A HEURISTIC NARRATOLOGICAL CASE STUDY OF THE LITERACY

EXPERIENCES OF HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS IN AN

URBAN HIGH SCHOOL

A DISSERTATION IN
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by
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Daniel C. Ryerson, Candidate for Doctor of Education Degree

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ABSTRACT

The intended purpose of this heuristic, narratological, descriptive case study is to capture the individual experiences of a group of urban high school students as they pertain to literacy developmental opportunities. The theoretical framework utilized to organize the information and attempt to create meaning was constructed using four conceptual strands. The first strand is the examination of a growing gap in high school literacy achievement levels over the past five decades. The second strand questions the need for the creation of a working definition that identifies what key literacy practices entail. The third strand examines the current literacy instructional practices utilized at the high school level. The final strand examines the impact school leadership has on academic achievement.

Based on the theoretical framework and methodology utilized for this research study, five case studies were used to try and better understand the research question "what can the personal narratives and life-long literacy experiences of urban high school students' reveal as to the practices required to effectively improve literacy skills?" There were also three sub-questions; (1) What instructional experiences create the productive

learning environments? (2) What is the relationship between cultural expectations and experiences and literacy development? (3) What role does school leadership play in developing and supporting the literacy practices found in urban high schools? The data utilized to examine these questions was document analysis, observations, and individual interviews. The findings of the study were surprising in that they point to influences beyond classroom practices as hindering student literacy attainment most significantly. Implications for leadership suggest that a shift in focus away from instructional pedagogy and towards student supports that address fundamental needs of a non-instructional nature can dramatically influence a student's ability to acquire foundational literacy skills.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the School of Education, have examined a thesis titled "A Narratological Heuristic, Case Study on Literacy Development and the Impact of Culture and High School Instruction on Achievement Levels," presented by Daniel C. Ryerson, candidate for a Doctor of Education degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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In order to accomplish a task such as a dissertation, you need the help, support and understanding of so many people. First, this never would have been possible if my soul mate had not been there every step of the way. Carri, I am always at my best when you are there to support me and push me to do better. This also is not possible without the love and support of my children. I have five wonderful kids who have all been patient and understanding while dad worked on "that paper thing" every weekend. You are all the center of my world.

I would like to thank my parents for being such an inspiration. They were the type of parents every child deserves to have growing up. They always encouraged my brothers and I to be whomever we wanted to be. They showed us what a work ethic should be and what that hard work could get you. They showed me the importance of discipline, but also showed me the importance of a long huge followed by, "I love you."

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PREFACE

Literacy has always been a cornerstone in my life. As far back as I can remember, I have been reading and writing. My earliest memories of my childhood involve my mother, a book, and the echoing phrase, "read it again!" Big, Big brown. Big brown bear. Big brown bear blue bull. Do you know the *B Book* by Doctor Seuss? I do. I made my mother read it to me a thousand times. If it wasn't the *B Book* it was *Go Dog Go*. Do you remember the scholastic reader book order forms we use to get in grade school? That was Christmas at my house. My mother never said no! You can pick out one she would tell my brother and me. Of course, she always let us choose two! We would sprint home on the days those books arrived. First one home – first one read. Now my dad was not much for Dr. Seuss. He would let us sit on his lap and read *Sports Illustrated*, *Newsweek*, or some other national publication with him. We quickly learned the art of paying attention and insightful dialogue. If we wanted to continue to share with my dad, you better learn how to argue or at least pretend to argue a point because some sort of editorializing always accompanied whatever he was reading. My upbringing was filled with lots of music, shared literary experiences, and lots of discussion.

When I was 13, my mother gave me her copy of *The Screw Tape Letters* by CS Lewis. I still have it and consider it one of my most cherished possessions. She had read it in college and wanted to share it with me. At that point, I officially became a bookworm. I loved it. This book challenged my thinking and galvanized religion in my life. From that moment on, I sought out more and more. I loved all types of literature, well except the romance novels my mother always seemed to be reading. She said it was candy for her brain that life was not supposed to always be serious. As I read, I found new friends, saw faraway

lands for the first time, and had experiences that would shape my life and view of everything around me. Twain, Dickens, Austen, Shakespeare, Milton, Plato, Chaucer, Poe, Steinbeck, Hemingway, Shelly, Stowe, Emerson, Thoreau and many others all added to the fabric of my life and helped craft the thoughts and beliefs that would play a role in who I would become. I carried my love of literature into adult life and shared it with my own children. I never intended to be a fan of young adult literature, but I shared my love of Stephen King, Tolkien, and CS Lewis with my kids. In exchange, my children shared, *Harry Potter, The Hunger Games, Divergent, The Fault in Our Stars, The Twilight Series, Eragon*, and *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*. As a father, I saw my children's minds grow and watched as they realized the potential of who they might become, and that potential knew no limits.

When I started in education, I quickly realized that not everyone had the benefit of the same experiences I had growing up and in later life. Many of my students lacked the literacy skills necessary to become successful students in either a post-secondary academic environment or even a work environment. There was also the notion of cultural differences that I had not considered. Not every student was coming from a home that viewed literacy in the same manner as I had been raised to view it. Some students had come from homes that viewed reading and writing as a necessary evil. Other students based on their upbringing saw no value in those experiences at all. So, I was faced with a decision. I could feel sorry for them and expect less because of factors that somehow made them less capable as students or I could provide them with the literary skills they needed but had not yet been exposed to at this point in their lives. I do not view my up-bringing as a deficit for understanding the cultural and social experiences that shape urban students' lives. Furthermore, I do not view the varied cultural experiences of my students as somehow creating a deficit in their own

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learning. I view my home socialization as the catalyst and foundation that determines what I expect students to achieve and the tools they will need to get there. However, to provide a truly rich experience, I knew I had to expand my scope of learning beyond just my home socialization. There was a need to account for all the experiences of my students. Every person that stepped into my classroom brought a wealth of information that allowed me to not only be a teacher, but also a student of their lives. In order to truly begin to help build a foundation in literacy, I had to first understand what learning experiences they had encountered as a part of their own culture and learning community.

I am nothing special. I had the benefit of being exposed to literacy at a very early age and this formed the foundation of who I became. Having that experience gave me the insight to offer those same experiences to the students I taught every day. Couple that with what I could learn from my students' own home socialization, anything was possible. My experiences led to the development of an educational philosophy that was based in strong literacy skills coupled with the appreciation of every student's unique journey to high school. Had I not had those experiences, I would not have had a first-hand understanding of why they were so important. I believe literacy is the most important component in determining the future success of a student. My job was and always will be to try my best to teach them superior literacy skills so they will be successful at whatever they choose to do. I want to insure my students have choices in life.

