a prior response (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

Individual interviews with key Heartland Elementary faculty and staff members were conducted within the participants' setting, face-to-face, one-on-one, and lasted approximately forty-five minutes. Participation in the open ended, semi-structured interviews was on a voluntary basis (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009). Interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Additionally, field notes were added

documenting the participants' body language, facial expressions, and other potentially relevant observations (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Following the transcription of the interview audio recordings, the researcher ensured internal validity by initiating member checking (Merriam, 2009). Interview participants were provided with the transcription and asked to identify any areas of misconception. The researcher made necessary changes to the coded analysis in order to accurately represent the interviewee's voice (Merriam, 2009).

Document Review/Artifacts

In order to triangulate the qualitative data gained through focus groups and interviews, document analysis was also used (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009). Multiple artifacts were chosen for the case study school to include school improvement plans, agendas and notes from Professional Learning Communities, faculty meeting agendas, professional development plans, allocation of grant and building funds, stated mission and vision of the organization, student demographics and student achievement data. Furthermore, standardized testing achievement data in mathematics and English language arts were analyzed to compare the academic growth of students receiving free and reduced lunch and those not participating in the program (ESSA, 2015).

The selected documents are considered public records and are located within the state department database or the participating school's website (Merriam, 2009). A document analysis protocol (see Appendix C) ensured each piece of data is analyzed while reducing researcher bias (Merriam, 2009). With the use of the protocol, these

documents revealed information about the organization of Heartland Elementary that cannot be observed or that occurred prior to the study.

Qualitative Data Analysis

During the study, field-notes were manually and audio recorded during interviews and focus groups (Merriam, 2009). More specifically, the first step in analysis included placing the data into appropriate documents, while organizing by date and location of focus groups and interviews (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Secondly, the researcher transcribed interview and focus group data while looking for common themes and potential patterns (Krueger & Casey, 2009). The themes and patterns were then arranged to outline participants' perceptions on the topic of academic optimism (Creswell, 2009).

Focus Groups

When attempting to analyze focus group transcripts, the researcher needed to maintain focus on the purpose of the study. During the present study, a transcript based form of data was utilized. Transcript based data typically includes an audio recording of the focus group transcript, along with the interview transcript, supplemented with field notes (Kruger & Casey, 2009). In analyzing the transcripts and field notes, also known as identifying themes and categorizing results, the researcher applied a classic analysis strategy by color coding remarks (Kruger & Casey, 2009). Specifically, the researcher utilized the open coding method, reviewing each line of the focus group transcripts, gleaning repeated themes (Merriam, 2009). Additionally, axial coding assisted in the disaggregation of central themes throughout qualitative data analysis (Merriam, 2009). Axial coding demonstrates the grouping of codes or themes based on the interpretation of

the data, as the researcher continues to add further transcripts from focus groups and interviews the codes or themes should represent repeated patterns found across all areas of data collection (Merriam, 2009).

Interviews

In order to make sense of the interview data, as the goal of such analysis is to answer the research questions, the researcher coded central themes naturally appearing during data analysis (Merriam, 2009). The researcher developed categories that are responsive to the purpose of the study, exhaustive to all relevant data, mutually exclusive to one category, sensitizing in order for outsiders to interpret the information, and conceptually congruent (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Data analysis of interview transcripts identified organizational beliefs, values, and artifacts that may have contributed to the development of one or more of the properties of academic optimism: collective efficacy, academic emphasis, and faculty trust.

Document Review

The document review of the qualitative case study did not seek generalizability or reliability of results, but determined whether the findings are accurate and reported without researcher bias. In order to validate the accuracy of the information during the document review, the researcher followed a continuous cycle of analysis (Kruger & Casey, 2009; Merriam, 2009). Additionally, triangulation of data sources, focus groups, interviews, and document reviews, were used in order to justify themes and patterns within the research (Merriam, 2009). Each data set was compared with another to check

for consistency of viewpoints and the comparability of perspectives from different participants (Creswell, 2009).

Credibility of the Study

The following section addresses how the role of the researcher, assumptions, and limitations relate to credibility of this study. The study was limited to an elementary school in Missouri. Accordingly, results from the study are a representation of the chosen elementary school and are not able to generalize across educational organizations (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009). Poverty, or socioeconomic status, was the one achievement gap factor explored within this study (Jensen, 2009). However, the author acknowledges other significant gaps based on race, gender, and disability.

In order to allow for a trusting relationship between the researcher and the case study participants, focus group and interview transcriptions were shared between parties (Merriam, 2009). Additionally, triangulations, using multiple sources of data to cross check information; added to the study's validity and reliability (Merriam, 2009).

Participating Heartland Elementary staff members represent a diverse sample of teachers with varying ages, gender, ethnicity, and years of experience (Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2015). Additionally, participation in the study is voluntary, did not involve every faculty member in the case study school, and allowed for participants to end their involvement in the study at any time (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009).

Design Control

The intent of the case study at Heartland Elementary was to take a deep look into the conceptual framework of academic optimism therefore, one organization was chosen for the research (Creswell, 2009). To control for the limitations of the case study the researcher addressed bias by focusing on the participants' experiences within Heartland Elementary, placing personal experiences aside (Merriam, 2009). Furthermore, the researcher needed to be objective when analyzing the data sets. Open ended questions were utilized to elicit opinions from participants.

Definition of Key Terms

The definition of terms examined the constructs of academic optimism to include collective efficacy, academic emphasis, and faculty trust, as well as additional related terms within the public school organization in order to enhance the understanding of the inquiry.

Academic achievement: The academic performance of students representing the level of mastery towards Missouri state assessment standards in math and English language arts.

Academic optimism: Each of the emerging organizational attributes of academic optimism refers to the capacity of the group versus the individual at maintaining high levels of student achievement. The triadic set of properties is dependent on the other (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006).

Academic emphasis: The priority a school places on the academic achievement and excellence of each student (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006).

Achievement gap: The difference in academic performance and educational benefit between groups of students, including disparities between students from low income families and those of higher socioeconomic status (Muhammad, 2015).

Artifacts: Observable behaviors found within the physical environment of an organization; what one would see, hear, or feel when entering an organization (Schein, 2010).

Basic underlying assumptions: Functioning as a way to tell members how to behave and how to feel, typically a fundamental aspect of the organization's livelihood (Schein, 2010).

Collective efficacy: The judgment, or sense of capability, of a school's faculty about the performance abilities of the group or team in which they are working (Bandura, 1997; Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004).

Espoused beliefs and values: The shared social experiences of a group, serving as the norms and overall philosophy of the organization (Schein, 2010).

Faculty trust: The faculty or school's willingness to be vulnerable to students and parents; the strength of the relationship between home and school, teachers and parents (Smith & Hoy, 2007)

Organizational culture: The artifacts, assumptions, values and beliefs within an organization that reflects the overall meaning and direction of the organization (Schein, 2010).

Significance of the Study

One goal held by the majority of school stakeholders is the academic achievement of all students. The challenge for school leaders is to create organizational conditions in which teachers believe they are capable of meeting the needs of all students, leading to a narrowing of the achievement gap (Brown, Benkovitz, Muttillio, & Urban, 2011; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Muhammad, 2015). Evidence implies school culture associated with academic optimism influence student achievement, specifically closing the achievement gap across socioeconomic divides (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004; Hoy & Tarter, 2011; Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006). If academic optimism leads to increased student performance, future research should focus on how to change an organization, historically pessimistic, to one which embraces optimism and hope.

Academic optimism shows promise for improving schools and guiding educational leaders (Hoy, 2012; Huff, 2012; McKinnon, 2012). While research is limited, there are implications for practice within each construct (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004; Hoy & Tarter, 2011; Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006): collective efficacy, academic emphasis, and faculty trust. The current study sought to add to the growing body of knowledge surrounding academic optimism. Considering past research (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004; Hoff, 2012; Hoy, 2012; Hoy & Tarter, 2011; Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006; McKinnon, 2012) identified the relationship of academic optimism with increased student achievement, despite the variability of student demographics, it can be concluded that school leaders would take interest in specific strategies leading to a culture of optimistic thinking. Likewise, understanding the artifacts, values, beliefs, and assumptions (Schein, 2010) existing in a culturally sensitive

school will lead to future educators creating and maintaining an academically optimistic culture with the end result of improving student achievement. This qualitative research conducted through a case study design of a school with varying levels of academic optimism should lead to a rich description of an organizational culture conducive to student achievement.

Summary

Fullan (2003) described the underlying belief of an academically optimistic organization as, “unwavering faith that you will prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties” (p. 9). Therefore, a school with a strong culture of academic optimism (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004; Hoff, 2012; Hoy, 2012; Hoy & Tarter, 2011; Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006; McKinnon, 2012) would have a staff that believes in the collective efforts of the organization to make an impact on the learning of all students, that academic performance will be achieved, and that together they can make a positive difference in their students’ lives. Additionally, academic optimism is evident when educational organizations have a sense of empowerment because they do not believe students are restrained from achievement by economic factors (Jensen, 2009; Muhammad, 2015). Themes and patterns within the case study were developed, while triangulating all relevant data.

Data on student achievement (DESE, 2015; ESSA, 2015; Jensen, 2009; Muhammad, 2015; NCLB, 2001) confirm that academic disparities in student reading and math performance within the United States exists primarily in schools serving low income families (Murakami, Garza, & Merchant, 2010). Despite prevailing

circumstances, educational researchers (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004; Hoff, 2012; Hoy, 2012; Hoy & Tarter, 2011; Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006; McKinnon, 2012) have identified school variables related to student academic achievement. School leadership efforts (Murakami, Garza, & Merchant, 2010) establishing a culture of academic optimism guided by collective efficacy can have a positive effect on student achievement regardless of socioeconomic status.

In evaluating the academic optimism of Heartland Elementary, the case study dissertation in practice will review the scholarly literature surrounding the constructs of academic optimism and organizational culture. Moreover, the paper represents the findings of the study and further explains the process for disseminating the data to stakeholders as well as academic journal submissions.

CHAPTER TWO:
PRACTITIONER SETTING FOR THE STUDY

Introduction

Trice and Beyer (1993) acknowledged the need for a leader to influence group members to buy into a new organizational culture. Equal attention must be paid to developing structure and culture within the Heartland Elementary learning organization (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Moreover, the moral imperatives for leaders to exhibit courage and arrange resources to move beyond traditional teaching and learning will ensure all students are academically successful (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker & Karhanek, 2010; Dufour & Fullan, 2013). Therefore, emphasis will be placed on the leadership and organizational traits necessary when establishing academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust in parents and students (Hoy & Tarter, 2011).

History of the Organization

Heartland Elementary was originally built in the 1960s and functioned as the central Missouri district's high school. However, over time, the building was reimagined to meet the growing district's needs as the middle school during the 1987 school year, eventually becoming Heartland Elementary in 1990 (Chamber of Commerce, 2016). In 2015, the central Missouri, rural school district in which Heartland Elementary resides had four elementary schools, one middle school, one high school, one alternative school and one career and technical program (Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2015). Total enrollment, as reported by DESE (2015), was 3,200 students. Certified teachers within the district have an average of 13 years teaching experience, while 63% of district teachers hold advanced degrees. The rural district has historically maintained sustainable academic achievement status across each of its campuses. More

importantly, the district was honored with the Distinction in Performance in subsequent years, and in 2005 received the Commissioner's Award for its dedication to teacher professional development (Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2015). Similarly, the Midwest school district earned past recognitions and awards, which included a perfect score on the Annual Performance Report (APR) in 1998-1999, 2001-2002, 2003-2004, and 2004-2005 (Chamber of Commerce, 2016). However, as student poverty levels increased as reported through the district's free and reduced lunch rates, low levels of subgroup proficiency prevented the district from maintaining a perfect APR status (Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2015). In summary, achievement among district subgroups did not match the growth of other students.

The central Missouri school district has experienced changing student demographics in the area of free and reduced lunch qualification since 1999 (Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2015). Beginning in 1999, and throughout the following decade and a half, the district's free and reduced lunch rate averaged 29.5%. Additionally, district free and reduced lunch averages were closely aligned with those at Heartland Elementary (DESE, 2015). Beginning in 2006, free and reduced numbers began a slight increase, which continued each subsequent year. Specifically, Heartland Elementary maintained a 31% free and reduced lunch rate in 2006 (DESE, 2015), ultimately resulting in an increase of students living in poverty in 2015 to 47%.

Despite the academic impact of increased poverty among school families (Jensen, 2009), the district continues to meet students' hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943). For instance, the district employs school social workers in each building, offers weekly Back

Snack food services through Harvesters, and in 2014 opened the Tigers' Den which provides clothing, food, and supplies to any district student (Chamber of Commerce, 2016). Equally important, partnership with local agencies established a network of support and services for students and families experiencing homelessness. Collaboration and communication between central Missouri community's network of support, such as the public school district, university, non-profit organizations, local churches, and shelters act as an aligning force to address poverty in the community (Chamber of Commerce, 2016).

With the current student demographics at Heartland Elementary, leadership maintains high expectations for student achievement, refusing to let the condition of poverty impact future academic success (Jacobson, 2008). Complementary to this, organizational learning, or professional development, centers on the creation of a collaborative culture known as a Professional Learning Community (PLC) (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker & Karhanek, 2010; Dufour & Fullan, 2013). Based on the ideas of Dufour and Fullan (2013), a PLC encompasses student learning, teacher collaboration, and high levels of trust as a way to increase student achievement. Heartland Elementary participated in a three-year Professional Learning Community training through a regional professional development center. Members of the school's leadership team attend conferences and workshops, then deliver supports to grade level teams in order to implement PLC's with fidelity.

With relation to academic optimism, Heartland Elementary's future success in closing the academic achievement gap relies on the ability of the organization to develop

a deep sense of collective efficacy (Dufour & Fullan, 2013; Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004; Hoff, 2012; Hoy, 2012; Hoy & Tarter, 2011; Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006; McKinnon, 2012). In summary, Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, and Karhanek (2010) insisted, “a school committed to helping all students learn at high levels should provide a multilayered collective response that guarantees all students who struggle will receive additional time and support for learning” (p. 1).

Organizational Analysis

The structural and cultural focus of a collaborative school include (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2010; Dufour & Fullan, 2013): (a) a commitment to high levels of learning for all students; (b) a commitment to a collaborative culture; and (c) a commitment to fostering continuous improvement. Dufour and Fullan (2013) hypothesized that a professional learning community is an organizational learning structure leading to the eradication of the achievement gap between students from low income families and their more affluent peers (Gill, 2010; Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Dewitt (2015) communicated a recent development in researcher John Hattie’s Visible Learning (Hattie, 2011) elements, outlining actions which have the most impact on student learning. Additionally, it can be determined that when Heartland Elementary teachers have a low level of efficacy they feel as though they do not have a substantial impact on student learning (Dewitt, 2015; Hattie, 2011). Necessary for improvement, district and building leaders need to establish a school culture that fosters an increased belief of collective efficacy. Furthermore, Jacobson (2008) confirmed, “leaders need to create a sense of coordinated purpose within the school, then provide the resources and

appropriate motivation to enable the staff to develop the skills necessary for the collective undertaking” (p. 6).

Based on the findings of Shafritz, Ott, and Jang (2005) it can be argued “culture is to the organization what personality is to the individual—a hidden, yet unifying theme that provides meaning, direction, and mobilization” (p. 352). For instance, organizational symbols and rituals at Heartland Elementary depict the values and beliefs held by teachers (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Levi, 2014). Similarly, Harris (2009) noted the importance of symbolic actions and artifacts within schools as a way to communicate the values of such an organization. As a result, Heartland Elementary would embrace a unifying culture, one which would diminish conflict and amplify homogeneity among staff (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Otherwise, significant pessimism can result from external criticism of a school’s continued failure to increase academic achievement of student subgroups (Brown, Benkovitz, Muttillio, & Urban, 2011; Hoy & Tarter, 2011; Muhammad, 2009).

Hoy and colleagues (Goddard, Hoy & Woolfolk, 2004; Hoy, 2003; Hoy & Tarter, 2011) recognized the significant role of a building principal in establishing or hindering an organizational structure leading to an enabling bureaucracy, which impact teachers’ sense of academic optimism (McGuigan & Hoy, 2006). McGuigan and Hoy (2006) found that a school’s enabling structure is one aspect which enhances a culture of academic optimism. A description of an enabling structure suggested it represents the building’s processes and structure which support staff’s ability to focus on the work impacting students (McGuigan & Hoy, 2006). Additionally, Hoy and Tarter (2011)

reported a correlation between enabling bureaucracies and the development of trust. Goddard, Hoy, and Woolfolk (2004) reported collective efficacy is tied to a school's ability to build a collaborative culture (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2010; Dufour & Fullan, 2013), involving teachers in decision making, while acknowledging structures identifying roles and building upon teachers' areas of professional talent.

Leadership Analysis

Preskill and Brookfield (2009) expressed,

Our chief claim is that leadership can be practiced by anyone in any kind of movement, community, organization, or institution...Leadership has little to do with formal authority or where one is in the chain of command, and a great deal to do with forming and sustaining relationships that lead to results in the common interest. (p.4)

Northouse (2013) declared "...leadership is concerned with the process of developing mutual purposes..." (p. 13), and later he described leadership as "...using influence to bring individuals toward a common goal..." (p. 15). It is with the leader's influence of groups that mutual goals are realized. At Heartland Elementary, common goals and shared purpose direct the work of leaders and followers. Northouse (2013) added, "Attention to common goals gives leadership an ethical overtone because it stresses the need for leaders to work with followers to achieve selected goals" (p. 6).

Fullan (2003) identified the relationship between trust and academic achievement, noting that the school principal is a key agent in developing organizational trust while fostering a culture of relationships. Dimensions of observable trust within the Heartland

Elementary leadership team include respect, competence, personal regard for others, and integrity. When these behaviors are continually observed within leadership (Fullan, 2003), “they become embedded in the culture of relationships across all participants” (p. 43).

To overcome the pressures of school accountability, principals direct their attention on improving teaching and learning, with an academic emphasis on student achievement. Moreover, district and Heartland Elementary leaders model the type of dialogue necessary for reculturing an organization in need of school improvement (Levi, 2014). Harris (2009) exemplified, “effective principals in such schools have to be more responsive to their social and cultural contexts in order to secure lasting improvement” (p. 88).

Jacobson (2008) noted the significance of leadership when it comes to improving student achievement. Specifically, Jacobson (2008) confirmed, “there is evidence of principals working in high poverty schools that have defied the odds; schools that have predicted levels of student achievement that were markedly better than would have been predicted given the demographic characteristics of the student body” (p. 4). In other words, if Heartland Elementary’s student poverty rates continue to increase, as the trend indicates, the practices of the building leader will impact the success of all students. (Jacobson, 2008; Leithwood & Riehl, 2005; Mulford, Silins & Leithwood, 2004).

Additionally, within schools experiencing a change in student demographics, Jacobson, Johnson, Ylimaki and Giles (2005), “observed the importance of successful principals exerting a positive attitude while maintaining a strong sense of purpose and direction” (p.

36). In conclusion, leaders who displayed high levels of optimism in terms of student learning, in turn, have teachers who carry similar sentiments related to the collective efficacy of students and staff (Harris, 2009).

Implications for Research in the Practitioner Setting

As student poverty rates continued to increase, academic performance of Heartland Elementary's free and reduced lunch sub-group decreased. Jacobson (2008) challenged the intentions of those invested in closing the academic achievement gap by stating, "leadership skills in the absence of measurable student outcomes ring hollow if the primary goal is simply to maintain organizational control and/or employer satisfaction" (p. 6). It is with this case study that the researcher seeks to uncover how school principals establish or embed a culture of academic optimism in conjunction with academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust (Goddard, Sweetland, & Hoy, 2000; Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004; Hoff, 2012; Hoy, 2012; Hoy & Tarter, 2011; McKinnon, 2012; Smith & Hoy, 2007; Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006).

At Heartland Elementary, a culture shift will need to take place in order to establish a renewed vision of student success (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Of great importance, when the intention of a school's success for all students, the adult assumptions, beliefs, and norms will need to direct the culture towards that of academic optimism (Schein, 2008). While school principals influence the organizational culture, teachers also establish or embed the constructs of academic optimism (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006). Equally important is the understanding that specific cultural

components (Schein, 2010) at Heartland Elementary may indeed hinder the development of academic optimism (Hoy & Tarter, 2011).

Elmore (2003) concluded, “Cultures do not change by mandate: they change by the specific displacement of existing norms, structures and processes by others; the process of cultural change depends fundamentally on modeling new values and behaviour that you expect to displace the existing ones” (p. 11). Hence, the case study will measure the level of academic optimism within Heartland Elementary.

Summary

Mandated public accountability produces an expectation of immediate change in reducing the academic achievement gap. Harris (2011) substantiated, “Immediate gains in achievement are often fueled by a strong political imperative where timescales are much shorter than those required for deep, sustainable change” (p. 625). While the relationship between poverty and underachievement in schools is recognized (Daly, 2009; United States Department of Education, 2015; Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015; No Child Left Behind, 2001), of great concern is the notion that the gap increases throughout schooling (Harris, 2009; Jensen, 2009). Adequately addressing the achievement gap within an elementary school (Harris, 2009) improves student outcomes throughout the PK-12 public school setting. Therefore, closing the academic achievement gap (Daly, 2009; Muhammad, 2015) will provide an equitable education for all students within Heartland Elementary’s care. With regard to the changing demographics impacting students’ socio-economic status and needs, the organizational culture will need to establish and sustain the constructs of academic optimism (Hoff,

2012; Hoy, 2012; Hoy & Tarter, 2011; McKinnon, 2012). The following sections of the case study will review the scholarly literature surrounding academic optimism, as well as offer a description of the researcher's proposed contribution to practice.

CHAPTER THREE:

SCHOLARLY REVIEW FOR THE STUDY

Introduction

After a synthesis of related literature, the conceptual framework for the proposed study will be academic optimism (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006), as it provides the necessary constructs relevant to the problem of study. Additionally, properties related to an organization's culture such as artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, as well as basic assumptions will be explained (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Schein, 2010). Literature consistently supports the argument that a school culture of academic optimism positively impacts the achievement of students, regardless of socioeconomic status (Connolly, James, & Beales, 2011; Goddard, Sweetland, & Hoy, 2000; Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004; Hoff, 2012; Hoy, 2012; Hoy & Tarter, 2011; McKinnon, 2012; Smith & Hoy, 2007; Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006). Consequently, the three properties of academic optimism, collective efficacy, academic emphasis, and faculty trust in parents and students, will be further analyzed as they relate to elementary school settings.

Problem of Practice

Federal, state, and local policies calling for increased improvement in struggling schools have done little to adequately address the achievement gaps (Harris, 2009; Jensen, 2009; Muhammad, 2015). Subsequently, measures of accountability place stress on teachers, ultimately making them question their ability to meet the needs of all students (Jensen, 2009; Muhammad, 2009; Muhammad, 2015). Therefore, the researcher contends that a cultural shift (Schein, 2010) within school organizations will create the optimistic environment deemed successful in closing the poverty achievement gap

(Jacobson, 2008; Jensen, 2009; Lacour, & Tissington, 2011; Muhammad, 2009; Muhammad, 2015; Murakami, Garza, & Merchant, 2010).

In order to achieve continuous academic improvement in the face of increasing levels of student poverty, school leaders must confront the cultural identity of the organization (Jacobson, 2008). Nevertheless, teachers also contribute to the constructs of academic optimism, with actions which either enable or hinder the school's positive culture. Harris (2009) concluded, "Teachers in schools facing challenging circumstances must work much harder simply to get to the starting line-the point at which students feel able and willing to learn" (p. 86).

Harris (2011) argued initiative overload takes a toll on educators, often reducing motivation and creating a pessimistic sense of one's ability to enact meaningful change within a challenging organization. In comparison, Harris (2011) indicated, "Improvement is much more likely in systems that are supported rather than punished and where there is a concerted effort to support and motivate educators rather than rely on simple accountability measures to ratchet up their performance" (p. 625).

Existing Gap in Literature

Quantitative studies analyzing the academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust are in abundance; however, qualitative studies necessary for interpreting the heart and soul of an organization's academic optimism are sparse (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006). Significant studies provide readers with the evidence and data to imply a direct correlation between school systems engulfed in academically optimistic cultures and student achievement. However, a gap in research exists when it comes to the

implementation and creation of academically optimistic cultures. If school cultures operating with hope and optimism (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006) are successful in eliminating the achievement gap between economically diverse student populations (Harris, 2009; Jensen, 2009; Muhammad, 2015), an increase in best practice research is needed.

Review of the Extant Scholarship

After a review of the extant research surrounding academic optimism (Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk, 2006), it was concluded that among school based factors collective efficacy, academic emphasis, and faculty trust are as potent as socioeconomic status in explaining academic achievement (Hoy, 2012). These constructs will be discussed further.

Academic Optimism

Academic optimism bonds the three school characteristics of academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust in students and parents together as a single construct (Hoy, 2012). Significantly, these three constructs are correlated to a school's level of student achievement, while controlling for SES (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004; Hoy, 2012; Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006; Hoy & Tarter, 2011).

Academic optimism, an emerging theoretical perspective under the larger construct of positive psychology, has been regarded as directly related to students' academic success (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004; Hoy, 2012; Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006; Hoy & Tarter, 2011). The three organizational facets of academic optimism consistently predict student achievement: the collective efficacy of the faculty,

the academic emphasis of the school, and the faculty's trust in students and parents. Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk (2006) stated, "these three collective properties work together in a unified fashion to create a positive academic environment characterized by the label academic optimism" (p. 431). The term academic optimism was chosen as an overarching construct because each of the three elements incorporates a sense of the possible.

Researchers Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) explained that success is typically viewed as a function of talent and motivation; however, optimism is a learned and developed trait, positively affecting achievement. Whereas, learned optimism is an individual trait, academic optimism is a collective, organizational, property.

Additionally, Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk (2006) described,

Another attraction to the term academic optimism is the idea that it can be learned; a pessimistic school can become optimistic. Academic optimism gains its name from the conviction that its composite properties all express optimism and are malleable. Administrators and teachers have reason to be optimistic.

They can be empowered; neither they nor their students are irretrievably trapped by socioeconomic factors. (p. 432)

Furthermore, Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk (2006) argued that, "learned optimism moves people over the wall of learned pessimism, not just as individuals but also as organizational members" (p. 440). The result, academic optimism provides a contrasting framework for organizations operating with a pessimistic voice, instead reinforcing that our tasks as educators is achievable.

Of great significance, Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk (2006) expressed, “it is difficult to find school properties that are consistently related to student achievement when controlling for the socioeconomic level of the school,” (p. 426). Each of the emerging organizational attributes of academic optimism refers to the capacity of the group versus the individual at maintaining high levels of student achievement. The triadic set of properties is dependent on the other. An organization’s faculty trust in students and parents, increases collective efficacy, which in turn enhances trust (Hoy, 2012). Similarly, faculty trust encourages teachers to maintain academic emphasis with confidence leading to an increase in collective efficacy. In conclusion, each of the three elements of academic optimism interact to create a culture conducive to having a positive effect on student achievement (Connolly, James, & Beales, 2011; Goddard, Sweetland, & Hoy, 2000; Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004; Hoff, 2012; Hoy, 2012; Hoy & Tarter, 2011; McKinnon, 2012; Smith & Hoy, 2007; Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006).

The literature review implies that academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust directly impact school values, assumptions, and observable symbols or artifacts (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006; Schein, 2010). Thus, the conceptual framework of academic optimism supports the purpose of the current study as the researcher seeks evidence on the creation and maintenance of an organizational culture which positively impacts student learning.

Academic Emphasis

The first organizational property that influences student achievement is academic emphasis. Academic emphasis is the priority a school places on the academic

achievement and excellence, with theoretical underpinnings from organizational health in school theories (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006). Primarily, the focus on academic success of each student is considered and expected. Smith and Hoy (2007) defined academic emphasis as a school's drive for academic achievement. Achievable goals, a structured learning environment, students who embrace academic achievement, and teachers who believe in the ability of their students are all hallmarks of academic emphasis.

Prior research has identified academic emphasis as an important element in student's achievement in math and reading, even after controlling for socioeconomic status (Goddard, Sweetland, & Hope, 2000; Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004; Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006). Research also presented evidence of instructional leadership and the academic press, or focus, as significant in the academic emphasis of the school (Smith & Hoy, 2007). Findings are similar across different settings such as elementary, middle, and high schools (Connolly, James, & Beales, 2011; Goddard, Sweetland, & Hoy, 2000; Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004; Hoff, 2012; Hoy, 2012; Hoy & Tarter, 2011; McKinnon, 2012; Smith & Hoy, 2007; Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006).

Collective Efficacy

Collective efficacy is the second organizational property identified in student achievement after controlling for socioeconomic status. Efficacy is considered a key individual or organizational trait when studying achievement (Bandura, 2010; Bandura, 1997; Tarter & Hoy, 2011). The three sets of efficacy beliefs impacting student

achievement include self-efficacy beliefs of students, self-efficacy beliefs of teachers, and teachers' collective efficacy beliefs about the school (Bandura, 1997).

Foundational to collective efficacy, Bandura (1997) developed the theory of self-efficacy, a component of social cognitive theory, to describe, how individuals motivate themselves and persist in the wake of adversity. Based on the ideas of Bandura, collective efficacy is a group's beliefs about the capabilities of the organization as a whole to reach high levels of attainment (Bandura, 2000; Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006). Of further interest, Smith and Hoy (2007) maintained, "schools in which the faculty had a strong sense of collective efficacy flourished academically whereas those in which faculty had serious doubts about their collective efficacy achieved little progress or declined academically" (p. 557). In brief, Goddard, Hoy, and Woolfolk (2004) provided evidence that teachers' collective efficacy was positively related to the achievement of all students, even after controlling for demographic variables.

Goddard, Hoy, and Woolfolk (2004) supported the connection and influence of collective efficacy and student achievement, while making the important distinction that efficacy judgements are the beliefs about capabilities, not actual abilities. To illustrate, Hoy and Tarter (2011) proposed, "Positive efficacy beliefs affect whether the individual or organization is optimistic. Optimistic individuals will persist in their efforts to achieve, and optimistic organizations will actively search to find ways to attain their goals" (p. 434). With this understanding, a school's collective efficacy represents the faculty's perceptions about the performance capability of the staff in meeting the

educational outcomes of all students (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004; Hoy & Tarter, 2011).

Educational researchers and practicing administrators are afforded four sources of efficacy shaping information specified on Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory. Sources are cited as key importance to the development of collective efficacy. The most powerful source, mastery experience, is the perception that a performance or action has been successful (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004). For instance, collective efficacy is enhanced when members of the organization believe that performance will be successful in the future. Goddard, Hoy, and Woolfolk (2004) described the effects of mastery experiences of organizational learning within schools, explaining, "Teachers as a group experience success and failures. Past school successes build teachers' beliefs in the capability of the faculty..." (p.5). Nevertheless, while past school success increases the collective efficacy of its faculty, past failures produce discouragement (Brown, Benkovitz, Muttillio, & Urban, 2011; Hoy & Tarter, 2011; Muhammad, 2009).