My heart breaks every time another student drops out or leaves school unprepared to face the challenges ahead. There are moments I question how many more times I can endure the loss of another student. But then I remember what Haberman (2010) taught us. What we are doing is an all-out war and any less of a commitment than to stop at nothing to win that

war will never be enough. There have been times I wanted to shut the door and scream at a student. Beg them to listen to me. Plead with them to take this chance they have been given more seriously. With age, we as educators, gain the insight of knowing where the paths our students are setting out upon will lead based on the decisions they are making as teenagers. Sometimes those destinations are terrifying. They just do not see the future yet because they are too young. These are our children. We want the best for them. So, instead I gain my composure and decide they just need to sit and listen and I will get out my tattered and warn copy of the *B Book* and we will read the book together.

As I reflect back on this introduction, I wrote more than four years ago, I am confronted with all that I have learned over those four years. There are times in our life when we must step back and acknowledge the hard truths staring us in our face. For me, I must acknowledge that many of my experiences were the product of a privilege that I was unaware existed in my life. Furthermore, I had always considered my path to understanding to be the best path for everyone. I find that as I come to the end of the road regarding this research, I have a much clearer picture as it pertains to just how different the literary experiences are for so many students. I also have a better comprehension of how powerful many of the cultural elements can be in a student's life and that there are in fact many paths that can lead to understanding. Finally, above all else, this process has helped me better understand that the real work is not in identifying the best practices to teach students, but in developing an understanding of all the different elements that shape the lives of students

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

What are the most critical skills that a student can learn throughout the course of an education? Is it reading and writing? In the twenty-first century, literacy has expanded beyond just reading and writing. Literacy instruction is now being shaped by aspects that exist outside the realm of education. Students live in a world that no longer has borders. Students are now in contact daily with people from all over the globe (Hussain, 2008). These interactions happen involving vast mediums of contact. No longer can an individual exist in a cultural vacuum. Students must now learn to communicate and process on multiple levels, utilizing new modes that are increasingly complex (Beetham & Sharpe, 2013; Rotherham & Willingham, 2009; Saavedra & Opfer, 2012). Students today must now be competent in a wide range of literate experiences that are dynamic and ever-changing. They must also learn to view these interactions through the lens of many different cultures. As the global economy continues to change and national borders continue to disappear, students must be prepared to meet these new demands. The experiences required to be successful in this changing landscape have grown beyond simple literacy skills and require much higher levels of thinking (Darling-Hammond, 2006). These experiences are the foundation for everything we will do throughout the entirety of our lives. As educators, it becomes paramount that our focus through instruction and student/teacher interactions is centered on obtaining the literacy skills necessary to fully prepare our kids for the future that is ahead of them. Failure to do so has dire consequences (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Trilling & Fadel, 2009). Our students will never reach their full potential or gain a truly insightful understanding of who they are and what part they play as members of a diverse and unique community, such as we

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have in the United States. Without superior literacy skills, students will become non-participants in their own lives (Jones & Flannigan, 2006; Trilling & Fadel, 2009). Unfortunately, education has not done a good job at adapting its instructional practices as quickly as the elements that define superior literacy skills have changed (Dede, 2010).

Twenty-first century learners are more connected to vast amounts of information than any generation before them (Breivik, 2005). With the advances in technology and connectivity of the World Wide Web (WWW) providing numerous outlets for interacting with information, the skills needed by today's students are vastly different from those needed even 20 years ago (Dede, 2010). In the past, a traditional view of literacy included alphabetic writing, recall of information, and vocabulary knowledge (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008). However, today, students are confronted with the need to navigate in various modes of information that are now considered new components of literacy (Kress, 2003). No longer are static elements, such as books and magazines, the only interactions with literacy one might have. Modern day students must also know how to navigate music, art, film, and new technology. They must understand the cultural elements that are often expressed within each modality (Sheridan-Thomas, 2007). In order to do so, the scope of literacy skills required to be successful has dramatically changed for today's students (Langer, 2001). Unfortunately, the modern high school is not doing enough to insure today's students receive the skills necessary to become productive members of society. Failure to acknowledge this issue and take steps to adjust current practices will have a negative impact for years to come. This is the reason I have chosen literacy deficits in high school students as my field of research.

Problem Statement

Many high school students continue to score below acceptable achievement and literacy levels. This prevents them from achieving academically in school. Hence, this status hinders their future potential in the areas of post-secondary education, economic attainment, and their roles as community members with the knowledge and skills to contribute to a democratic society (Reardon, 2013). In today's changing, global economic climate that is now digitally connected, the education of our students has become an increasingly high-stakes endeavor (Voogt, Erstad, Dede & Mishra, 2013). This is especially true when considering the need for today's students to be able to read, write and interact in a globally connected society (Monge & Frisicaro-Pawlowski, 2014). To further complicate matters, the traditional definition of literacy no longer applies, and schools are struggling to keep up with the changing landscape (Webber & Johnston, 2014). Students must now become multi-literate utilizing literacy skills across several domains (Anstey & Bull, 2006; Griffin & Care, 2014). From 1971 to 2012, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exam trend data revealed the average-reading scores among nine-years-old students have continued to rise (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). However, the scores for 17-year-old students have declined steadily since 1992 (Perie, Moran, & Lutkus, 2005). This trend has continued as confirmed by the most recent results as documented in *NAEP 2012: Trends in Academic Progress* (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Research conducted by American College Testing Corporation (ACT) suggests that a drop off in college ready literacy occurs between the eighth and twelfth grades (ACT, 2006). Based on the EXPLORER scores of eighth grade students, there should be a much higher number of

college level readers and 12th grade scores do not show that kind of growth (ACT, 2006). Educators wonder what students' scores are not rising to the level needed for college success.

Today's public schools are not doing their job when it comes to preparing all students for life after high school (Lombardi & Behrman, 2016). This in turn has created an achievement gap that will hinder large segments of the population for decades to come. There are many factors that have created and sustained the achievement gap. Gloria Ladson-Billings' (2006) presidential address for the American Education Research Association on the subject of the achievement gap led her to conclude the problem is actually an educational debt that has created this situation. The educational debt is historical, economical, sociopolitical, and moral in nature. By focusing on the achievement gap and trying to address instruction, the gap will always exist and never be subdued (Ladson-Billings, 2006). There must be a shift in how educators and the government attempt to address this problem. The United States must focus on the decades of neglect that can be traced back to socioeconomics and race as leading indicators of student achievement to truly eradicate the achievement gap (Noguera, 2009).

In a comparative study examining 20 schools with the highest dropout rates and 20 schools with the lowest dropout rates, 196 students who dropped out were identified. Using correlation coefficients, school level variables were identified as potential causes. Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson (2007) stated:

> A strong positive relationship between poverty and school failure has been documented in numerous studies, and our results corroborated this research. The demographic of poverty seems to create vast inequities in our public education system, from federal funding to employment of experienced teachers and administrators. (p. 333)

Poverty tends to manifest problems in many ways. Unfortunately, for school aged children, these problems create a set of circumstances that make it almost impossible to break free from the poverty cycle of oppression (Noguera, 2009). Being under privileged too often translates into poor academic achievement and hinders one's ability to ever reach economic independence (Allen, 2008). However, poverty is not the only circumstance that strongly predicts low academic achievement. There are other variables that are equally strong predictors.

In 2006, Shelly Brown-Jeffy published her findings as they pertained to school achievement and the growing educational gap. Her worked examined the reading achievement of 12th grade students from 219 high schools. The 4,065 students were original participants in the *National Education Longitudinal Study* of 1988. The students came from private, public, and parochial schools; 63% of the students attended suburban high schools and 33% percent attended urban schools (Ingels, 1990).

The examination of the student's readings scores further supported the decades old notion of an achievement gap based on race. White and Asian students scored significantly higher than Black, Latinx, and Native American students. The data analysis also identified other mitigating circumstances that lead to less than desired academic achievement. Students who came from urban schools performed worse than their suburban counterparts. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds performed worse than those from a higher status. In short, Black and Latinx students from poor, urban high schools had significantly lower achievement scores. The tool utilized for data collection was a reading test with the intent of examining a student's literacy abilities after they had completed four years of high school.

The results are worth noting and not surprising given the current state of literacy instruction in high schools.

Students who are not academically successfully during high school are more prone to drop out and less likely to achieve academically during post-secondary schooling (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Maynard, Salas-Wright, & Vaughn, 2015). Furthermore, students performing poorly academically have limited economic opportunities in later life (Cahuc, Carcillo & Minea, 2017; Langer, 2001; Schargel & Smink, 2014). In a survey of 29 schools that included students who had dropped out, the following was reported:

> In the survey, 47 percent said that not having a diploma makes it hard to find a good job. Participants in our focus groups counseled others to stay in school for this reason. For instance, a male from Philadelphia said, "... I would tell him like, I haven't finished high school. I don't have a diploma. I don't have a job. I am broke .... You can't make it without that. You can't go anywhere, for real, on the legal side.... If you go to school, get your diploma; you can do more things the right way. You might succeed." (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006)

Moreover, low academic achievement is a consistent predictor utilized by many researchers when determining the chance of a student dropping out of school (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Márquez-Vera, Cano, Romero, Noaman, Mousa Fardoun, & Ventura, 2016; Swanson & Schneider, 1999; Thammasiri, Delen, Meesad, & Kasap, 2014).

Poor literacy performance by high school students is the product of several factors prevalent in today's high schools. To begin with, reading and writing are rarely taught as separate subjects once a student completes eighth grade (Clarke, 2006). Literacy instruction historically has been a component of primary grade pedagogy (Gambrell, Morrow, & Pressley, 2007). Nationally, literacy instruction is void at the secondary level with very few resources in place to help struggling learners (Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, high school content teachers do not believe there is a need to include reading strategy instruction in

course curriculum (Heller & Greenleaf, 2007). Of the 49 states with reading standards, more than half have defined grade-level standards that only progress through the eighth grade (ACT, 2006). Therefore, in most cases, high school teachers are not equipped to provide literacy instruction or support these efforts (Clarke, 2006). There is also an ingrained culture at the high school level that limits literacy instruction believed to no longer be needed. Secondary teachers in academic content areas, besides English, do not believe they have a responsibility to teach literacy. They view this task as the responsibility of the English teachers to make sure students possess literacy skills (Jewitt, 2005; Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999). With the proliferation of the high stakes testing, brought on by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the most recent Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA (U.S. Department of Education, 2015), the focus tends to be more on increased test scores and covering content (Dee, & Jacob, 2011). This leads to a skills deficit in many content areas (McCarthey, 2008; O'Brien, Stewart, & Moje, 1995). Because of the lack of adequate secondary literacy instruction, there is an increasing gap in the achievement levels of 12th grade students compared to the levels of students not in high school (Hernandez, 2011; O'Brien, Stewart, & Moje, 1995). Educators must collectively begin to address the shortcomings of literacy instruction at the high school level. Failure to do so will continue to have adverse consequences on students. Furthermore, ignoring these issues will dramatically limit the options of the students' educators are supposed to be preparing for future endeavors.

Educators must realize reading, writing, and speaking properly is no longer enough for students; all students must be able to perform utilizing higher levels of thinking (Dede, 2010; Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, & Robison, 2009). They must understand how to solve problems and be able to operate within complex systems. While some research

shows that literacy numbers have remained unchanged, that is not the case when higher level thinking skills are required. The percentage of high school seniors performing at or above the basic level in reading on the NAEP decreased from 80% in 1992 to 72% in 2012 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). The percentage of students performing at or above the proficient level decreased from 40% to 35% over the same period (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). When examining these numbers even further, there are large performance gaps between racial and ethnic groups. Only 16% of Black high school seniors and 20% of Latinx high school seniors scored at or above proficient on the 2012 NAEP reading test, compared to 43% of White students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). White and Asian/Pacific Islander high school seniors typically score between 15-26 points higher overall than Blacks and Latinx students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). This is a trend that has held for almost two decades.

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Purpose and Research Questions

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The intended purpose of this heuristic narratological case study was to describe the literacy development opportunities of a group of 12th grade students in an urban high school setting. The site for this research was a Midwest metropolitan suburban high school. For the purposes of this study, literacy deficient students were defined as those students who read three or more levels below their specific grade as determined by Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) scores (Knutson, 2006). The SRI scores are utilized to establish a student's reading comprehension level and measure growth over time. In this particular urban high school, the SRI is administered twice annually; given at the beginning of the fall semester and the end of the spring semester. The test is given to all students during all four years of high school. The unit of analysis or focus of the study as defined by Patton (2015) for this

research, will be the collective life and educational experiences of the low achieving learners and the impact on their high school literacy experiences. The need to better understand the individual life and educational experiences of high school learners led to the utilization of a case study design. This type of study required the analysis of a particular group and examined the developmental factors in relation to some form of environmental context (Maxwell, 2013). Without an understanding of these experiences, there would have been limited opportunities to determine why students fail to develop strong literacy skills. The use of a case study also supports other areas of the study design.

The individual narratives of students helped construct common or shared experiences expressed in themes. As found in narrative tradition, these stories took the form of a narrative history (Clandinin, 2013). Some of the contributing factors causing deficits were identified utilizing the themes found in their educational histories. According to Clandinin (2013), "Narrative inquiry is an approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way of honoring lived experiences as a source of important knowledge and understanding" (p. 31). Through the gathering of these stories, I was able to identify the elements that played a role in literacy development in the lives of individual students. By identifying the shared experiences, the research was able to provide potentially meaningful solutions to combat this growing problem in high schools nationwide. However, to accomplish this goal, there was a need for other methods to support the narrative, case study.

The utilization of several types of documents, as well as, survey data were paramount for crystallizing the data during the analysis process. Crystallization is a method of inquiry that allows the researcher to establish a deeper understanding of the data by examining a topic from many different points of reference allowing for an infinite number or outcomes

(Ellingson, 2009). The collection of these data from the selected students created a story identifying the importance of literacy interaction, effective instruction, life experiences, and educational supports. There was one final approach required to complete the study's design.