Vicarious experiences, the second source of efficacy building, happen when a specific skill or craft is successfully modeled by another member of the organization (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004). If the modeled behavior is successful it will increase the efficacy of the observers; however, the potential for a failed skill or craft can decrease the organization's belief in its capabilities (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004). Therefore, teachers' collective efficacy is enhanced when they view their peers performing successfully with an initiative. On a larger scale, perceived collective efficacy can be increased by observing other organizations in which purpose and goals are similar such

as other schools of similar demographic relevance (Hoy, 2012; Hoy & Tarter, 2011). Additionally, Goddard, Hoy, and Woolfolk (2004) noted "in the current high-stakes systems of state-mandated testing and accountability, schools wanting improved educational outcome may experience gains in perceived collective efficacy by observing successful educational programs offered by higher achieving schools" (p.5).

Social persuasion, the third source in collective efficacy building, includes encouragement, feedback on performance, or simply conversations among peers in various settings (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004; Hoy, 2012; Hoy & Tarter, 2011). Social persuasion can be positive or negative when considering feedback on the capabilities of teachers from teacher lounge conversations, media reports, and community views of education (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004). Goddard, Hoy, and Woolfolk (2004), "Social persuasion is another means of strengthening a faculty's conviction that it has the capabilities to set and achieve goals" (p. 6). The school culture impacts social persuasion.

The final means of developing a collective efficacy among members of an organization includes affective states (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004). An affective state is the organization's reaction to stress, anxiety, or excitement. While individuals respond in varying degrees to emotions, so can an organization. In the same way, organizations with strong collective beliefs about capability will respond positively to challenges, increasing the likelihood of success (Bandura, 2000; Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2010; Hoff, 2012). It has been shown that there is a relationship between teachers' collective efficacy and students' academic achievement (Harris, 2011; Hoff,

2012). In comparison, schools with a strong sense of efficacy improved, whereas schools in which teachers were pessimistic about the collective ability of the staff failed to maintain academic progress ((Harris, 2011; Hoff, 2012; Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004).

If educational leaders intend to create schools which value diversity and guide all students on a path of success, they must also meet the needs of esteem and self-actualization (Lopez, 2003; Maslow, 1943). Maslow (1943) commented, “satisfaction of the self-esteem need leads to feelings of self-confidence, worth, strength, capability and adequacy of being useful and necessary in the world” (p. 171). Similarly, significant, collaborative practice, often coined professional learning communities, in which teachers work collectively to establish effective instructional practices, produce sizable gains in student achievement (Dufour & Fullan, 2013). Collective efficacy drives teachers’ professional engagement, while improving academic achievement, as working together generates shared commitment to the organizational goals (Dufour & Fullan, 2013; Harris, 2011; Hoff, 2012).

Faculty Trust

The final organizational property associated with closing the achievement gap among students is faculty trust in parents and students. A definition of trust frequently associated with school and family relationships is provided by Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, and Hoy (2001) who highlighted that trust was, "...a reliance on others' competence and their willingness to look after rather than harm what is entrusted to their care" (p. 4). Based on Coleman’s (1990) analysis of social interactions, trust was

identified as a key component within relationship building. It can then be proposed that teacher trust in parents and students is a critical element of academic achievement and overall school success.

As a component of academic optimism, faculty trust is the belief that parents, students, and teachers can work towards a shared purpose of learning for all students (Hoy & Tarter, 2011). Smith and Hoy (2007) defined the property as “faculty trust is the group’s willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open” (p. 558). Faculty trust is an integrated concept in which teachers trust parents, so in turn parents begin to trust teachers. Past studies identify faculty trust as an important organizational property leading to student achievement, despite challenges associated with low socioeconomic status (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001). Therefore, as with other properties of academic optimism, faculty trust demonstrates improved achievement despite variations in student demographics (Jensen, 2009; Muhammad, 2015).

Ultimately, it is the strength of the relationship between home and school, teachers and parents that implicate a foundation of trust. Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, and Hoy (2001) implied, “...trust is at the heart of strong relationships that help children learn, particularly disadvantaged children” (p. 4). The significance of teacher or faculty trust is that it builds the relationships needed to align students and families to their schools. Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, and Hoy’s (2001) investigation of urban elementary schools revealed teacher trust in parents and students affects academic achievement.

Academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust are all school characteristics, similar in function, as well as their positive and consistent influence on student achievement (Connolly, James, & Beales, 2011; Goddard, Sweetland, & Hoy, 2000; Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004; Hoff, 2012; Hoy, 2012; Hoy & Tarter, 2011; McKinnon, 2012; Smith & Hoy, 2007; Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006). Hoy and Tarter (2011) were among the first to conceptualize the term academic optimism, while providing evidence of the commonalities of the three interrelated constructs of academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust. In summary, the properties of academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust form the conceptual framework of academic optimism.

Organizational Culture

Bolman and Deal (2008) stated the benefits of investing in the people of an organization within the human resources framework of leadership. The benefits, such as increased commitment to the goals of the organization, higher levels of motivation, and willingness to try new things will lead to an enhanced school culture of academic optimism. As stated by Bolman and Deal (2008), “conditions in the environment allow people to survive and grow” (p. 123). Furthermore, organizations demonstrate higher levels of performance when the needs of employees are recognized. To illustrate, Schein (2010) stated, “culture is to the organization what personality is to the individual—a hidden, yet unifying theme that provides meaning, direction, and mobilization” (p. 352). For this purpose, a human resources framework of organizational analysis established

ways in which support and commitment can be achieved while maintaining or instituting a culture of academic optimism (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

As Bolman and Deal (2008) further ascertained, a true human resource leader will guide with advocacy, but will be resolved when it comes to meeting the needs of the organization and its members. Similarly, Bolman and Deal (2008) discussed the need for a unifying culture, one which would diminish conflict and amplify homogeneity among staff. Research suggests applying organizational symbols and rituals in order to depict the values and beliefs held by the members of the organization (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Levi, 2014).

As Schein (2010) argued, when elements of a culture become dysfunctional, as in a pessimistic school culture, it is then a function of the leader to oversee a change in culture. Organizational culture has been noted as an essential element of school performance, while complex in nature, an optimal culture has been shown to increase student achievement and the overall morale of staff (Connolly, James, & Beales, 2011).

Schein (2010) presented the idea that, “culture is ultimately created, embedded, evolved, and ultimately manipulated by leaders” (p. 3). Additionally, organizational culture is often invisible as it is the mindsets and frames of reference of the group. However, Schein (2010) provided three avenues to which culture can be analyzed: artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, and basic underlying assumptions.

A highly visible element of organizational culture are artifacts, described as all which one would see, hear, or feel when entering an organization (Schein, 2010). Specifically, artifacts are observable behaviors found within the physical environment:

myths, stories, celebrations, and rituals, as well as published values. Seemingly, Bolman and Deal (2008) addressed the artifacts of an organization through their symbolic frame of leadership.

A group's shared knowledge encompasses a sense of how things should be done, what's right, what's wrong, leading to a common set of beliefs and values (Schein, 2010). Often abstract, espoused beliefs and values within an organization provide a means of social validation, described by Schein (2010) as a shared social experience of the group. It is with this understanding, that espoused beliefs and values serve as a group's norms and moral compass, often acting as an organization's philosophy.

The assumptions that guide an organization's behavior, telling members how to perceive, think about, and feel about things, are hard to change (Schein, 2010).

Assumptions are often non-debatable, and attempts to challenge or change a basic assumption will result in anxiety. Culture's function as a way to tell members how to behave and how to feel. Shared assumptions within an organization are difficult to change as they are a fundamental aspect of an organization's life (Schein, 2010).

To summarize, organizational culture has many dimensions and is the topic of substantial literature, however for the purpose of the current study, analysis of school culture will focus on the collectiveness of the staff. As explained by Connolly, James, and Beales (2011), "Although there are differences in the characterization of organizational culture in the literature, a common thread is its collective nature; it is considered to be a shared phenomenon" (p. 425). Thus, the collective efficacy of

Heartland Elementary will be viewed through the lens of academic optimism (Hoy, 2012; Hoy & Tarter, 2011).

Summary

The scholarly review of literature provides an extensive synthesis of the case study's conceptual framework, academic optimism (Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk, 2006; Hoy & Tarter, 2011). While other constructs were considered, such as hope theory (Snyder, 2002) and positive psychology (Peterson, Park, & Sweeney, 2008; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), they were ruled out because they would not meet the needs of the educational organization, as an organization seeking to improve and build upon the current culture in order to support the changing student demographics, the conceptual framework of academic optimism was selected. When researching an organization, a conceptual framework embodying the interdependence of a group versus individual autonomy (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006), in order to produce desired outcomes, was selected. Furthermore, underlying components relative to the current research, artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, as well as basic assumptions were discussed in order to provide a thorough explanation of the organizational culture elements being analyzed (Schein, 2010).

**CHAPTER FOUR:
CONTRIBUTION TO PRACTICE**

Results

Qualitative Findings

The results of the qualitative case study findings demonstrate the perceptions of Heartland Elementary's certified faculty and classified staff as they relate to the organizational culture in regard to academic optimism. Hence, the collected qualitative data are reported according to properties of organizational culture to include underlying assumptions, espoused values and beliefs, and artifacts. Additionally, the data were filtered through the selected conceptual framework of academic optimism and its three constructs -academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust.

Focus groups and interviews were comprised of certified and classified employees. Each certified faculty and classified staff member of Heartland Elementary was invited to participate in the case study. Participation in the research study through focus groups or individual interviews were based on participant's current employment within Heartland Elementary, which then categorized into certified faculty or classified staff, as the researcher sought to uncover the perceptions of organizational culture from two unique viewpoints.

Certified faculty members accepted the invitation to engage in a collegial discussion via focus group or individual interview. The first focus group conducted at Heartland Elementary included five faculty members with a mean organizational experience of 9 years, with participants identified as classroom teachers and counselors. A second focus group comprised of five certified faculty represented a mean of 4.8 years of teaching at Heartland Elementary, and held titles as special education teachers and

classroom teachers. Further data collection included individual interviews with four certified faculty members, resulting in a of 14 faculty participants.

Classified staff at Heartland Elementary was invited to attend a separate focus group or interview for the purpose of gathering their unique perceptions related to organizational culture. Five classified staff members participated in a focus group and represented a mean experience of 4.8 years, while representing Heartland Elementary's custodial, secretarial, and paraprofessional staff. An additional classified staff employee, who has experienced 12 years of employment at Heartland Elementary, engaged in an interview in order to gather additional data.

Document analysis provided the third qualitative data piece, enabling the researcher to triangulate the data. In analyzing the organizational documents of Heartland Elementary, the researcher selected three key pieces of information to further create the narrative of the school. The first document selected for review was the 2016-2017 faculty and staff handbook used by administration to communicate Heartland's vision, mission, goals, and expectations. The handbook was finalized by the principal, but included aspects which were created by faculty and staff such as building goals, vision and mission statements, and collective commitments. The second document was the Missouri Professional Learning Communities Implementation Rubric used by Heartland Elementary's leadership team to pinpoint key components of an effective PLC within the current organization. The rubric, created by educators within Missouri's Regional Professional Development Committee, in conjunction with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, provides schools participating in collaborative

training feedback on the six strands of an effective PLC. The final document displays the Benchmark Assessment survey results detailing certified faculty’s perception of Heartland Elementary’s Professional Learning Communities implementation, as well as areas of growth. The Benchmark Assessment Survey is another tool utilized by Missouri’s RPDC to collect data on the implementation of PLC’s, as it provides an online, confidential platform for certified faculty to indicate their level of agreement within the six strands, using a Likert rating scale. Each of the three selected documents are aligned as they provide data reflective of Heartland Elementary’s journey towards proficient Professional Learning Communities implementation and its correlation with an organizational culture of academic optimism.

To aid in the qualitative findings, names and types of participants, as well as reviewed documents, have been indicated in the table below, Table 1. The qualitative findings in this section represent focus group and interview facilitator questions with participant responses surrounding the organizational culture of Heartland Elementary. Subheadings distinguish between certified faculty and classified staff perceptions, as well as data gleaned from document analysis.

Table 1 *Description of Participants*

<u>Qualitative Data Type</u>	<u>Type</u>	<u>Participants</u>
Focus Group #1: June 13, 2016	Certified Faculty	FA1: Jane FA2: Janet FA3: Jill FA4: Jordan FA5: Julia
Focus Group #2: June 13, 2016	Certified Faculty	FB1: Anna FB2: Alice

		FB3: April FB4: Audrey FB5: Ali
Focus Group #3: June 21, 2016	Classified Staff	SA1: Marie SA2: Mark SA3: Molly SA4: Megan SA5: Mindy
Interview #1: June 21, 2016	Certified Faculty	FI1: Paige
Interview #2: June 23, 2016	Certified Faculty	FI2: Piper
Interview #3: June 28, 2016	Certified Faculty	FI3: Peyton
Interview #4: Sept. 21, 2016	Certified Faculty	FI4: Peggy
Interview #5: Sept. 28, 2016	Classified Staff	SI1: Parker
Document Review: August 20, 2016	2016-2017 Sterling Faculty & Staff Handbook	All certified faculty and classified staff receive training on handbook.
Document Review: July 19, 2016	Missouri Professional Learning Communities Implementation Rubric	Administered to Sterling's (certified) Leadership Team: March 15, 2016
Document Review: July 20, 2016	Missouri PLC Project Benchmark Assessment Tool: Summary Report	Administered to Certified Faculty: January 12, 2016

Note: N=20 participants

Summary of the Results of the Qualitative Analysis

The researcher utilized axial coding methods during data analysis. Word repetition included searching for commonly used words or phrases as well as their synonyms within interview and focus group transcripts and within selected documents (Merriam, 2009). Grouping the open codes resulted in the creation of categories,

representative of the themes which emerged throughout the data sets. Repeated words and phrases were tallied to capture recurring patterns across the study.

Case study data collected through focus groups, interviews, and document analysis revealed the themes associated with the organizational culture perceptions of Heartland Elementary's certified faculty and classified staff members. The unique experiences of each participant surrounding the cultural aspects of artifacts, espoused values and beliefs, as well as assumption were reflected within the data analysis.

Academic optimism and its corresponding constructs of academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust were reflected in discussion held by certified and classified participants. Concerning the construct of academic emphasis, themes emerged surrounding academic achievement, goal setting, data analysis, student support, and high expectations.

Furthermore, each of the three documents utilized during data analysis highlighted elements of Heartland Elementary's academic emphasis and the press for closing the achievement gap as a central tenant of the Professional Learning Community.

Collective efficacy arose throughout the conversations with certified faculty and classified staff pointing to the themes of low confidence, teamwork, peer learning, faculty and staff relationships, and ownership. Frequently mentioned within the faculty and staff handbook were the organization's collective commitments ensuring academic success for all students. Heartland Elementary's perception of faculty trust in parents and students were revealed within the themes relationships, opportunities, involvement, and

communication. Additionally, the Benchmark Assessment Tool revealed Heartland Elementary certified faculty's perceptions related to trusting colleagues.

Summary of the Themes derived from Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative analysis began with the transcription of interview and focus group recordings. Based on recurrent ideas throughout transcription following data collection, coding, and analysis the researcher uncovered recurrent ideas, leading to the creation of themes within each construct of academic optimism as it related to Heartland Elementary's established and embedded organizational culture. Interview and focus group transcription and document artifacts demonstrated consistent experiences and perceptions regardless of certified or classified identification. Regarding the construct of academic emphasis, the three themes are: student support, goal setting, and data analysis. Themes emerged from collective efficacy are: learning from peers, teamwork, and collaboration. The final construct of faculty trust in parents and students unveiled the themes: *relationships*, *opportunities*, and *involvement*. Throughout the study, these themes were evidenced in a variety way on multiple occasions. Additionally, these were the responses consistently given by certified faculty and classified staff when validating the establishment and maintenance of Heartland Elementary's culture of academic optimism.

Answering the Research Questions

Research Question One

The first research question of the case study is, "What are the perceptions of certified faculty concerning the established or embedded culture of academic optimism?"