My own experiences with literacy during a 20-year career in urban education allowed for the use of the heuristic tradition. These experiences with struggling learners led to my need to better understand why high school students failed to develop the literacy skills required for life long success. To qualify as a heuristic study, a researcher must have a close personal experience that leads to an intense interest in the study at hand (Patton, 2015). The intent of the research was to combine my first-hand experiences with struggling learners and the elements of their own personal narratives to form a better understanding of their literacy development.

For the purpose of this study, the central research question was: What can the personal narratives and life-long literacy experiences of urban high school students' reveal as to the practices required to effectively improve literacy skills? The three sub-questions that will be addressed are:

1. What instructional experiences create productive learning environments for literacy development?

2. What is the relationship between cultural expectations and experiences and literacy development?

3. What role does school leadership play in developing and supporting the literacy practices found in urban high schools?

To better understand the meanings that participants attribute to the areas in question, a heuristic, narrative, case study was utilized as the best form of inquiry. By understanding the

participant's stories and weaving in my own personal experiences, a picture was developed illustrating the elements that contributed to the literacy experiences, both positive and negative, of high school students.

Theoretical Framework

The intent of a good qualitative research study is to identify a phenomenon and establish a theoretical framework that demonstrates a comprehensive understanding of the topic. A theoretical framework is based on existing theories, combined with key concepts and definitions in an attempt to expand the current body of knowledge (Patton, 2015). The purpose of the framework is to provide the structure upon which a phenomenon is explained and/or predicted. Furthermore, a framework allows one to systematically identify relationships amongst different sets of variables (Maxwell, 2013). In essence, the theoretical framework acts as a road map for those conducting research. Twenty-two years in urban education has afforded me daily interactions with high school students who are unable to read or write at the appropriate grade level. These interactions have led me to conduct a case study to better understand the factors that contribute to literacy deficiencies among urban high school students.

Literacy achievement levels continue to decline at an alarming rate for a number of high school seniors (NCES, 2013). My experiences in urban education have led to several assumptions regarding this phenomenon. There is a pattern of literary neglect that plays out year after year for low-income youths (Pitcher, Martinez, Dicembre, Fewster, & McCormick, 2010). During my 10 years teaching social studies in a poor urban high school, many students arrived lacking the basic literacy competencies all students should possess. I spent much of the instructional time attempting to provide students with basic literacy skills and

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ignoring content. Unfortunately, high schools are ill prepared to serve the needs of struggling readers and writers (Reardon, Valentino, & Shores, 2012). Even when a viable plan exists, there are very few resources that can be utilized to aid in the effort (Reardon et al., 2012). Finally, by failing to provide enriching instruction, urban students post-secondary options are minimized (Schargel, & Smink, 2014). They find that they do not have access to the same opportunities as their suburban counter parts.

When considering the research, there were four strands considered. The first conceptual strand analyzed by the theoretical framework was the examination of a growing gap in high school literacy achievement levels over the past five decades. As student achievement levels have been tracked more closely by norm referenced national exams, the observation of decreased literacy skills by high school students has grown more prevalent with each passing year (Slavin, Cheung, Groff, & Lake, 2008). However, to properly understand the poor achievement in certain segments of the student population, one must also examine the student achievement gap that persists across both racial lines and socio-economic lines. The second conceptual strand of the theoretical framework addressed the need for the creation of a working definition that identified what key literacy practices entailed. While high school literacy has become a hot-button issue in education during the last decade, there is little focus or consistency with regards to defining literacy components at the secondary level (Chambers, Burns, & Callaway, 2008). Scholars struggle to define the basic principles that create the framework by which instructional practices can be modeled. Current literacy instructional practices utilized at the high school level make up the third conceptual strand. While attempts have been made to address the current learning deficiencies, there has not been a systematic approach to address student needs be

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reexamining current instructional practices (Saavedra & Opfer, 2012). The final conceptual strand examined the impact school leadership has on academic achievement. As the available research continues to expand, there is little doubt building level leadership has a profound impact on the academic outcomes of students (Leithwood & Jantze, 1998; MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008).

Analysis and Causes of the Current Achievement Gap

When considering the current gap in literacy achievement amongst high school students, one must step back and first consider the achievement gap across all learning. There has been extensive research pertaining to the achievement gap in this country. At the high school level, many of the factors contributing to the gap can be grouped into four basic categories (Snow & Biancarosa, 2003). First, research shows that the when considering the impact of a student's race, Black and Latinx students have lower levels of achievement (Alvermann, 2003). Second, students whose primary or first language is not English also have lower achievement levels (Snow & Biancarosa, 2003). Third, students that come from a background of poverty historically have lower achievement scores than their more affluent counter parts (Jackson, 2011). Finally, students that are subjected to inferior or culturally unresponsive instruction have lower rates of achievement (Fry, 2008). When considering the literacy achievement gap, the gap must be framed in the context of these four categories.

Black and Latinx students consistently score lower in reading and writing than White students (NCES, 2007). The achievement gap viewed in terms of race has been prevalent for decades. There have been extensive research studies documenting the impact that race has on achievement levels. Consistently, in all subject matters, students from Black and Latinx backgrounds have been out performed by their White counterparts for decades (Crum, 2008).

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There are differing opinions as to the root cause of the achievement gap. However, most can agree that the gap has not decreased and continues to weigh heavily on students of color.

The fastest growing group of students attending public schools in the United States is English Language Learners (ELL). The 2005 ELL learner population was approximately 12.3 million students. This number is expected to grow to 17.9 million by 2020 (Fry, 2008). This will account for roughly all the growth in school age children during that time period. ELL students face an even more daunting achievement gap than Black and Latinx students. On most state standardized tests, ELL students score below all groups of students. For example, in Texas, only 22% of ELL students scored proficient or above on their eighth-grade state test. Forty-four percent of Black students scored proficient or higher on the same test (Genesee, 2006). The concentration of ELL students can be found most often in urban schools with a high free and reduced lunch populations (Delgado, 2014). Furthermore, this increase in the ELL student population will be fueled almost entirely by immigrants to this country (Fry, 2008). One in five immigrant students speak little to no English. Couple this with the problems that already impact urban school children and ELL students stand little to no chance of ever closing the current achievement gap (Dearing et al., 2016; Delgado, 2014; Solari, Petscher, & Folsom, 2014; Zepeda, 2017).

Students at all grade levels, who come from low-income backgrounds, have significantly lower reading and writing achievement levels when compared to students from higher income families (Clark, 2002; Lacour, &Tissington, 2011). The income achievement gap has grown significantly over the past 30 years. Recent research has shown that the gap has grown by as much as 40% for low income students (Reardon, 2013). Students who come from a poor socio-economic background are often subjected to an inferior educational

experience (Noguera, 2009).

Gloria Ladson-Billings (2010) is considered one of the foremost scholars in the area of Critical Race Theory and the impact on the education of students of color. Black and Latinx students consistently score lower in reading and writing than White students (Espinoza-Herold & Gonzalez-Carriedo, 2017; Fergus, Noguera, & Martin, 2014; Harper & Williams, 2014; NCES, 2007). These are well known facts. However, the real discussion must center around what are the root causes for this continued discrepancy in achievement. Black and Latinx students make up a large portion of the urban high school population (Luke, 2014). This is a product of decades of policy and practice that have kept Black and Latinx citizens in a state of poverty and despair; the realities of the urban educational system that allow this cycle to continue. In urban schools, students are faced with less spending per pupil than in suburban schools (Anyon, 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2015; Knoblauch & Chase, 2015; Sugrue, 2014). The staff is usually younger in an urban school and most of the time less qualified than suburban teachers (Ingersoll, Merrill, & May, 2014; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Whipp & Geronime, 2017). The instructional practices and accepted pedagogy of the staff are typically not culturally relevant and suffer from a lack of understanding about what urban students require to be successful (Durden & Truscott, 2013; Haberman, Gillette, & Hill, 2017; Valencia, 2010). These are just a few of the areas that manifest in urban schools and continue to provide uneven playing fields for the students who attend these institutions.

As the research reflects, the achievement gap still exists and continues to grow in several segments of the current student population. These numbers become even more troubling when one considers the increasing demands for literate students in the work place.

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Globally, performing at proficient levels is no longer enough for students. They are now required to become critical thinkers and also compete, not only against students in this country, but also students from around the world (Brown & Lauder, 2016; Docquier & Machado, 2016; Fredman, 2015; Stewart, Wall, & Marciniec, 2016). Practitioners must start by examining these four areas and identifying steps that can be taken that will have a real impact on current and future learners.

Defining Literacy

Broadly defined, literacy is being able to respond appropriately to written language utilizing "basic" reading and writing skills (Langer, 2001). Reading fluency is a significant indicator in overall academic development and performance (Rasinski et al., 2005). As Dauzat and Duazat (1977) articulated during their research:

> In spite of all of the furor and the fervor for attaining literacy, few have undertaken to say what they or anyone else means by literacy. Those few professional organizations, bureaus, and individuals who have attempted the task of explaining 'what is literacy?' generate definitions that conflict, contradict but rarely complement each other.... These champions of the cause of literacy' crusade for a national effort to make literacy a reality without establishing what that reality is. (p. 67)

What is becoming apparent, as more research becomes available, is that there is no single belief system in place to define literacy instruction (Heller & Greenleaf, 2007). In order to define and ultimately understand literacy, the first question has to be what is the purpose for students to read and write and in what context?

There have been several studies attempting to identify situational literary practices. Shirley Brice-Heath (1983) conducted extensive ethnographic research in southeastern mill towns. Her goal was to better understand the cultural influences on the functional uses of literacy and the perceived reason that individuals read. She also sought to understand how

school age children developed literacy skills and interacted using language. Bryce-Heath (1983) would demonstrate that family structure, standing in the community, and even religion played roles in literacy development.

Given a goal of functional literacy for all citizens, the notion of a uniform definition becomes problematic. The Bryce-Heath (1983) study reveals some of the potential roadblocks that might be encountered. How does one begin to take into account all the different literacy needs the vast citizenry of the United States require? Do all communities have the same approach to functional demands? Within those communities, do all the ethnic groups approach the functional demands of that same community in the same manner? Do rural communities define functional skills in the same manner as large cities or suburban neighborhoods? Does the Northeastern portion of the United States value the same ideals and skills as the citizens of the Midwest? All of these questions bring into focus just how monumental a task it is to find a universal common ground for defining literacy and literary practices. Without a working definition, identifying successful pedagogy found within the nation's schools becomes a nearly impossible task.

In their work, *Local literacies: Reading and writing in one community* (2012), David Barton and Mary Hamilton continued to build on the research started by Bryce-Heath (1983). Barton and Hamilton examined the development of literacy practices in Lancaster, England. The site of Lancaster provided a significant back drop for this study. The authors were able to trace the literacy development in this community back to the time of the Romans. Like Bryce-Heath (1983), the research reaffirms the importance of local context as this applies to achievement levels. Furthermore, Barton and Hamilton (2012) identified the critical nature of culture within a community and how that culture provides meaning to literary practices.

Barton and Hamilton's (2012) research is considered one of the seminal studies on literacy development. Contemporary literacy theorists continue to build on the constructivist nature of their work in local communities (Barton, 2017; Barton & Hamilton, 2005; Gee, 2013; Luke, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2017). Their research will continue to shape the ways literacy will be viewed and investigated for decades to follow and will be examined in greater depth in chapter two.

Current Literacy Instructional Practices

In order to develop instructional practices that can impact the learning of high school students, there must be some basic classroom tenets, that are accepted by all, regarding literacy instructional practices. To begin with, every student that walks through the door brings a different set of expectations and needs into the classroom (Bush, 2003). These needs are shaped by gender, ethnicity, socio–economic standing, life experiences, and cultural beliefs (Ferdman, 1990). Second, educators must acknowledge that students are now living in a pluralistic society that is no longer dominated by the views of one culture (Banks, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2014). This can be seen in the changing demographics found in today's public schools. For the first time, in 2014, students of color became the majority in public schools. In 1970, White students comprised 80% of the public-school population. This trend is a major shift in public education (Paris & Alim, 2017; Taylor, 2004). Finally, literacy instruction is a developmental process that continues well beyond middle school (Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, & Hurwitz, 1999). Too many times, the primary focus in high school is content accumulation. There are several instructional practices that yield significant outcomes when implemented with fidelity even with high school students (Ladson-Billings, 2010; Marri et al., 2011; Monge, & Frisicaro-Pawlowski, 2014). By

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acknowledging a few simple core principles, educators can begin to lay the foundation for meaningful and impactful instruction for all students.

As one begins to question or even identify best practices, we must reframe our thinking. As the ethnic makeup of our nation has shifted, instructional pedagogy has failed to shift as well (Paris, & Alim, 2017). Considering the practices that take place in a classroom on a daily basis is no longer enough. Educators must also consider the underlying presumptions for how and why those practices exist in the first place. When Ladson-Billings (1995) wrote her article *Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy,* she laid the foundation for reframing the context by which instructional practices were valued. The merit of one's pedagogical methodology within a classroom must no longer be seen in terms of a singular outcome. Education needed to take on a more pluralistic view of not only how instruction occurred, but more importantly why and what were the desired outcomes. Ladson-Billings' work encouraged education to embrace the culturally relevant practices, such as language or home life, as a means of producing a more desirable educational outcome.

Ladson-Billings' (1995) research set in motion a shift in the examination of pedagogical practices over the next two decades that is still being considered. What if the Judeo-Christian, White, middle-class point of view was not the standard by which all performance outcomes were based (Berner, 2016)? Renowned author and poet Toni Morrison coined this phenomenon as the *White-gaze.* This simply was the process of measuring the very nature of almost everything one did through the gaze of White society (Krumholz, 1998). Most elements of one's existence were simply a part of an indoctrination process into Whiteness (Paris & Aim, 2017). What if instead, the educational process and

outcomes for students were developed and measured by the values and culture of the very communities in which they resided and flourished allowing for a much more personal experience (Paris & Aim, 2017). Furthermore, instead of viewing these experiences as a moment in time, they must be considered as evolving and expanding life experiences that will change based on the dynamics of not only the culture, but how these experiences mesh uniquely for each and every student (Irizarry, 2007). The research of Django Paris (2009) in California high schools and finally the introduction of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy as presented by Paris & Aims (2014) mark an even deeper examination of not only identifying best practices but insuring that they are lasting.