The research question is answered by analyzing the perceptions and experiences of the study participants in which responses collected from focus group and interview transcripts revealed three themes: (a) *celebrating success*; (b) *relational trust*; and (c) *mutual accountability*.

Culture of Academic Optimism: Celebrating Success

Overall, certified faculty noted the importance of each student experiencing success and celebrating the academic and behavioral milestones as they occur. Described by Jordan, “Celebrating those small increments, targets of getting to the goal, are so important for the students to notice.” Jordan followed up with, “Celebration is very important. The whole class can get in on it and also send [students] out to celebrate with others.”

Celebrations were not limited to individual teachers, but a result of a building’s faculty which embraced student success. Julia expressed, “Even if the kids aren’t as successful in the classroom as they’d like to be, they are successful somewhere in the building. We all try to work together to make sure the kids are successful in some aspect.” This was also recognized in comments such as when Jane shared, “When we celebrate small progress towards goals it helps them to want to keep going and other kids see that. We have kids that come down to the counselor, the principal, and show the chart that they made. I think it helps with the ‘I can do it’ attitude.” Peyton acknowledged the impact each faculty and staff member has on student success, “We have the support of a literacy coach, counselors, and paraprofessionals that help teachers

and students become successful. By the end of the year, we have celebrated many achievements throughout the school year.”

Certified faculty responses aligned with the statements found within the staff handbook describing ways in which Heartland Elementary celebrates student and staff success. Collective commitments, which are the promises Heartland faculty and staff have made in regards to improved student outcomes, point to the importance of celebrations. “We promise to reflect on accomplishments, big and small, through recognition and celebration while sharing our success with the community and beyond” (Staff and Faculty Handbook, 2016). Furthermore, Professional Learning Communities Implementation Rubric identifies celebrating team success as a necessary component of effective collaborative teams.

Culture of Academic Optimism: Relational Trust

Faculty perceptions of Heartland Elementary’s organizational culture consistently noted trust between members of the learning community as an important element. Alice touched on the topic of relational trust among students and adults, stating, “The relationships between the students and the staff are also good in my opinion, you can tell there are positive relationships with the kids and adults and that it’s really special and unique about Sterling.” Adding to the discussion, Anna said, “It is every adult, not just every teacher. Custodians, paras, every adult in this building has at least one connection with students.” Additionally, a collective commitment within the Staff and Faculty Handbook (2016) identified building positive relationships with students as a key

component of Heartland Elementary's vision. "We will be a place that instills confidence in each other in order to define our individual and team successes."

Issues of relational mistrust among faculty, however, were evident within the data triangulation process. Results of PLC implementation rubric demonstrated the leadership team's experience related to school culture which expressed trust as the number one issue facing grade level collaborative teams. Missouri PLC Project Benchmark Assessment Tool (2016), a certified survey, identified the component, "the school-wide collaborative climate promotes sharing, reflection, and mutual support" as an area in which faculty had minimal agreement. Of significant importance, trust was referred to by focus group and interview participants as an obstacle to sustaining school improvement efforts. Julia addressed the topic of mistrust by stating, "When we were talking about trust with parents and students, we didn't talk about teacher to teacher. I'd say that is our biggest struggle in the building. If we could work through that, we could do anything." As a follow up, Jill expressed, "We have built trust with students and families but we need to work on the trust in each other and trust in our practices in order to be that highly effective school we are always striving to be." Considering actions to overcome the problem of relational mistrust, Peggy stated, "We need to build trust and part of that is that our staff is very veteran heavy, so the old teaching was you did your own thing and you had your data and no one looked at anything. So I think that opening up and saying I did this well but I would like a little assistance here. We aren't all there yet."

In alignment with focus group and interview responses, document analysis revealed the organization's commitment to increasing trust among faculty and staff. The

percentage of Heartland Elementary faculty marking strongly agree or agree on the issue of *Trust and Confidence (there is a feeling that people will do what's right between and across groups; no "us" vs. "them")* will increase as measured by the Missouri PLC Project Benchmark Assessment Tool (BAT).

Culture of Academic Optimism: Mutual Accountability

The PLC implementation rubric identified the certified leadership team's appreciation for a mutually accountable organization in which each member accepts responsibility for student academic achievement. Simply described, Piper stated, "We value each student as an individual and recognize that every student may learn differently and can benefit from different teachers teaching in different ways." Additionally, Piper added, "We have teachers and staff that put our student's education and safety first. Every adult in our building is dedicated to enriching our students lives and helping them to succeed."

The diverse faculty within Heartland Elementary was expressed in Janet's response, "We have a demographic of teachers in this building. We have experienced teachers and we have new teachers that come in with some great ideas and we all work together to come up with some great teaching and lesson plans." Furthermore, mutual accountability is reflected in Peggy's interview response, "A common belief we are trying to have is our one team, one goal, no limits. A common belief that I hope all people would have been that all kids can learn. I think sometimes it's harder for us because we have to change what we are doing in order for that to happen." Piper expressed similar sentiments, reflecting, "By having staff that believes all students can

achieve and grow academically is important, having a staff that has a positive attitude is another way. Having teachers and staff constantly reinforcing the teaching and learning that happens in our school.”

When asked about future improvements to the organization, Ali remarked, “This building continues to trust in a still fairly new leader and understand that we all come in with the best intentions, so be willing to change. Change is the biggest thing that helps any organization. Lack of change will make us stagnant.” In addition, Peggy stated, “We have an instructional leader that I think is doing a great job of holding people accountable.” When exploring mutual accountability and acceptance of organization change initiatives, Paige shared a concern by stating, “It’s okay to ask questions about new changes because staff may be just trying to understand and seeing how any changes fit in their world. Questions don't always mean negativity.” Piper described the correlation between mutual accountability and trust, expressing, “keeping accountability throughout all classrooms and grade levels will help build trust.”

Research Question One Sub Question One. Sub question one of the first research question is “What are the perceptions of certified faculty concerning the established or embedded culture of academic optimism with regard to academic emphasis?” Three themes emerged during analysis: (a) academic achievement; (b) goal setting; and (c) data analysis.

Academic Emphasis: Academic Achievement

The first theme echoed the phrase “all students” as it is commonly referenced within the documents as Heartland Elementary’s vision statement and the desire to create

an inclusive educational setting in which all students experience success. Peyton expressed, “We are dedicated to student achievement because we are constantly looking for ways to help students be academically successful. We are continually going to professional development workshops for ideas and looking at data to help us understand areas where students need further instruction or enrichment. Our motto continues in our belief that students can do anything. One team, one goal, no limits.” The Professional Learning Community Benchmark Assessment survey results indicated a large percentage of Heartland Elementary staff have strong beliefs that all students can achieve at high levels. The organizational beliefs are one aspect of culture impacting the establishment of academic optimism.

Student learning and achievement within Heartland Elementary was a frequent theme throughout data analysis, in which certified faculty echoed the importance of academic emphasis in closing the achievement gap. Similarly, Paige stated, “There is a true goal to meet the needs of every student whether academically or socially. Also, I think there are expectations and challenges, but a strong focus to reward achievement.” When demonstrating student support, the faculty and staff work in accordance to meet the needs of the building’s demographics. Piper described, “We get all staff involved in the learning process. We have specials teachers, paraprofessionals, and our social worker among the adults that are helping to teach core subjects shows our commitment that all students can learn.” To further demonstrate this belief, Peyton concluded, “We meet a variety of needs in our students. We also have an intervention time at the beginning of each school day where students receive small group.”

Heartland Elementary's structures for academic achievement are vast; however, planning and reflection on best practices continue to impact faculty in their quest to provide opportunities for all students. Piper expressed concern, "We have a variety of different platforms to teach in like small group opportunities, the use of technology, and specials to teach core subjects. I would like to see more opportunities for extracurricular activities. I believe that some of our students could benefit from opportunities outside of the traditional classroom setting to engage and grow." Anna reflected on the school-wide intervention time known as Growing Our Academic Leadership (G.O.A.L.) Time, "I think having a dedicated time, our G.O.A.L. time, is important to show growth, especially for our lower students. Having a time set aside each day for them is proof that we believe they all can learn."

Alice elaborated, "By giving the students different opportunities to let students show what they know, whether it's doing something on the iPad or writing it down, teachers give students opportunities for students to demonstrate how they can be successful. So that's how I think we show our belief that each student can learn." Janet went on to say how Heartland Elementary supports students with diverse demographics and skills sets, "Teachers are more willing to provide accommodation and modifications, and realize they aren't just for special education students anymore and can use them with any students that would need them."

Academic Emphasis: Goal Setting

The second theme referred to written and stated goals, both for the adults and students of Heartland Elementary. Goal setting provides a roadmap to academic success

and reflects the emphasis on student learning within the organization. Julia described the evidence of Heartland's high academic standards, "Building goals, essential learning standards, what our students need to know to be successful." Anna included, "Our wildly important goals we set as grade levels and as a building, we collaboratively as teachers sat down and decided what would be the most important thing, what had the most leverage to move them through life and we've monitored those specific skills and I think that's the academic piece we are looking forward to make sure they can move forward to the next grade and beyond."

While goal setting has been shown to increase Heartland Elementary students' motivation, faculty recognized that goals and the pace at which their children reach goals are diverse. This was brought to the forefront by Jill. "We work to make progress transparent for adults and students, and students feel more self-motivated to work towards reaching their goals. Not just reaching goals, but we help motivate each other for success, and it naturally leads to more performance on the goals." Paige mentioned, "Once a goal is achieved, the student feels successful and then moves on to achieve an even higher goal. There is also support and a push to become the best person or student they can be. We understand and recognize that each student will move at a different pace. We change the way we teach to accommodate learning."

Certified faculty's perceptions regarding academic performance supported the Faculty and Staff Handbook (2016) as Peyton reflected, "Heartland also sets high standards for academic performance by continuing to set goals for students and teachers. Students can achieve the goals set for them from small group or one-on-one repeated

practice. Teachers may also try different strategies in order for students to learn, such as manipulatives, hands-on learning, or modifications.” One instance of goal setting and monitoring occurs through the use of student’s data notebooks or binders. Audrey described the process, “We implemented data binders this past year and had students take ownership of their goals, so it’s not just teachers but students seeing where they are in setting their own goals and looking at their own documentation.” In addition, Julia mentioned, “It’s important for kids to set their own goals and with the use of data notebooks it will be important for kids to track their goals.”

Goal setting is modeled by Heartland Elementary faculty and staff as evidenced within the handbook. “We promise to guide students in setting goals while monitoring progress towards meeting high expectations academically and behaviorally” (Faculty and Staff Handbook, 2016). The handbook identifies academic goals in reading and math for students, as well as goals tied to the professional learning of the adults.

Academic Emphasis: Data Analysis

The third theme revealed participants’ understanding of data. Peyton shared the data cycle utilized by Heartland Elementary staff. “We spend time looking at data. This data may come from pre-tests and post-tests, SMART goals, STAR tests, or unit tests. From this data, we form small groups to work on specific areas of concern or expand on areas where students may excel. We continue these small groups all year while reorganizing the groups as students show success in Math and Communication Arts.”

Alice discussed the importance of displaying our data, “To improve our school it goes back to how we show academic success throughout our building and this upcoming

year we will have those opportunities where we show our Wildly Important Goal data in the hallways...I think once students are aware of our buildings academic success then their involvement will pick up. So I think publicizing our academic success will really help our school improve.” When it comes to supporting the diverse student population, Peggy noted, “We have our CARE Team. Where we have our students with academic concerns we work together. We keep data on them.”

Completed by Heartland Elementary’s leadership team, the Missouri PLC Implementation Rubric (2016) revealed, “relevant data has been identified, collected, and shared with appropriate staff in a manner that is easy to use and understand. School staff demonstrates an understand of these data points and why they have been selected.” It was evident that data collection and analysis were an integral part of Heartland’s academic emphasis.

Research Question One Sub Question Two. Sub question two of the first research question is “What are the perceptions of certified faculty concerning the established or embedded culture of academic optimism with regard to collective efficacy?” Data analysis revealed three frequent themes: (a) low confidence; (b) teamwork; and (c) peer learning.

Collective Efficacy: Low Confidence

Faculty touched on the self-confidence needed to close the achievement gap among a diverse student demographic. Anna expressed, “There’s lots of ups and downs, other days I wonder if I’m doing any good here. I think it depends. There are days when my confidence levels are high, and as an educator I know kids can learn. But there’s

always room for improvement.” Jill expressed her feelings by stating, “I think some days it can be overwhelming and you don’t feel like you can meet the needs of every student but when we are working together, working with the kids, or working with other professionals in the building, the confidence grows as we work as a team. We are helping all the kids.”

Analysis uncovered Heartland Elementary’s faculty’s need to share instructional strategies and engage in professional development as an alternative to feeling low confidence in the ability to help all students succeed. The Benchmark Assessment Tool completed by Heartland Elementary faculty indicated an area of concern associated with collective efficacy. Therefore, the building leadership crafted a goal leading to the increase on collective efficacy attributes among staff. Heartland Elementary faculty goals were found within the handbook (2016). The percentage of faculty marking deep or proficient implementation on *PLC team plans time to discuss effective teaching and teaching challenges (making engagement in shared learning a priority)* will increase from 66% to 80% by January 2017 as measured by the Missouri PLC Project Benchmark Assessment Tool (BAT) (2016). April referenced the human resources faculty can access in times of self-doubt, “I feel like my confidence, personally if it’s low, I feel like there are resources and people I can go to, even district wide, but especially within the building. We’ve got a good array of expertise.” Ali added to the conversation by stating, “We have to reach out to our resources and sometimes we forget that it can be a neighbor right next to us or a district resource, if we aren’t willing to swallow our pride when we hit a wall.” Jordan also expressed seeking human resources when feelings of low

confidence arise, “We take time to differentiate and encourage one another if they don’t quite know what to do. I know I could go for help to somebody.” Additionally, Piper suggested, “I would argue that some individuals may need more exposure to different ways to meet the needs of our students. I feel like all teachers and staff believe they are doing their best for the kids.”

Collective Efficacy: Teamwork

Jill described the cohesiveness of Heartland Elementary’s faculty and staff, “something special about Heartland is the group of adults that work together for the kids.” Jordan added to the conversation by stating, “What is really special is the team of adults because people work together to solve problems. I’ve needed some support at different times and there’s been people all over the building at different capacities that have come to my aide and made my job easier.”

Paige explained, “I think understanding differences and being okay with it. Knowing that it's okay to disagree, and move on. To say we are a team is different than acting on it. I think we all love what we do, but it's even better when we can have positive relationships with each other as a staff.” The Faculty and Staff Handbook acknowledge the school’s mission as, “At Heartland, we accept, appreciate, and challenge each other” (2016). Additionally, the organization’s vision statement represents underlying beliefs associated with collective efficacy and academic optimism, “Heartland Elementary will be a place where we celebrate our differences and instill confidence in each other, in order to define our individual & team successes” (Faculty

and Staff Handbook, 2016). Faculty perceptions of teamwork revealed during interview and focus group sessions aligned with document analysis.

Collective Efficacy: Peer Learning

One critical aspect of the Professional Learning Communities framework in support of collective efficacy concerns collaborative peer learning among teams. Alice described the welcoming feeling felt throughout Heartland Elementary, “[visitors] would feel welcomed into any classroom if they were curious about a lesson or activity. I don’t think any teacher would have a problem with visitors participating in the lesson, whether it was a brain break or other activity, along those lines.” Ali followed up with, “As adults we have to show the kids that we want collaborative learning. We see kids all the time using each other but then we forget that it’s just as necessary for the adults working with them.” Anna elaborated by stating, “Going back to our wildly important goals we set as grade levels and as a building, we, collaboratively as teachers, sat down and decided what would be the most important thing, what had the most leverage to move them through life and we’ve monitored those specific skills and I think that’s the academic piece we are looking forward to make sure they can move forward to the next grade and beyond.”