As a first step in establishing a solid instructional model for addressing quality literacy, there are certain elements that should be found in all literary programs (Rycik & Irvin, 2001). The International Reading Association identified a set of guidelines. The intent was to create a road map for developing and evaluating literacy programs.
By implementing these practices, a common pedagogy can be established to guide literacy instruction and create an instructional model to benefit all students. However, there are many elements to creating a successful framework for instruction. One must also not forget that there is a growing shift in the boundaries of one's literacy interactions. The world is becoming a connected place that is no longer confined by the boundaries of nations and continents. Scholars and educators must now also consider the effect of a globally connected world that allows for types of literary interactions that have never before been considered.

Students need to be given opportunities to interact with high-level text across several different subject matters. This allows for increased comprehension strategies and students become more literate (Luke, 2014). Over the past three decades, an instructional model

known as balanced literacy has emerged (Frey, Lee, Tollefson, Pass & Massengill, 2005). There are several basic components to a balanced literacy approach for high school students. These practices provide a solid base that is grounded in established teaching practices and research.

In 2001, Judith Langer conducted a two-year qualitative study to investigate instructional literacy practices in 25 large suburban and urban high schools in New York, Florida, California, and Texas. The study involved 44 teachers and 88 different English Language Arts classroom settings. The study used field notes, observations, conversations, and document analysis to investigate discrepancies in achievement, as determined by high stakes testing, between high and low achieving students in similar settings. In high achieving schools, teachers planned for a systematic and collaborative approach in all six of these areas. Students were pushed to higher levels of thinking utilizing very targeted strategies. Students were provided opportunities to interact with all types of materials creating varied learning experiences. In schools where students did not perform well, most learning was teacher centered, poorly planned, and consisted of limited instructional interaction and rigor with students working in isolation (Langer, 2010). Studies such as Langer's should allow educators to identify a set of common practices that will have the most impact on student achievement.

High School Building Level Leadership

Effective leadership of any type is a very perplexing characteristic to pinpoint and even harder to define. In his work on leadership practices, Yukl (2002) notes, "the definition of leadership is arbitrary and very subjective. Some definitions are more useful than others,

but there is no 'correct' definition" (pp. 4-5). Regardless of this challenge, the importance of organizational leadership in most settings is hard to refute.

One way to look at leadership is a person's ability, using minimum coercion, to influence and motivate others to perform at a high level of commitment (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). Leadership can also be defined as a combination of the activities engaged in by leaders and their interactions with others in a particular context, around specific tasks, that require a certain level of knowledge (Spillane & Diamond, 2007). As the research around leadership and leadership styles in the field of education has increased, several different theories have evolved. One such theory, Transformational and Transactional Leadership Theory, was first developed by James Burns (1978). Transformational and Transactional Leadership Theory examines what truly motivates people to work and commit to an organization. Kenneth Leithwood (1994) developed a model for understanding Transformational Leadership Theory as applied to school leadership. He demonstrated how the characteristics of this theory applied to the role of a school administrator.

The research of Leithwood (1994) has established that transformational leaders have a high impact on achievement in schools. Furthermore, in low achieving schools, the research has shown that transformational leaders have an even greater impact on student achievement (Southworth, 2002). Marzano's (2003) research states that effective leadership accounts for a 44% difference in pass rates when compared to schools run by ineffective leaders.

Leithwood (1998) was one of the first to conduct a wide scale empirical study to determine the impact of the transformational leadership theory. His research found that transformational leadership did in fact have a major influence on organizational learning and student outcomes. The study was conducted analyzing survey data from over 9000 students

and 2000 teachers. The individuals were chosen at random from 110 buildings in a large Ontario school district (Leithwood, 1998). The schools were divided into groups based on the mean average of the students' scores and grouped by like score ranges. The research examined how teachers and students rated the sources of collective leadership across five of the quintiles. The results of the research indicate that despite achievement level, with regards to building level personal, the building principal was considered by teachers and students in all quintile groups to have the most influence on achievement. These results would be confirmed as further studies were conducted examining the impact of leadership on achievement (Blase & Blase, 2000; Hallinger, 2007; Marzano, 2003; Marks & Printy, 2003; Southworth, 2002). School leadership is an important factor in student's academic success.

Overview of the Methodology and Design

The intent of the proposed narratological, heuristic case study was to explore students' literacy experiences in a Midwestern suburban high school. To begin with, the research utilized a comparative case study, as opposed to an intensive or action research case study. This approach allowed for the comparison of each individual's experience with literacy development during the high school years. The comparison of individual cases to one another was a key element in the comparative case study. The research developed concepts and themes relevant to the topic by carefully examining commonalities found in each case (Cunningham, 1997). Given the nature of the research, there was a need to bind the scope of the case study. A bounded system was an element of case study methodology that allowed the researcher to view a phenomenon during a certain segment in time. By bounding the research to only the high school years, the methodology focused on multiple points of view when examining the phenomenon of literacy achievement during just those years of

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schooling (Creswell, 2013). It was also important to identify the unit of analysis in this particular study. The unit of analysis was the defining feature of the case study, not to be confused with the topic that was researched. In this case study, the unit of analysis was literacy achievement levels during high school. In order to be considered a case study, the unit of analysis must be a singular focus or phenomenon (Merriam, 2002). The focus of this case study was on a particular type of achievement and bound at a specific point in time. The context of the school setting also binds the study. After considering these initial parameters, further attention was given to what type of traditional approach was utilized for the study.

The traditions for this proposed case study was heuristics and narrative. The personal stories and experiences of the study participants were paramount to understanding the phenomenon of literary deficits. By utilizing narratives, the ability to create a better understanding of the phenomenon through first person accounts becomes essential to the process (Riessman, 2008). Therefore, a qualitative research design was chosen to allow for the incorporation of the participant's experiences. Furthermore, narrative traditions allowed the researcher to better understand the depth and breadth of each subject and their stories. The perceptions of the participants were as valuable to the outcome of the research as any other strand of data. Understanding each individual's personal story allowed for the crystallization of themes and patterns. However, the narrative tradition was not the only one being utilized for this research.

This case study was comprised of heuristic traditions. I brought my own experiences from 23 years in urban education. My first ten years in education were spent teaching students in an urban high school. This provided first hand experiences that helped me better understand why urban learners often struggled. The next 12 years of my career were spent as

an administrator in an urban high school. This provided real world experiences that highlighted the struggles faced by teachers daily. These struggles were not only centered around the deficits of individual students, but also what concepts and practices actually defined quality literacy instruction and what the exact mode of delivery needed to be for each student. The totality of the experiences I have had during my educational career, provided an ample foundation for utilizing the heuristic tradition as part of my research.