Piper expressed, “Collaborative professional development would help exhibit the fact that we are all a part of the student's journey and that there is accountability throughout all factions of the school.” Piper continued to elaborate, “I think more peer observation and setting aside time so that us teachers can collaborate, sharing of teaching strategies and ideas is super important. I think we talk about these big ideas and have great discussions over big concepts but the logistics and the sharing of resources gets

pushed to the side.” Peer learning, was also identified as an area of weakness on the annual Missouri PLC Project Benchmark Assessment Tool (2016), leading to the creation of a faculty and staff goal within the Heartland Elementary Faculty and Staff Handbook, “The percentage of faculty marking deep or proficient implementation on *the school-wide collaborative climate promotes sharing, reflection, and mutual support* will increase from 62% to 80% by January 2017” (2016).

Research Question One Sub Question Three. Sub question three of the first research question is “What are the perceptions of certified faculty concerning the established or embedded culture of academic optimism with regard to faculty trust in parents and students?” Themes which emerged throughout data analysis included: (a) relationships; (b) opportunities; and (c) involvement.

Faculty Trust in Parents and Students: Relationships

Throughout data analysis the concept of relationships reoccurred within discussion and document analysis. Heartland Elementary faculty referenced the importance of relationships with students and parents as a way to build trust leading to increased commitment. Heartland Elementary faculty and staff handbook reflected the organization’s continued commitment to student relationships, which is the foundation of trust “We promise to build positive relationships while seeing the unique talent in each student.” Peggy expressed, “We need to build the relationship with them and that’s through emails, phone calls, conversations, the activity nights we have at our school. Finding ways to do that and making sure you tell them it is a partnership, you and them

working with their child, Don't leave them out of...you know keep them updated on what's going on because they want to know."

When asked about faculty's trust in school parents, Jordan stated, "That will depend on the level of trust the parents have in the school. Even coming into the school some parents have had nothing but negative experiences when they were in school and coming to school themselves brings that all up, but it's obviously is going to be a different level. I think parents have as much commitment as they possibly can. Some are in survival mode and they can't do very much."

When asked to describe a committed parent Jordan added, "A parent that lets you know when their child is sick, if something is happening at home so you can be on the lookout for changes at school. A parent that checks to see how the grades are at any particular time. Right now I have a parent that has emailed me twice to tell me her daughter has been reading over the summer." Jane also expressed, "I think that the household itself plays a huge part in it, whether it's survival mode, we do have parents that don't value education as much because they didn't have a good experience." Later, Jill stated, "Sometimes our building needs to commit to parents to help the kids."

Jill addressed the need for all faculty and staff to continue to build student relationships, "The students I teach don't just need a relationship with me but they need to know that the school believes in me, that those teachers down the hall don't think I'm bad. That everyone here is voting for me and everyone is proud at what I accomplish, it's not just the kids in your own room." Peggy also reflected on student relationships stating, "You have to have a relationship and in order to do that you're going to have to

talk to the child outside of the regular school day. Give them eye contact when you are speaking to them. Call them by their name. We listen, just listening really well and validating how they feel at the moment.”

Julia took a different approach when describing her trust in students, “I want someone to trust me. We as teachers, staff, the minute a brand new student walks into the building we want them to trust us. We haven’t earned it. We haven’t done anything. We don’t have a relationship with us, so it has to be reciprocated immediately for us to have that we need to give it.” Data analysis revealed the need to build meaningful relationships leading to trust.

Faculty Trust in Parents and Students: Opportunities

Faculty revealed a desire to provide school families with additional opportunities to become involved in the education partnership. Piper expressed, “I think we need more than just a social worker to get involved with our families and I think we should have more opportunities to help parents understand the importance of their child's education.” Jill described an understanding of the unique family dynamics within Heartland Elementary, “I think we trust that all parents are doing the best they can for the kids. I think we also understand that may look different depending on the household, the dynamics of the household, but I think overall as a building we do trust that parents are doing what they can but it takes a little more from us as adults to help provide them with things to support a struggling learner or even a higher learner with things to push them further. I think that we do trust they do the best they can but we have to help support that best to make it even better.”

Opportunities for students were also expressed when Paige revealed, “We let students be leaders. We let students face challenges, overcome fears and confidence issues, and we let students share ideas.” Adding to the discussion, Peyton stated, “At this age, we trust or have faith in our students and their parents to find their niche. Most students will want to discover who they are and where their interests are.”

Jordan reflected that commitment varies depending on a parents’ past school experiences, “That will depend on the level of trust the parents have in the school. Even coming into the school some parents have had nothing but negative experiences when they were in school and coming to school themselves brings that all up. But it’s obviously is going to be a different level. I think parents have as much commitment as they possibly can. Some are in survival mode and they can’t do very much.” Realizing the faculty’s role in creating opportunities for building trust, Jill stated, “Another thing that goes with the parents’ level of commitment is the adults that work in the building. Sometimes as teachers if we don’t communicate what we are working on then that level of commitment is a little stagnant, because they don’t know how to help their kids or don’t know what they should be doing. Sometimes not obsessive communication, but if we put drops in their ear about little things they can do to help their child then that raises their level of commitment.”

Faculty Trust in Parents and Students: Involvement

Jill expressed the need to increase family engagement events during the school year, stating, “We do hold events that involve families throughout the year but I don’t think that is something we can stray away from. I think that if anything we should

increase those events. We have conferences at the end of 1st quarter, but maybe grade levels do something at the end of 2nd quarter. Build that over the course of the year.”

Peggy also mentioned family events or activities, “I think when it comes to parents and community relationships I think it is having things for them to come to and then attending ourselves and getting kids excited about coming.” On the other hand, Piper described, “I think many staff [members] don’t trust the parents. We have a large number of parents that are not involved. Whether it’s due to socioeconomic reasons or not enough opportunities to get parents involved, I believe we could improve this.”

When reflecting on the surrounding community’s commitment to Heartland Elementary, Peyton expressed, “I believe parents and students have a high level of commitment to Heartland which is demonstrated in our PTO group and our parent volunteers in classrooms. We also know our community is committed to our schools when we passed a levy and a bond to help with teacher salaries, programs, and maintaining our school buildings. Our community has always been committed to our schools.”

Jordan reflected a continued goal for Heartland Elementary as, “working on that disconnect with parents, and realizing it is still a team effort. They are their children’s biggest fans and we are too. It’s mutual. In trying to develop some type of strategies and outreach to pull parents in for academic purposes not just performances, our school and parents realize we need to focus on academics in this fast moving world and also to look beyond our school how do we maintain a consistency from one building to the next,”

Additionally, Julia expressed the importance of modeling social emotional behaviors, “I think we set high standards for academic performance by focusing on social skills and behaviors through our positive behavioral supports we have in place because I think kids who feel good and are behaving well thus will perform better academically. A lot of times people don’t focus on the direct tie to academic performance.”

Research Question Two

The second research question is, “What are the perceptions of classified staff concerning the established or embedded culture of academic optimism?” Five classified staff participated in a focus group discussion and one member answered questions during an interview, revealing the following themes: (a) relationships; (b) investing in students; and (c) celebrations.

Culture of Academic Optimism: Relationships

Heartland Elementary staff noted the visibility of adults building relationships with students. Parker observed, “I see some of the adults trying to build a relationship with a student one on one that would help that child become successful.” During the classified focus group discussion, Megan expressed, “I think we do a really good job of greeting everybody and making sure their needs are met before they leave the office and if they are walking around the building teachers are excited about their kids and what she was saying. The positive reinforcement.” Mindy added to Megan’s statement, “this past school year I felt we did the greeting right. Pretty much each student is greeted.” It is with the daily interactions between adults and students that classified staff perceive the relationships are created.

Culture of Academic Optimism: Investing in Students

In addition to building relationships, staff identified the need to invest in all students within Heartland Elementary. Parker stated, “The kids are the most important thing. We want to give them the best education we can.” Parker continued, “the way they [staff members] greet them in the morning, the lessons they prepare for them in their classrooms, how they are available to them any time of the day.” Megan described the school’s focus, “You are continually seeing it’s all about the kids and doing what’s best for them. Encouraging them daily.” Megan continued, “I noticed when students come in excited about something, [adults] are very much aware, and I’m intentional about it, taking that time to learn about them and know about them, talk to the teachers... It’s not just in the classroom. We are all invested.”

Culture of Academic Optimism: Celebrations

One way Heartland Elementary staff communicates their belief that students have the ability to achieve academically was expressed by Marie, “We celebrate the goals and constant achievement our students show.” Following up, Megan stated, “Our building is just warm and welcoming. We see quotes everywhere. Our student’s artwork is displayed. Just celebrating them [students], you see this all over our building.” Megan further explained, “All the celebrations that happen. There are different ways to celebrate kids. Whether it’s academic or behavior or sports, there are different ways to celebrate. I enjoy the positivity. Even though everyone has their own personality we can come together as a team and celebrate the successes.”

Research Question Two Sub Question One. Sub question one of the second research question is “What are the perceptions of classified staff concerning the established or embedded culture of academic optimism with regard to academic emphasis?” Themes which emerged during data analysis included: (a) student support; (b) goal setting; and (c) high expectations.

Academic Emphasis: Student Support

Supporting students was reflected within classified staff focus group and interview transcripts. When responding to the academic success of students, Megan expressed, “You see that everywhere in the building. Putting things on the wall you are continually seeing it’s all about the kids and doing what’s best for them. Encouraging them daily...we do a good job of displaying that all over and the teachers do a great job of doing it in their rooms as well.” Of significance, Parker stated, “We communicate with each other. I think the kids know that if something is going on not just one adult is going to know about it, we are all going to know about it. We work together to take care of situations. Communication is the biggest thing.” Megan expressed, “Experiencing the changes that are taking place. I think we have a high level of trust in students, but it goes along with expectations. We want you to do your best, we don’t want to point out all the negative. In encouraging them to be their best you will see more of them doing the right thing and it’s building their trust factor.”

Academic Emphasis: Goal Setting

Heartland Elementary’s vision of student success and school wide academic achievement is reflected in the theme of goal setting. Goals are referred to within staff

interview, focus group, and document analysis. When it comes to setting goals, Marie stated, “We are reaching for it and working with other teachers as a team to meet the needs of kids, sharing strategies to help other teachers as well.” Additionally, Mindy discussed, “I think it’s good to see not just the teachers are working with kids. If you know a kid is working on something you catch them in the hall. So not just the teachers having ownership of that is important too.” Furthermore, goal setting is established within classrooms as students utilize data binders to reflect personal academic and social growth (Faculty and Staff Handbook, 2016).

Academic Emphasis: High Expectations

Megan reflected on the academic standards set by Heartland Elementary’s faculty and staff by stating, “Right off the bat we set a high expectation. It’s not I hope you can do, but I expect you to do it, and I will do everything I can to help you get it. Just coming into [school] you feel the bar is set high and the kids are meeting that daily.” Increasing expectations when setting goals was described by Marie, “It’s good to make it harder throughout the year, so you aren’t just plateauing, I think a lot of kids struggle with having higher expectations.” Mindy added, “Have that moving finish line. Have a goal, but say great you’ve reached that point, but now let’s go there.”

Research Question Two Sub Question Two. Sub question two of the second research question is “What are the perceptions of classified staff concerning the established or embedded culture of academic optimism with regard to collective efficacy?” Frequent themes included: (a) faculty and staff relationships; (b) teamwork; and (c) ownership.

Collective Efficacy: Faculty & Staff Relationships

A collaborative culture should be modeled by the adults within Heartland Elementary as Mark expressed, “Investing in ourselves is investing in our students. Students can see it when there is tension. Having that relationships with staff is modeling it for them.” Mindy followed up by stating, “The relationships with the teachers. I know there can be groups of people and we need to work on that, kids can see it.” Additionally, Marie expressed, “I think the teachers really work well together.” Parker described what actions demonstrate a relationship between students and faculty, “With our presence and our positive attitudes. The way that we show we care and love them, just by our relationships.”

Collective Efficacy: Teamwork

Throughout data analysis the term team was mentioned by classified staff and is indicated as a common motto within Heartland Elementary’s Faculty and Staff Handbook (2016), “One team, one goal, no limits.” The collaborative culture reflective of teamwork was acknowledged as Marie stated, “We are working with other teachers as a team to meet the needs of kids, sharing strategies to help other teachers as well.” Adding to the conversation, Mindy reflected, “Investing in ourselves is investing in our students. Students can see it when there is tension. Having that relationship with staff is modeling it for them.” Mark offered, “I feel like the students know we go above and beyond so they’re more likely to step in and go overboard too.”

Collective Efficacy: Ownership

Classified staff acknowledged the inclusive nature of Heartland Elementary. In addition to classroom teachers, other staff members take ownership for student learning as Megan explained, “I think being my first year in the office I noticed when students come in excited about something. We are very much aware, and I’m intentional about it, taking that time to learn about them and know about them, talk to the teachers. We are doing certain things in the office to draw out those kids I enjoy being a part of that. It’s not just in the classroom, we are all invested.” Mindy shared, “It’s good to see not just the teachers are working with kids. If you know a kid is working on something you catch them in the hall. So not just the teachers having ownership of that is important too.” Document analysis of the Missouri PLC Implementation Rubric (2016) indicated Heartland’s collective responsibility as a strength. Additionally, success for all students is embedded in the systematic intervention process in which certified faculty and classified staff participate.

Research Question Two Sub Question Three. Sub question three of the second research question is “What are the perceptions of classified staff concerning the established or embedded culture of academic optimism with regard to faculty trust in parents and students?” Classified staff identified two themes during interview and focus group participation: (a) positive relationships; and (b) communication.

Faculty Trust in Parents and Students: Positive Relationships

Mindy reflected on the historical context of student trust when building relationships, “I think we are moving in the right direction of catching them being good, but it’s coming from a long history of catching them being bad, so we are turning that

corner.” Megan added to the thought by including, “Just in my year of being here and hearing how it used to be, but experiencing the changes that are taking place. I think we have a high level of trust in students, but it goes along with expectations. We want you to do your best, we don’t want to point out all the negative. In encouraging them to be their best you will see more of them doing the right thing and it’s building their trust factor.” Marie added, “more positivity they will be better behaved.” Ways in which staff create a context for positive relationships was mentioned by Parker, “Keep going back to them, encouraging them, and giving them positive signs.”

In addition to teacher and staff relationships, families also work towards creating a culture of trust as Megan stated, “I think we need continual encouragement in cultivating the relationships with families, making the time and effort to be present so they are fully aware of what our goals are and that we want their kids to be successful. Continue to reach out with communication and be available.”

Faculty Trust in Parents and Students: Communication

Classified staff perceived communication as a means of trust among Heartland Elementary staff and parents. The school frequently highlights students within social media as Mindy explained, “I think it’s important that when you see work or pictures on Facebook, Twitter it’s not always the same kids. Not just a teacher’s kid or school board member’s kid, but it’s every kid so you can go through and see all kids being recognized at least once throughout the school year.” Mindy followed up with, “I think all the Facebook posts and tweeting has put us out there, even in the community. So if a parent is asked about us they may want to go check it out. It’s made a huge difference,

highlighting not just teachers or students, but it's a really good mix, custodians, everyone is out there.”

Communication leading to increased interest and excitement is of great importance according to classified staff. Megan shared, “In the past there didn't seem to be a high level of interest, for parents or students. But I think with all the changes we are making, it's been a change in such a way that it's caught their attention. We've gotten creative in how we present it to parents and teachers present it to students, and they are getting excited. You can tell the level of wanting to be here is high. Kids are excited to come here and parents are excited to send their kids here. I think all of the new things we are doing as a school has had a huge positive effect to that.” Classified staff perceived increased parent interest as leading to improved relationships and trust building.

Research Question Three

The third research question of the qualitative case study is, “What cultural components influence the development of academic optimism?” Participant responses and document analysis were based on the organizational cultural components of artifacts, beliefs and values, as well as assumptions. Repeated themes were extracted from each component to provide a thorough description of the established culture within Heartland Elementary.

Artifacts. Certified and classified staff frequently identified artifacts, visible within the physical environment, depicting Heartland Elementary's commitment to student achievement. The emerging themes related to cultural artifacts were: (a) encouraging displays; (b) documentation of learning; (c) and structure.

Encouraging Displays

Within Heartland Elementary, encouraging displays add the cultural artifacts of the school. Peyton said, “You see student achievements everywhere-writings, art, or the Student of the Month bulletin board.” Mark described another element of cultural artifacts, “I like the glass cases with pictures in it, it demonstrates we do care about the kids and how active they are.” Adding to Mark’s comment, Megan expressed, “Our building is just warm and welcoming. We see quotes everywhere, our student’s artwork is displayed, just celebrating them [students]. You see this all over our building.” Mindy offered, “I think you see that everywhere in the building. Putting things on the wall you are continually seeing it’s all about the kids and doing what’s best for them. Encouraging them daily. I think we do a good job of displaying that all over and the teachers do a great job of doing it in their rooms as well.” Audrey described the cultural climate of Heartland Elementary by stating, “We walk in the building it’s bright. That’s one of the things I noticed when I moved into the building to teach. It’s bright and light. It enhances the culture because it’s welcoming, it’s just very positive.”

Documentation of Learning

Elements of student learning are represented through artifacts as referenced by certified faculty and classified staff during focus group and interview discussions.

Observing student interactions, Peyton stated, “When a visitor enters our building, they would see many students engaged in a variety of learning situations, such as hands-on learning, small group or whole group instruction, or just quietly reading or writing.”

Alice referred to the visible culture within Heartland Elementary, expressing, “I think that

a visitor would see if they got far enough into the building a lot of documentation of learning and fun, with pictures and documents that are displayed and even without talking to anybody they would have a feeling of comradery with what's just on the walls.” Furthermore, Heartland Elementary Faculty and Staff Handbook (2016) outlined building goals, or Wildly Important Goals (W.I.G.s), which indicate student progress, as mentioned by Parker, “[Visitors] would see our W.I.G.s, our data wall.” It is the public display of goal setting and progress monitoring that acts as an artifact of student learning.

Structure

A historical and symbolic element within Heartland Elementary is the concept that the building previously acted as the district's high school and middle school, in which artifacts still remain. Megan reacted to the structural setting of Heartland Elementary, “pulling up to the building you're like ugh it's the old high school building but once you walk in it feels like an elementary building.” Piper described the physical layout of Heartland Elementary, stating, “A visitor would see a clean and traditional high school transformed into an elementary. Lockers adorn the walls and it doesn't necessarily look like an elementary building upon first impressions, however the tone and sounds of a traditional elementary come through.” Agreeing with the statement, Peyton said, “The visitor would hear the noises of an elementary school students working or reading together, teachers organizing classroom instruction, students engaged in whatever is going on in the classroom

Beliefs and Values. In expressing one's perceptions of the organizational culture at Heartland Elementary the beliefs and values held by its members transpire. The beliefs

and values of certified faculty and classified staff were uncovered through the following themes: (a) appreciation; (b) positive relationships; and (c) adult engagement.

Appreciation

As referenced within the Faculty and Staff Handbook (2016), Heartland Elementary aspires to appreciate the contributions of each member of the learning community and value the diversity among its student population. Piper expressed, “Having staff that believes all students can achieve and grow academically is important. Having teachers and staff constantly reinforcing the teaching and learning that happens in our school.” Alice revealed how Heartland Elementary demonstrates an appreciation of student uniqueness, stating, “Giving the students different opportunities to let students show what they know. Whether it’s doing something on the iPad or writing it down, teachers give students opportunities to demonstrate how they can be successful. That’s how we show our belief that each student can learn.” Ali added to the conversation, “We demonstrate that by our wide scope of what we help children learn. It is not always reading, math, and writing.” Heartland Elementary understands that academics are only part of the learning process, as Aubrey expressed, “Not only do we teach academics but social skills and behavior skills. We recognize in those areas, there’s recognition for every child no matter what they are learning.”

Positive Relationships

Maintaining positive relationships with students is a common belief among Heartland faculty and staff. Piper expressed, “Every adult in our building is dedicated to enriching our students lives and helping them to succeed.” When reflecting on the

culture of the school, Alice stated, “I like the energy, something’s always happening, everyone is upbeat.” Adding to the conversation, April identified the bond between members of the learning organization, “The relationships between the students and the staff are also good in my opinion. You can tell there are positive relationships with the kids and adults and that it’s really special and unique about us.” As a follow up, Anna offered, “I think it is every adult, not just every teacher. Custodians, paras, every adult in this building has at least one connection with students.” Parker expressed the incentives students receive as a form of motivation, “There are class trophies they can earn by doing the best at an assembly. There are trophies for things they can earn like basketball with the principal. It motivates them to keep going. So showing students we believe in them, I think we talk to them and encourage them, and show them they can keep going. The next step to kind of build off of.”

Adult Engagement

Jill referred to the ease with which adults work together by expressing, “I think the feeling is kind of like a cohesive feeling anywhere you go. Even though you might see something wrong with a student you will always feel that sense of working together to find a solution, and they will see a variety in instructional practice and relationships.” Ali included what she values within Heartland Elementary, “It’s always changing. That is what I like the best about our school, always willing to try new things, to get better, be creative, for kids.”

Paige described the feelings as she enters the building, “[Visitors] would see all staff talking with students. Just simple friendly conversations always giving a little time

to see how students are doing. You would see students and staff moving with purpose. You would see staff supporting each other. I believe visitors would feel welcome and comfortable. I know as a parent, I would think to myself, I'm glad this is where my child spends their days." Jill commented on the collective effort demonstrated by Heartland Elementary faculty and staff, "I think teachers are always going the extra mile to consult others for help. I think part of showing we believe students can learn that we take the extra time to support to kids. Even if it's an adult that isn't necessarily with the student at all hours of the day they are still working with everyone as best they can. I think that as professionals we won't say they can't do it, we will always figure out ways to help them."

Assumptions. The cultural assumptions held by members of an organization represent unconscious perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. Data analysis revealed the following themes: (a) adult learning; (b) inclusiveness; and (c) perseverance.

Adult Learning

Audrey described the basis of Heartland Elementary's professional development or adult learning, "When thinking about our academic standards...I remember the book studies we did to set those high academic standards. It's not just a whim, it's published whether in a journal or research we are looking beyond our own collective ideas."

Audrey, acknowledged the efforts in which adults address diverse student needs during instruction, stating, "One thing I notice is that when I walk down the hallway by myself there are always different things happening in classrooms. You will see some classrooms where it's very focused silent time and another classroom where it might be sort of a

ruckus with learning going on and games, and a lot of interaction, and then another classroom might just be intermediate. You see a variety of things going on which I think speaks to the school and how we are trying to reach each person where they are. It all stems down to helping each child progress to where they are right now.”

Parker touched on a concern when reflecting on the resistance to new learning, “As far as academics...we need to continue to step outside of our box a little bit and make sure we know what the instructional practices are and we are trying to do what is the best practice even if we’ve been teaching for a long time. Maybe you just started teaching but you know what is appropriate instruction.”

Inclusiveness

An underlying assumption of Heartland Elementary’s Professional Learning Community lies within its belief that all students can learn. Members of the organization embraced an inclusive culture as described by Piper, “We value each student as an individual and recognize that every student may learn differently and can benefit from different teachers teaching in different ways.” Adding to the discussion, Paige stated, “There is a true goal to meet the needs of every student whether academically or socially. Also, I think there are expectations and challenges, but a strong focus to reward achievement.” Additionally, Peyton responded, “They would feel confident about the experiences that the students are receiving and that the teachers really care about every single student.” Ideally, Peyton continued, “It’s not the building that is special, it’s the people. From the teachers, principals, custodians to the students, we continue to be a school where people work together to help all students feel inclusive and successful.”

Perseverance

The desire to continue on the Professional Learning Communities journey, despite occasional failure and times of doubt, was described by Paige, “Giving [students] many ways to be successful and celebrating their progress.” Similarly, Peyton shared, “I think the next step is to continue working hard for student achievement as we have already been doing. We will continue with new ideas, new approaches, and collectively working towards student goals, as well as building goals.” Audrey identified how faculty and staff members respond when students are not learning, “We just don’t settle. If someone is not progressing we try to find another way to help them, so we have goal time interventions, and small groups, or sending a student to another classroom that might work better there. It seems like Heartland is open to a lot of different options and the thing is we just don’t settle for no growth. We are constantly trying to get everyone to learn.” In order to establish a perseverance mindset in students, Alice expressed, “One way students can achieve goals are by getting a lot of encouragement from their teacher. We set goals for them and with them. But just saying hey you’re doing a good job can go a long way.”

Reflection of Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

The purpose and design of this research study, identifying cultural components related to closing the academic achievement gap among Heartland Elementary’s student subgroups with respect to socio-economic status, was filtered through the lens of academic optimism. Academic optimism and its related components have served as the central framework for the purpose of this study and are supported through qualitative data analysis and findings. The embedded and established constructs of academic emphasis,

collective efficacy, and faculty trust in students and parents will be addressed and supported with evidence within this section.

The rationale behind studying Heartland's culture is described by Peterson and Deal (2009), "Culture affects all aspects of a school. It influences informal conversations in the faculty lunchroom, the type of instruction valued, how professional development is viewed, and the shared commitment to ensuring all students learn" (p. 12). Additionally, research supports a relationship between an organizational culture of academic optimism and student achievement (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004; Hoy, 2012; Hoy & Tarter, 2011; Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006; Smith & Hoy, 2007). As discussed earlier in this research study, Heartland Elementary is an active participant in Professional Learning Community implementation. In order to implement PLC's with fidelity, faculty and staff should engage in a collaborative culture, reflective of an organization rife with collective efficacy. Specifically, organizational attributes associated with academic optimism acknowledges to the capacity of the group, or collective efficacy, at maintaining high levels of student achievement (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004). With consideration given to the changing student demographics and the vision of learning for all, maintaining a culture of academic optimism will lead the school in closing the academic achievement gap.

This research study provides an in depth look into the perceptions of certified faculty and classified staff within Heartland Elementary surrounding the established and embedded culture. When sharing her notion of the school's strengths, Piper stated, "We value each student as an individual and recognize that every student may learn differently

and can benefit from different teachers teaching in different ways.” Additionally, Piper added, “We have teachers and staff that put our student’s education and safety first. Every adult in our building is dedicated to enriching our students lives and helping them to succeed.”

Discussion

Qualitative discussion

The qualitative analysis of this research study provided a glimpse into the perceptions of certified faculty and classified staff regarding the culture of academic optimism within Heartland Elementary. The research revealed how the implementation of Professional Learning Communities within Heartland Elementary aligns with aspects of academic optimism. Additionally, data established elements of academic emphasis which support the efforts of faculty and staff in maintaining a culture which valued achievement for all students.

Through focus group and interview discussions, analysis unveiled evidence of the first construct of academic optimism, academic emphasis. Peyton, expressed, “We are dedicated to student achievement because we are constantly looking for ways to help students be academically successful. We are continually going to professional development workshops for ideas and looking at data to help us understand areas where students need further instruction or enrichment. Our motto continues in our belief that students can do anything, one team, one goal, no limits.” Peggy noted, “We have our CARE Team, where we have our students with academic concerns we work together, we keep data on them.” Megan reflected, “Right off the bat we set a high expectation, it’s

not I hope you can do, but I expect you to do it, and I will do everything I can to help you get it. Just coming into [school] you feel the bar is set high and the kids are meeting that daily.”

In relationship to the second construct, collective efficacy, data analysis revealed the organizational concerns surrounding mistrust. Jill expressed her feelings by stating, “I think some days it can be overwhelming and you don’t feel like you can meet the needs of every student but when we are working together, working with the kids, or working with other professionals in the building, the confidence grows as we work as a team. We are helping all the kids.” Piper expressed, “Collaborative professional development would help exhibit the fact that we are all a part of the student's journey and that there is accountability throughout all factions of the school.” Mark expressed, “Investing in ourselves is investing in our students, students can see it when there is tension, having that relationships with staff is modeling it for them.”

What is significant to the research is the recurring theme of mistrust within the construct of collective efficacy. Julia addressed the topic of mistrust by stating, “I’d say that is our biggest struggle in the building. If we could work through that, we could do anything.” Touching on how a culture of mistrust negatively impacts collective efficacy, Jill expressed, “We have built trust with students and families but we need to work on the trust in each other and trust in our practices in order to be that highly effective school we are always thriving to be.” Reflecting on the faculty and staff experiences, Peggy stated, “We need to build trust and part of that is that our staff is very veteran heavy, so the old teaching was you did your own thing and you had your data and no one looked at

anything. So I think that opening up and saying I did this well but I would like a little assistance here. We aren't all there yet.”

Qualitative data analysis revealed the perceptions of faculty and staff to the construct of faculty trust in students and parents. Piper described, “I think many staff [members] don't trust the parents. We have a large number of parents that are not involved, whether it's due to socioeconomic reasons or not enough opportunities to get parents involved, I believe we could improve this.” Megan expressed, “Just in my year of being here and hearing how it used to be, but experiencing the changes that are taking place. I think we have a high level of trust in students, but it goes along with expectations we want you to do your best. We don't want to point out all the negative. In encouraging them to be their best you will see more of them doing the right thing and it's building their trust factor.” Julia addressed trust with students, “I want someone to trust me. We as teachers, staff, the minute a brand new student walks into the building we want them to trust us. We haven't earned it. We haven't done anything. They don't have a relationship with us, so it has to be reciprocated immediately. For us to have that, we need to give it.” The uncovered perceptions of collective efficacy would have an impact on students' academic achievement.

The results revealed through qualitative data collection and analysis impact Heartland Elementary as well as additional educational organizations seeking to establish a culture consistent with academic optimism. This research study supports the significance that faculty and staff perceptions of cultural elements have a profound impact on the functioning of the school. Faculty and staff perceptions, along with

document analysis, raised the concern of mutual trust among members of Heartland Elementary. Without mutual trust, collective efficacy will cease to transpire, ultimately impacting the ability of the organization to overcome the effects of poverty in relation to students' academic achievement.

Recommendations

After qualitative data analysis revealed the perceptions of certified faculty and classified staff concerning the established and embedded culture two focus areas for future maintenance of academic optimism was provided. Within the focus areas are recommendations specific to the organizational culture of Heartland Elementary. Each focus aligns with the professional learning community's philosophy leading to the closing of the academic achievement gap which evolved with the changing student demographics of the organization.

The members of Heartland Elementary's organization revealed significant evidence related to the school's implementation of a culture consistent with academic emphasis. Elements of academic emphasis and the school's focus on the achievement and learning of students were evident based on personal narratives disclosed during the focus group and interview discussions. Academic emphasis is just one construct of the overarching theory of academic optimism, and it is one that cannot stand alone when educational organizations seek to improve the culture in an effort to close achievement gaps among student subgroups.

The evidence also pinpointed a lack of trust among certified and classified staff, which has a negative impact on the organizational member's ability to collaborate,

minimizing the effects of collective efficacy. Collective efficacy, the belief that members of the organization have a positive impact on student learning, is referenced by researcher John Hattie (Dewitt, 2015) as having one of the largest effect sizes when examining its impact on student learning.