The site for this research was a suburban Midwestern high school, located in a major metropolitan city. The school has a diverse population of students with regards to both race and ethnicity. The school was 2% American Indian, 8% Asian, 20% Black, 19% Hispanic, 10% multiple races, 1% Pacific Islander, and 41% White (Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2017). The site was comprised of Grades 9 through 12. There was a large population of both English Language Learners and Special Education Students. A sizeable portion of the student body performed below grade level on most standardized measures of literacy achievement. The school population had a high mobility rate, but also had an extremely high graduation rate. Currently, the school graduates over 95% of its students. This site was considered a convenience site as it is a part of the researcher's district of employment. However, the site possessed all the qualities required of this type of research. The site also provided the backdrop needed for a narratological heuristic case study of this nature.

The participants of the study were a cross section of high school age students. The type of sampling was what Maxwell (2013) described as *purposeful sampling*. "In this type of sampling, particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately to provide information that is particularly relevant to your question and goals, and that can't be gotten as

well from other choices" (p. 97). Sandelowski (1995) breaks purposeful sampling down even further by creating three sub-groups; maximum variation, theoretical variation, and phenomenal variation. For this research study, maximum variation sampling, one of the sub-groups defined by Sandelowski (1995), was utilized. In this type of sampling, race, class, gender, and other person-related characteristics were key factors in sampling decisions. These categories were all of significant importance when determining the research participants. The subjects consisted of three males and three female students. The study also included various race and ethnicities. This was done in an attempt to identify cultural tendencies that might also impact the development of literacy skills. In order to insure fidelity to the research and to avoid any type of preconceived bias in the sampling of students, the students reading and writing levels were not known prior to selection.

Data sources for this research included classroom observations, personal documents, and student interviews. The classroom observations were conducted throughout the entirety of the site visits and allowed for a better understanding of how students respond to direct instruction. The observations became useful because of the importance of studying participants in a natural setting. This was a crucial component when trying to gain first-hand knowledge outside the scope of just an interview (Merriam, 1998). Personal documents allowed for the analysis of how student learning progresses. In the case of my research, these documents provided a map for illustrating how the learner responds to individualized instruction, as well as, the effectiveness of the intended instructional targets. These documents included writing samples from various contents at different stages of instruction when possible, as well as, standardized test results. The last component to the data collection process was done through interviews. The interview process is one of the most important

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elements of the case study (Yin, 2017). This allows the researcher to create a systematic line of inquiry that will provide consistency from participant to participant. The interviews were conducted at the school site over a period of a month. Once all the data was collected, the process of analysis is the next logical step.

One of the features of a case study is the use of numerous data strands for analysis. This is done in an attempt to crystalize the data, thereby giving deeper credibility to the data and collection process (Yin, 2011). Once the data strands have been identified, there are several different methods utilized to interpret or analyze the data. Pattern matching, linking data to propositions, explanation building, time-series analysis, logic models, and cross-case synthesis are all possible techniques described by Yin (2009). The analysis of data, also known as coding, should begin immediately following the first interview (Patton, 2015). Coding involves breaking data down into categories or themes and attempting to determine key words or phrases that describe specific segments of data (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). By examining the lines of response from each member of the group, patterns and themes begin to emerge providing insight in to the phenomenon being studied (Patton, 2015). Chapter three expands the understanding of the design and provides further details regarding the methodology of the study, as well as, defining the limitations.

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Significance of the Study

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Literacy instructional practices at the high school level need to be redefined to match the changing needs of students in today's global environment. The significance of this study can be found in its potential to change pedagogical practices in both teacher instruction and school leadership. Current practices fail to address the individualized needs of struggling learners. Furthermore, institutions fail to provide the support necessary for those tasked with

teaching today's students, the teachers. Therefore, in most cases, high schools, as an

institution, are not equipped to provide adequate literacy instruction or support. Failure to

address the current state of high school literacy has dire implications for students.

Students in the United States continue to lag behind their counter parts from other

nations. On an international level, the United States still continues to score in the average

range when comparing the literacy levels of students from other industrialized nations

(Reardon, 2011). If this trend continues, students will suffer as they pursue post-secondary

opportunities. Eventually, American students will find themselves unable to achieve at a

level allowing them to attain the kind of academic and economic future necessary to become

productive citizens in an increasingly competitive global work force.

This research study will hopefully provide educators with the knowledge base to

create meaningful instructional practices. These new tools will further enhance the current

pedagogy utilized by classroom teachers and potentially create a belief system that

recognizes the overall importance of a balanced literacy approach to learning. High school

leadership can utilize the findings of this study to formulate a plan of action and establish the

support systems necessary to create and maintain rich learning environments offering greater

opportunities to develop successful students. Building leaders must become advocates of a

balanced approach to high school literacy. They must infuse buildings with a culture in

which all students can become successful learners. The current literature has identified a

growing learning gap and suggested the potential impact that school leadership can have a

large impact rectifying this problem (Perie, Moran, & Lutkus, 2005; Spillane, 2005). This

study will bridge the gap between the phenomenon that currently exists and potential

solutions to a problem that if not addressed, will have catastrophic implications for current

students and the generation of students to follow.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The intended purpose of this heuristic narratological case study was to describe the educational experiences of a group of students and their literacy development opportunities in an urban high school located in a Midwest metropolitan area. To fully comprehend the decreasing levels of academic achievement for high school students, I bring several assumptions about the foundation knowledge needed to gain an understanding of this phenomena. To accomplish this task, there must be a clear understanding of four key components and their relationships to learning outcomes. First, there must be an understanding of the current achievement gap in the United States. Even more importantly, there must be an analysis of the potential causes of this gap for students of color. Second, there needs to be an understanding of the components that constitute literacy in an individual's life. By understanding these elements, it is possible to construct a working definition of literacy and literary practices. Third, understanding the developmental nature of literacy and the influence of culture in becoming literate translates to instructional strategies that will produce the highest levels of achievement for learners, Finally, an examination of leadership practices found in the current school setting and the potential influence leaders have or do not have on instructional achievement need examination as well.

This literature review was conducted utilizing the resources found in such data bases as Google Scholar, ERIC, EBSCO, and ProQuest. I examined scholarly journals, books, content specific dissertations, and current government reports related to the area of emphasis. My initial searches mainly focused on my four over-arching themes; achievement gap, literacy, instructional practices, and leadership. As expected, the results returned were very

large in nature. For example, my initial search for achievement gap literature produced 679,668 results on ProQuest and 2,510,000 from Google Scholar. Data base tools like Eric and ProQuest were the most useful at narrowing these searches. First, it was easier to sort by result type. My tendency was to focus on journal articles and books. In some areas, different types of reports were useful. I tended to use a similar methodology when researching a topic. First, I would look for something that had been cited many times in other works. This indicated to me that there was some type of foundation or importance to the work. Once I reviewed that work, I would go to its works cited section and look for other sources. One feature of Google Scholar that was very useful was the "related articles" feature to find other scholarly offerings on similar topics. Once, I had identified a topic of interest, for instance, achievement gap, I would work backwards chronologically. I found this allowed me to arrive at the foundation or starting point of a topic. Sometimes, this would provide dated references, but they were important to find to understand the entire scope of a content. Having a historical understanding of each topic was crucial. It was only by working in a linear fashion using a historical timeline that I was able to sort through so much research

When it came to the actual searches, it was a process of working from broad topics to very specific topics. For instance, my research of leadership started with just an overarching treatment of leadership that began by looking at businesses and the military. However, by working backwards I was able to focus on Transformational Leadership in education, as well as, Instructional Leadership. When looking for an understanding on literacy, I had to start by looking at functional literacy during the beginning of the nineteenth century through the 1960s and 1970s; at this point, a shift occurred when literacy was examined through the lens

of ethnography and an anthropological approach to this topic. I eventually arrived at Critical Race theory and related research of achievement and literacy.