Focus Area

The researcher recommends Heartland Elementary prioritize actions leading to the establishment of mutual trust, a necessary a component of creating and sustaining collective efficacy. Described by Goddard, Hoy, and Woolfolk (2004), “For schools, perceived collective efficacy refers to the judgment of teachers in a school that the faculty as a whole can organize and execute the courses of action required to have a positive effect on students,” (p. 7). Therefore, building a culture of collective efficacy will align with the organization’s prior commitment to the implementation of a Professional Learning Community, which carries the belief that all students are capable of learning at high levels.

Essentially, Bandura (1997) and Goddard, Hoy, and Woolfolk (2004) identified practices which support the organizational development of collective efficacy, with one being mastery experiences. Heartland Elementary encourages adult learning through the use of professional development practices. Such an emphasis on learning can assist in the improvement of collective efficacy. Specifically, Goddard, Hoy, and Woolfolk (2004) portrayed,

Teachers as a group experience successes and failures. Past school successes build teachers’ beliefs in the capability of the faculty, whereas failures tend to

undermine a sense of collective efficacy. If success is frequent and too easy, however, failure is likely to produce discouragement. A resilient sense of collective efficacy requires experience in overcoming difficulties through persistent effort. (p. 5)

Connecting prior successes such as rises in standardized test scores, higher levels of reading and math achievement, or an increase in goal attainment will build upon faculty and staff's perception of efficacy.

A second approach used to increase the collective efficacy of a group, and one which aligns with organizational learning, is vicarious experiences, or observing similar organizations and emulating their success. Heartland Elementary would benefit from studying educational organizations which experienced improved academic achievement for all students, especially those from SES demographics. Additionally, peer observations would enhance the perceptions of faculty and staff efficacy, and lead to replication of successful initiatives, instructional strategies, or systems of support.

Recommendation one. To address concerns associated with mutual trust it is recommended that Heartland Elementary build upon shaping the collective efficacy of its faculty and staff through the use of mastery and vicarious experiences among its members. Fostering a sense of collaboration will address both mastery and vicarious experiences while supporting the central tenant of Professional Learning Communities. Therefore, restructuring elements of a teacher's' day to day functioning and providing them with further opportunities to collaborate with colleagues begins to establish a feeling of professionalism, thus improving the collective confidence of grade level teams.

Engaging in discussions and observations surrounding shared instructional practices will enhance the feeling of teamwork and communication, leading to stronger relationships. However, in order to create mutual trust, relationships must be built surrounding a shared vision of student success within Heartland Elementary. Implementing time for faculty and staff to participate in meaningful professional development, collegial conversations, and peer observations will create a culture of professionalism leading to self and collective efficacy beliefs.

Recommendation two. In continuing to build the culture of collective efficacy among faculty and staff, a second recommendation is provided to coincide with option one. The leadership team within Heartland Elementary will want to create an action plan as to how to promote shared decision making leading to goal creation and attainment. Encouraging experimentation in relation to student learning was described by Goddard, Hoy, and Woolfolk (2004),

The more teachers have the opportunity to influence instructionally relevant school decisions, the more likely a school is to be characterized by a robust sense of collective efficacy...Schools that formally turn over instructionally relevant school decisions to teachers tend to have higher levels of perceived collective efficacy. Collective efficacy beliefs, in turn, foster commitment to school goals and gains in student achievement. (p. 10)

Providing faculty and staff with the resources and support necessary for experimentation, instructional decision making, and goal setting will garner higher levels of buy-in when implementing school side change initiatives.

Additional Focus

In order to enhance Heartland Elementary's collective efficacy the creation of organizational frameworks surrounding what Goddard, Hoy, and Woolfolk (2004) described as social persuasion and affective state, would need to take place. Seemingly, organizational culture is assessed through artifacts, beliefs and values, as well as assumptions.

Members within an organization can influence elements of culture through formal and informal conversations in faculty lounges, lunchrooms, hallways, and offices. A focus on the optimistic beliefs or positive outcomes of the school can lead to increased collective efficacy. Specifically, Goddard, Hoy, and Woolfolk (2004) explained, "Social persuasion is another means of strengthening a faculty's conviction that it has the capabilities to set and achieve goals. Talks, workshops, professional development opportunities, and feedback about achievement can inspire action" (p. 6).

The importance of an organization's affective states assumes organizations, much like individuals, react to stress. Demonstrating a strong sense of collective efficacy requires an organization to persevere in light of challenges or setbacks. Meanwhile, the effects of outside influences on the morale or affective state of a school is described by Goddard, Hoy, and Woolfolk (2004),

Past performance on state-mandated tests, which is typically widely publicized, plays a key role in influencing the mood of local schools. Organizations with strong beliefs in group capability can tolerate pressure and crises and continue to

function without debilitating consequences; indeed, such organizations learn to rise to the challenge when confronted with disruptive forces. (p. 6)

In comparison, organizations which react to challenges with pessimism and a fixed mindset, struggle to maintain the momentum for system wide improvement. Therefore, Heartland Elementary must find ways to implement a deeper level of collective efficacy when faced with changes in student demographics.

Recommendation three. It is recommended that Heartland Elementary continuously revisit the school's vision, mission, and collective commitments to engage in a shared understanding of organizational goals. In doing so, the organization will be immersed in language representative of the collective impact on student achievement. It is with the promotion and defense of the school vision in which faculty and staff perceive they have the ability to overcome influences outside of the school setting, such as SES. Ideally, conversations surrounding past achievements directly tied to the school's vision, mission, and collective commitments will influence faculty and staff's perceptions concerning their impact on student learning. The leader and leadership team should recognize, celebrate, and promote the actions of faculty and staff which align to the shared beliefs of the organization.

Recommendation four. Heartland Elementary should strive to effectively implement Professional Learning Communities which will require a leader or leadership team to shape the culture in which meaningful and sustainable improvement can flourish. While celebrating actions consistent with the creation of a culture of academic optimism, of equal importance, the leader should be willing to confront behaviors which have a

detrimental effect on organizational culture. Therefore, faculty and staff will come to understand the cultural artifacts, beliefs, values, and assumptions which are celebrated and confronted. It is through the confronted components of Heartland Elementary's culture that change regarding collective efficacy will take shape. The leader then must develop confidence by inspiring and motivating reluctant faculty and staff regarding the closing of the academic achievement gap.

Implications for School Leaders

From the research it appears that each construct of academic optimism (academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust in parents and students) has the capacity to influence organizational culture. Therefore, if a school leader intends to effect a change of culture they will seek strategies in the establishment of academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust in parents and students. Schools which operate under the guise of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) will already have specific protocols for data analysis, goal setting, and evidence based instructional strategies as they are imperative for a culture of academic emphasis. Additionally, a central tenant of a PLC culture is that of collective efficacy. In order for faculty and staff to believe in its collective ability to increase students' academic achievement despite external variables, such as poverty or low socioeconomic status, mutual trust and shared vision will need need to be present. One way in which a school leader can increase the collective efficacy within the organization is to provide low risk opportunities for peer learning and coaching. Finally, increasing faculty trust in parents and students, specifically among families living in poverty, will occur through the use of home visit. School leaders,

faculty, and staff which engage in positive home visits focused on a child centered partnership, strengthens relationships and establishes mutual trust.

Direction for Future Research

Limitations are a part of any research study. The limitations within this qualitative case study include relying on qualitative data sets, time constraints for data collection, limited number of participants, and researching the culture within one Missouri elementary school. The selection of qualitative data limited the breadth of the research study as it solely focused on the perceptions of faculty and staff without further analysis. Furthermore, this research study was designed to capture the perceptions of certified faculty and classified staff within one Missouri public elementary school, limiting the number of participants. Therefore, the study was specific to the organizational culture of the elementary school in question. This study is unable to be replicated in other settings.

Time was a limitation to the research process. The researcher was able to collect data on the faculty and staff's perceptions of the current organizational culture as it relates to the establishment and maintenance of academic optimism across several months. Additional time would have provided the researcher with further examples of the constructs related to academic optimism as the faculty and staff are in the midst of professional learning communities training.

The researcher facilitating the study is a certified faculty member hired as the principal of Heartland Elementary. The relationship the researcher has with certified faculty and classified staff is a limitation to the implementation of the study and the

analysis of the results. Therefore, researcher bias was accounted for throughout the study.

Future research opportunities for expanding the study to include additional elementary schools and increasing the length of the study were discovered through the limitations. The results extracted from the study provide the framework for future research opportunities on the elements of school culture.

Summary

Despite the limitations which occurred during the research study the findings can be utilized to create a deeper level of a culture of academic optimism within Heartland Elementary. The study revealed evidence that the construct of academic emphasis was a cornerstone for school improvement and implemented at high levels. Additionally, limitations with data collection provided minimal evidence of faculty trust in students and parents, concerns surrounding the mutual trust of the organization's members emerged. However, even with a culture embracing academic emphasis, Heartland Elementary has areas in which to grow.

In relation to the effects of poverty, the results of the research pinpoint organizational constructs that have a positive effect in meeting the needs of all students. Closing the poverty academic achievement gap will occur when Heartland Elementary increases its collective efficacy, while sustaining academic emphasis and faculty trust. A continuance of the PLC components in addition to the provided recommendation will assist in overcoming the external effects of poverty on student achievement.

The data analyzed unveiled the need to enhance the collective efficacy of the school's faculty and staff. The results uncovered throughout the research will provide a framework for future research interests surrounding a culture of academic optimism at the elementary school level.

CHAPTER FIVE:
CONTRIBUTION TO SCHOLARSHIP

Submission Ready Journal Article

Dennis Shirley, Editor-in-Chief,

Please accept this article submission for review in the upcoming issue of *Journal of Educational Change*. The attached article aligns with the journal's primary purpose of examining educational change in relation to economic and cultural forces. Your journal is a staunch advocate for addressing issues impacting education, while providing readers with best practice tools when experiencing the positive, and often critical, aspects of change. I want to assure you of the manuscript's fit with your journal's mission surrounding educational change.

This submission provides an in-depth look into the organizational culture of a Midwest elementary school experiencing a change in student demographics. Specifically, the article is based on a qualitative research design for the purpose of highlighting school cultural factors that make a difference in closing the achievement gap in regards to the socio-economic factors which are powerful influencers when it comes to student achievement.

Please review this submission as it adheres to the 4,000-8,000-word format request. Additionally, this article reviews current literature and adds to the body of knowledge surrounding the impact academic optimism has on closing the academic achievement gap among students living in poverty.

As the author, I am a third year principal at Sterling Elementary school, the setting for the study and focus of the article submission. Prior to my leadership position I worked for twelve years as an elementary teacher serving students in second grade, first

grade, and as a special education teacher. My research focus is to continue to identify avenues through which students receive equitable educational opportunities.

Thank you,
Christine Johnson, Ed. D.
Principal
Sterling Elementary School
522 East Gay Street
Warrensburg, MO 64093
660-747-7478
cjohnson@warrensburgr6.org

Title
Establishing a culture of academic optimism in response to changing student demographics

Christine M. Johnson, Ed. D.
Sterling Elementary School
522 East Gay Street
Warrensburg, MO 64093
(660) 747-7478
(660) 747-9400
cjohnson@warrensburgr6.org

I am a third year principal at Sterling Elementary school, the setting for the study and focus of the article submission. Previously, I worked for twelve years as an elementary teacher serving students in second grade, first grade, and as a special education teacher. Abstract

Abstract

This article is created from a qualitative case study which studied the established and embedded culture of one elementary school experiencing changes in student demographics. The identification of cultural components effective in closing the academic achievement gap among students living in poverty and their more affluent peers was the basis for the research. The conceptual framework for this study is academic optimism, which falls under the broader theory of positive psychology (Hoy & Tarter, 2011; Peterson, Park, & Sweeney, 2008; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The three constructs of academic optimism were extracted during the research, which included academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust in parents and students (Hoy & Tarter, 2011; Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006).

Key Words

Academic optimism, academic emphasis, collective efficacy, faculty trust, organizational culture

Abbreviations

ESSA: Every Student Succeeds Act

PLC: Professional Learning Community

SES: Socio-economic status

Introduction

In the United States, the gaps in academic achievement among poor and advantaged students are substantial (Harris, 2009; Jensen, 2009; Muhammad, 2015). A

targeted approach to closing the poverty achievement gap occurred when the reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965*, known as the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 (McKinnon, 2012), addressed the notion of adequate yearly progress for all students, to include those categorized within sub groups. At the time NCLB (2001) was introduced, the United States was unconsciously and systematically creating inequalities within the public education system, resulting in a visible achievement gap (Muhammad, 2015).

The *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA, 2015) reauthorized the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965* (ESEA) and replaced the NCLB Act of 2001. Similarly, the bill addressed issues such as accountability and testing requirements, intended to further the United States interest in eradicating the achievement gap within public schools (Muhammad, 2015). Despite an awareness to ensure achievement for all students, NCLB (2001) and ESSA (2015) had unintended outcomes: (a) teachers had a diminished efficacy in their ability to teach all learners; (b) organizational pressure to increase yearly performance created a sense of pessimism; and (c) public recognition of school's deficiencies and weaknesses reduced morale (Brown, Benkovitz, Muttillio, & Urban, 2011; McKinnon, 2012).

A pessimistic school culture carried a disbelief in the ability of its staff to overcome the socio-economic barriers of its students (Brown, Benkovitz, Muttillio, & Urban, 2011; Hoy & Tarter, 2011; Muhammad, 2009), and is not conducive for students of poverty to be successful. The urgency for schools to demonstrate adequate yearly progress on measures of standardized tests may have influenced educational leaders to

place less emphasis on developing a healthy, optimistic organization, to that of depleting funds on test scores (McKinnon, 2012). While past research (Coleman, 1968) exuded the notion that school characteristics are unable to overcome the effects of poverty and family background, educational stakeholders have exhausted resources and energy to identify characteristics which benefit the academic achievement of all students (Hoy & Tarter, 2011; Jenson, 2009; Muhammad, 2015). The academic achievement disparities between increasingly diverse student populations create a moral obligation to enact change benefiting all students. (Fullan, 2003; Muhammad, 2015).

Schools have an expectancy to increase access and opportunity for all students, specifically closing the poverty achievement gap as a means of providing an equitable education (Brown, Benkovitz, Muttillio & Urban, 2010; Harris, 2009; Muhammad, 2015). Socioeconomic factors are powerful influencers when it comes to student achievement; however, this article will highlight school cultural factors that make a difference in closing the achievement gap (Jacobson, 2008; Jensen, 2009; Lacour, & Tissington, 2011; Muhammad, 2009; Muhammad, 2015; Murakami, Garza, & Merchant, 2010). Specifically, by understanding factors needed to create an academically optimistic environment in pursuit of improving student achievement.

Conceptual Framework

Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk (2006) claimed that, “There is real value in focusing on potential with its strengths and resilience, rather than pathology, with its weakness and helplessness. Academic optimism attempts to explain and nurture what is best in schools to facilitate student learning” (p. 443). Furthermore, Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk (2006)

confirmed the relationship between three school properties (academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust in students and parents) as one conceptual framework: academic optimism.

School leaders looking to improve the organizational culture of their school to one which embraces academic optimism have three avenues in which to approach the task: collective efficacy, academic emphasis, and faculty trust in parents and students (Hoy, 2012; Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006; Smith & Hoy, 2007). Each of the emerging organizational attributes of academic optimism refers to the capacity of the group, or collective efficacy, versus the individual at maintaining high levels of student achievement (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004).

Scholarly Review

Academic optimism, an emerging theoretical perspective under the larger construct of positive psychology, has been regarded as directly related to students' academic success (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004; Hoy, 2012; Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006; Hoy & Tarter, 2011). The three organizational facets of academic optimism consistently predict student achievement: the collective efficacy of the faculty, the academic emphasis of the school, and the faculty's trust in students and parents. According to Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk (2006), "these three collective properties work together in a unified fashion to create a positive academic environment characterized by the label academic optimism" (p. 431). The term academic optimism was chosen as an overarching construct because each of the three elements incorporates a sense of the possible.

Researchers Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) explained that success is typically viewed as a function of talent and motivation; however, optimism is a learned and developed trait, positively affecting achievement. Whereas learned optimism is an individual trait, academic optimism is a collective, organizational, property. Of great significance, Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk (2006) expressed, “it is difficult to find school properties that are consistently related to student achievement when controlling for the socioeconomic level of the school,” (p. 426). Each of the emerging organizational attributes of academic optimism refers to the capacity of the group versus the individual at maintaining high levels of student achievement. The triadic set of properties is dependent on the other. An organization’s faculty trust in students and parents increases collective efficacy which, in turn, enhances trust (Hoy, 2012). Similarly, faculty trust encourages teachers to maintain academic emphasis with confidence leading to an increase in collective efficacy.

In conclusion, each of the three elements of academic optimism interact to create a culture conducive to having a positive effect on student achievement. Therefore, academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust directly impact school values, assumptions, and observable symbols or artifacts (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006; Schein, 2010).

Research Questions

The research question guiding the study is “What are the perceptions of certified faculty concerning the established or embedded culture of academic optimism?”

Additionally, the sub question is, “What cultural components influence the development of academic optimism?”

Methods

Qualitative Analysis

The researcher, leading all efforts of data collection and analysis, utilized interviews, focus groups, and document review (Merriam, 2009). However, the primary means of data collection consisted of focus groups in order to gather a variety of opinions and further understand the thoughts of each participant (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Merriam, 2009). Analysis included placing the data into appropriate documents, while organizing by date and location of focus groups and interviews (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Secondly, the researcher transcribed interview and focus group data while looking for common themes and potential patterns (Krueger & Casey, 2009). The themes and patterns were arranged to outline participants’ perceptions on the topic of academic optimism (Creswell, 2009).

Participants

Certified faculty and classified staff were studied in order to understand their perceptions of organizational culture as it is related to academic optimism. The researcher collected factual and perceptual data from participants at the case study school.

The case study school employed 32 certified teachers, with an average experience of 15 years and 67% having completed an advanced degree. Additionally, school staff representing classified and certified positions total 62 members. A random sample of

certified and classified staff members representing varying degrees of experience and roles within the building were selected for the study. Certified faculty and classified staff engaged in focus group discussions and interviews designed to answer the key research questions of the study. One focus group of classified staff, with five participants, and two focus groups of certified faculty, with a total of ten participants, were conducted. Furthermore, interviews were conducted with one classified and three certified staff members selected from a random sampling of members not included in the focus group discussions.

Results

The first research question of the case study is, “What are the perceptions of certified faculty concerning the established or embedded culture of academic optimism?” The research question was answered by analyzing the perceptions and experiences of the study participants. Data collected from focus group and interview transcripts revealed three themes: (a) celebrating success; (b) relational trust; and (c) mutual accountability.

Overall, certified faculty noted the importance of each student experiencing success and celebrating the academic and behavioral milestones as they occur. Jordan, a certified faculty member shared, “Celebrating those small increments, targets of getting to the goal, are so important for the students to notice.” Jordan followed up with, “Celebration is very important, the whole class can get in on it and also send [students] out to celebrate with others.”

Celebrations were not limited to individual teachers, but a result of a building’s faculty which embraced student success. Julia expressed, “Even if the kids aren’t as

successful in the classroom as they'd like to be they are successful somewhere in the building, in a specials classroom, special education, speech, we all try to work together to make sure the kids are successful in some aspect.” This was also recognized in comments such as when Jane shared, “When we celebrate small progress towards goals it helps them to want to keep going and other kids see that. We have kids that come down to the counselor, the principal, and show the chart that they made. I think it helps with the ‘I can do it’ attitude.”

Faculty perceptions of the school’s organizational culture consistently noted trust between members of the learning community as an important element. Alice touched on the topic of relational trust among students and adults, stating, “The relationships between the students and the staff are also good in my opinion. You can tell there are positive relationships with the kids and adults and that it’s really special and unique about Sterling.” Adding to the discussion, Anna said, “It is every adult, not just every teacher. Custodians, paras, every adult in this building has at least one connection with students.”

The theme of mutual accountability is reflected in Peggy’s interview response, “A common belief we are trying to have is our one team, one goal, no limits. A common belief that I hope all people would have been that all kids can learn. I think sometimes it’s harder for us because we have to change what we are doing in order for that to happen.” Piper expressed similar sentiments, reflecting, “By having staff that believes all students can achieve and grow academically is important. Having a staff that has a positive attitude is another way. Having teachers and staff constantly reinforcing the teaching and learning that happens in our school.”

Addressing the sub question, study participants made frequent mention of the encouraging displays adding to the cultural artifacts of the school. Peyton said, “You see student achievements everywhere writings, art, or the Student of the Month bulletin board.” Mark described another element of cultural artifacts, “I like the glass cases with pictures in it. It demonstrates we do care about the kids and how active they are.” Adding to Mark’s comment, Megan expressed, “Our building is just warm and welcoming. We see quotes everywhere. Our student’s artwork is displayed. Just celebrating them [students]. You see this all over our building.” Mindy offered, “I think you see that everywhere in the building. Putting things on the wall you are continually seeing it’s all about the kids and doing what’s best for them. Encouraging them daily. I think we do a good job of displaying that all over and the teachers do a great job of doing it in their rooms as well.” Audrey described the cultural climate of Heartland Elementary by stating, “We walk in the building it’s bright. That’s one of the things I noticed when I moved into the building to teach. It’s bright and light. It enhances the culture because it’s welcoming. It’s just very positive.”

Alice referred to the visible culture within Heartland Elementary, expressing, “I think that a visitor would see if they got far enough into the building a lot of documentation of learning and fun, with pictures and documents that are displayed and even without talking to anybody they would have a feeling of comradery with what’s just on the walls.” Paige described the feelings as she enters the building, “[Visitors] would see all staff talking with students. Just simple friendly conversations. Always giving a little time to see how students are doing. You would see students and staff moving with

purpose. You would see staff supporting each other. I believe visitors would feel welcome and comfortable. I know as a parent, I would think to myself, I'm glad this is where my child spends their days.”

Discussion

Data established elements of academic emphasis which support the efforts of faculty and staff in maintaining a culture which valued achievement for all students. Through focus group and interview discussions, analysis unveiled evidence of the first construct of academic optimism, academic emphasis. Peyton expressed, “We are dedicated to student achievement because we are constantly looking for ways to help students be academically successful. We are continually going to professional development workshops for ideas and looking at data to help us understand areas where students need further instruction or enrichment. Our motto continues in our belief that students can do anything, one team, one goal, no limits.” Peggy noted, “We have our CARE Team, where we have our students with academic concerns. We work together. We keep data on them.” Megan reflected, “Right off the bat we set a high expectation. It’s not ‘I hope you can do it’, but ‘I expect you to do it, and I will do everything I can to help you get it.’ Just coming into [school] you feel the bar is set high and the kids are meeting that daily.”

In relation to the second construct, collective efficacy, data analysis revealed the organizational concerns surrounding mistrust. Jill expressed her feelings by stating, “I think some days it can be overwhelming and you don’t feel like you can meet the needs of every student. But when we are working together, working with the kids, or working

with other professionals in the building, the confidence grows as we work as a team. We are helping all the kids.” Piper expressed, “Collaborative professional development would help exhibit the fact that we are all a part of the student's journey and that there is accountability throughout all factions of the school.” Mark stated, “Investing in ourselves is investing in our students. Students can see it when there is tension. Having that relationships with staff is modeling it for them.”

What is significant to the research is the recurring theme of mistrust within the construct of collective efficacy. Julia addressed the topic of mistrust by stating, “I’d say that is our biggest struggle in the building. If we could work through that, we could do anything.” Touching on how a culture of mistrust negatively impacts collective efficacy, Jill shared, “We have built trust with students and families but we need to work on the trust in each other and trust in our practices in order to be that highly effective school we are always thriving to be.” Reflecting on the faculty and staff experiences, Peggy stated, “We need to build trust and part of that is that our staff is very veteran heavy, so the old teaching was you did your own thing and you had your data and no one looked at anything. So I think that opening up and saying I did this well but I would like a little assistance here. We aren’t all there yet.”

Qualitative data analysis revealed the perceptions of faculty and staff to the construct of faculty trust in students and parents. Piper described, “I think many staff [members] don't trust the parents. We have a large number of parents that are not involved, whether it’s due to socioeconomic reasons or not enough opportunities to get parents involved. I believe we could improve this.” Megan commented, “Just in my year

of being here and hearing how it used to be, but experiencing the changes that are taking place, I think we have a high level of trust in students. But it goes along with expectations-we want you to do your best, we don't want to point out all the negative. In encouraging them to be their best you will see more of them doing the right thing and it's building their trust factor." Julia addressed trust with students, "I want someone to trust me. We as teachers, staff, the minute a brand new student walks into the building we want them to trust us. We haven't earned it. We haven't done anything. They don't have a relationship with us, so it has to be reciprocated immediately. For us to have that, we need to give it." The uncovered perceptions of collective efficacy would have an impact on students' academic achievement.

Conclusion

The research study supports the significance that faculty and staff perceptions of cultural elements have a profound impact on the functioning of the school. Without mutual trust, collective efficacy will cease to transpire, ultimately impacting the ability of the organization to overcome the effects of poverty in relation to students' academic achievement.

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CHAPTER SIX
SCHOLARLY PRACTITIONER REFLECTION

The dissertation process has impacted my thinking and influenced my professional practice as an educational leader. Early experiences with research, both qualitative and quantitative, provided necessary exposure to the elements needed for a dissertation in practice journey. Coursework throughout the program challenged my thinking and led to my development as a reflective and confident data analyst. Additionally, applying knowledge gained from numerous projects requiring a literature review, I am able to discern between viable and quality scholarly literature in order to present the strongest link to my intended research purposes.

As an educational leader of a public elementary school, I have realized my role in progressing school improvement efforts through data collection, both large and small scale. The qualitative case study experience led to the development of specific recommendations intended to assist my organization's vision of improved student learning. While the dissertation process may be ending, research, learning, and data based decision making will continue to influence my leadership role within my organization. I have been challenged throughout the dissertation process to fully embrace my role in shaping organizational culture.

Through the dissertation in practice model I was able to apply new learning while uncovering qualitative themes and findings to answer research questions affecting my organization. The recommendations will lead to a culture of continuous improvement in regards to student academic achievement.

APPENDIX

Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Interviewer: Researcher

Interviewee: Participant #

Setting: Sterling Elementary School in central Missouri

Welcome: Introduction and describe reason for the interview.

Confidentiality: Explain that no names will be included in the research. The interview will be audio recorded for later transcription.

Possible Prompts: Can you give me details about that? How do you feel about that? How might that change? What does that look like at Sterling Elementary?

Questioning Route	Interview Questions	Research Questions
Opening	1. Tell me your title and how long you've worked at Sterling Elementary.	
Introductory	2. What do you feel, see, hear when entering Sterling Elementary?	Q3, Q4
Transition	3. What are the common beliefs of Sterling Elementary?	Q3, Q4
Key Questions	<p>Academic Emphasis</p> <p>4. What procedures are in place to ensure academic success?</p> <p>5. What actions exist to support students who are not being successful?</p> <p>Collective Efficacy</p> <p>6. How do we rely on each other to get through the tough times with difficult students?</p>	<p>Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4</p> <p>Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4</p> <p>Q2, Q3, Q4</p>

	<p>7. How do we show students that we believe in them?</p> <p>Faculty Trust</p> <p>8. How do we establish trust with students?</p> <p>9. How do we establish trust with parents?</p>	<p>Q2, Q3</p> <p>Q2, Q3</p> <p>Q2, Q3,</p>
Ending	<p>10. What are the next steps in improving the [academic emphasis, collective efficacy, faculty trust] of the organization?</p> <p>11. Is there anything I didn't ask you that you would like to share?</p>	<p>Q1, Q4</p>

Appendix B

Focus Group Protocol

Moderator: Researcher

Participants: Elementary Certified Faculty or Elementary Classified Staff

Setting: Sterling Elementary School in central Missouri

The researcher will act as the facilitator of each focus group. As participants arrive the facilitator will greet each subject and offer refreshments and seating.

Bold text = Moderator *Italicized text = field notes, observations*

Welcome: **Welcome, thank you for taking the time this afternoon to join our discussion. I will be moderating our discussion.**

Topic Overview: **I am currently researching a case study of the establishment of academic optimism in response to change student demographics at Sterling Elementary. You have been asked to participate since you all are (*certified faculty or classified staff*) at Sterling Elementary and have experienced elements of school culture as it relates to academic optimism.**

Ground Rules: **There is no right or wrong answer. I expect that you will have different points of view, so feel free to share varying opinions even if it differs from what others have described. We are recording the session in order to ensure accuracy. No names will be used in the report; all comments are confidential. I'm here to ask questions, listen, and make sure everyone has a chance to share.**

Let's begin.

Questioning Route	Focus Group Questions	Research Questions
Opening	1. Tell me your title/position and how long you've worked at Sterling Elementary. Participant #1: Participant #2: Participant #3: Participant #4: Participant #5:	

Introductory	2. What is special about Sterling Elementary school?	Q4
Transition	3. What would a visitor to our school see, hear, feel, upon entering the building?	Q3, Q4
Key Questions	<p>Collective Efficacy</p> <p>4. How do we demonstrate our belief that all students can learn?</p> <p>5. Can you describe the level of confidence we have in meeting the needs of all students?</p> <p>Academic Emphasis</p> <p>6. How can students achieve the goals that have been set for them?</p> <p>7. How do we exhibit the belief that students have the ability to achieve academically? (explain)</p> <p>8. How does the school set high standards for academic performance?</p> <p>Faculty Trust</p> <p>9. Share your reaction to the statement: We trust students. (the parents)</p> <p>10. What level of commitment do parents and students have within the school?</p>	<p>Q2</p> <p>Q2</p> <p>Q1, Q2</p> <p>Q2</p> <p>Q1, Q2</p> <p>Q2</p> <p>Q1, Q2</p>
Ending	<p>11. What are the next steps in improving the [academic emphasis, collective efficacy, faculty trust] of the organization?</p> <p>12. Is there anything I didn't ask you that you would like to share?</p>	Q1

Appendix C

Document Analysis Protocol

Date:	Title of document:
Site:	Obtained from:
Why was this document created?	Who is the intended audience?
How does the document reflect organizational culture?	Do parts of the document relate to the three constructs of academic optimism?
a) Norms:	a) Academic Emphasis:
b) Assumptions, Values & Beliefs:	b) Collective Efficacy:
c) Artifacts:	c) Faculty Trust:

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VITA

Ms. Johnson was born in Kansas City, Missouri on July 10, 1977. She was provided opportunities to enrich her education by her parents which instilled a deep value and appreciation of knowledge. Ms. Johnson graduated from high school in 1995 and entered college. She graduated in 2002 from Avila University with a Bachelor of Science in Special Education in addition to completing coursework in Elementary Education. She then accepted her first teaching position in which she taught remedial reading and first grade, while finishing her Masters of Science degree in Curriculum and Instruction in 2007.

In 2007, Ms. Johnson accepted a position within the Grain Valley RV School District in Grain Valley, Missouri. She taught special education for three years then second grade for four years. While working in the Grain Valley district, Ms. Johnson finished her Educational Specialist degree in School Administration. Additionally, she participated in numerous professional development opportunities and leadership experiences related to balanced literacy, Professional Learning Communities, and Response to Intervention.

While working on her doctorate in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at the University of Missouri, Ms. Johnson obtained her first principal position within the Warrensburg RVI School District. She is currently in her third year as principal of Sterling Elementary School. Ms. Johnson continues to advocate for school equity and the academic achievement of all students.