Of all the areas I examined, the research on the achievement gap was the most extensive. This required a great deal of focus to narrow the literature to a usable group of sources. The first layer was searching the White-Black achievement gap; which, in turn, led to the need to include an examination of socio-economic factors that impact achievement. The next step was to examine empirical literature and theories of teacher quality. Finally, I returned to the area of Critical Race Theory regarding the achievement gap which gave a much deeper understanding of the phenomenon. The proposed study of the literature was designed to transform the future practices of secondary school practitioners and hopefully create a much deeper understanding of why the current literary practices utilized in high school are not successful.

Analysis and Causes of the Current Achievement Gap

One of the most commonly acknowledge paradigms in education today is the presence of an achievement gap between White students and students of color. The achievement gap, viewed in terms of race, has been prevalent for decades. This gap exists at all grade levels and in all subjects. Most frequently, this gap has been articulated in terms of standardized achievement. Black and Latinx students consistently score lower in reading, writing and mathematics than White students (NCES, 2007). Over the past three decades, students from Black and Latinx backgrounds have been out performed by their White counterparts (Crum, 2008). However, there are several other ways to consider the deficits faced by students of color. In high schools, these gaps can be seen in such things as the drop-out rates. Students who are not academically successfully during high school are more prone

to drop out and less likely to achieve academically during post-secondary schooling (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Maynard, Salas-Wright, & Vaughn, 2015). Low academic achievement is a consistent predictor utilized by many researchers when quantifying the chances of a student dropping out of school (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Márquez-Vera, et al., 2016; Swanson & Schneider, 1999; Thammasiri, Delen, Meesad, & Kasap, 2014). Students of color have a significantly higher drop-out rate than their White counter parts. Gaps are also present in the number of advanced and dual credit courses taken by each group. White students can be found to take upper level courses at a rate of almost two to one versus students of color (Yeung, & Conley, 2008). In post-secondary opportunities, this deficit is played out in the number of students accepted to colleges and universities. The number of White students graduating from colleges with advanced degrees is higher again than students of color (Howard, 2010). These are just a few of the ways to consider the achievement gap and educational deficits that have been faced by Black and Latinx students for decades. However, in the end, the achievement gap speaks the loudest to the current plight of students of color.

When evaluating learning gaps, the typical methodology utilized is to examine a student's performance and compare that to what they are expected to do at a given age or grade level (Schumaker, et al., 2006). To determine achievement levels, schools must utilize some form of standardized testing. The most common and widely used tool is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The NAEP is administered to students in grades 4, 8 and 12. The results of these tests are used to generate the Nation's Report Card. This report is the work of National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Other mechanisms utilized are the work produced by American College Testing (ACT) various

national and state norm referenced tests, and some local assessment items (Perie, Moran, & Lutkus, 2005). For the purposes of this literature review, the primary focus will be on the achievement levels of students in the areas of reading and writing; otherwise known as literacy

The examination of the achievement data reveals some troubling trends for high school students in general when compared to younger students. The NAEP scores from 1970 to 1988 showed no significant decline in achievement levels but remained essentially the same for grades four through eight (NCES, 2013). Between 1992 and 2012, NAEP fourth grade reading scores remained unchanged. The scores of Grade 8 students rose slightly from 260 to 262. However, Grade 12 reading scores *declined* by five points from 292 in 1992 to 287 in 2009 (NCES, 2013) with scores dipping in 1994, slight rise again in 1998, and remaining relatively flat until 2009. Research conducted by ACT suggests that a drop off in college ready literacy occurs between Grade 8 and Grade 12. The basis of this conclusion is that Grade 8 and Grade 10 scores indicate there should be a higher number of college level readers based on EXPLORER and PLAN results (ACT, 2006). These numbers do not equate to the levels produced by the ACT results of 12th graders. By examining the research further, group data achievement numbers become even more alarming.

Student achievement data when utilized to examine gaps based on race can be disheartening. During the decades of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, there was a consistent decrease in the achievement gap between White students and students of color (Haycock, 2001). However, this all began to change during the 1990s. While the gap between White students and students of color has not grown any wider, it has also not narrowed statistically at all over the past twenty years (Snow, & Biancarosa, 2003). Regardless of the tool utilized

to measure literacy achievement, the data always present an irrefutable truth; overall, a "performance gap" exists at basically every grade level in the United States for Black and Latinx students when compared to White students. Only 16% of Black high school seniors and 20% of Latinx high school seniors scored at or above proficient on the 2012 NAEP reading test, compared to 43% of White students (NCES, 2013). White and Asian/Pacific Islander high school seniors typically score between 15-26 points higher overall than Black and Latinx in all areas of measure (NCES, 2013). This is a trend that has been consistent for almost two decades. When considering the average achievement levels of students by race and ethnicity, there is an obvious achievement gap. Research has shown over and over again that there is a consistent achievement gap between White students and students of color. This gap holds at all grade levels and across subject matters (NCES, 2013). While there have been periods that have seen the gap narrow, the last two decades have seen stagnation in this trend. Since there is no real disagreement amongst educators as to the existence of the achievement gap, the next step in the process is examining the possible causes of the sustained deficits faced by students of color and considering potential solutions.

There is no shortage of research attempting to find correlations between the achievement gap and extenuating circumstances that are potentially the root cause of these issues and potentially predictive in nature. In general, these possible circumstances fall into three broad categories; socio-economic factors, cultural elements, and school-based factors (Jeynes, 2014).

Socio-economic Factors

Of the three broadly defined elements that potentially impact the achievement gap, the one that has probably received the most attention over the past decades is the socio-

economic or poverty correlation to achievement. As a group, low income students historically perform worse on academic standards of measure than students who come from wealthier backgrounds (Yeung & Conley, 2008). When comparing decades and reading achievement gaps, the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s saw a gap, but it remained relatively constant during this time period even decreasing during some periods. However, for students born after the mid-1970s that gap has increased by almost 40% (Bohrnstedt, Kitmitto, Ogut, Sherman, & Chan, 2015). This is further demonstrated by a survey of composite scores of students taking the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT).

Student composite scores were averaged and reported based on their family income bracket. Besides just SAT scores, students at all grade levels, who come from low-income backgrounds, have significantly lower academic achievement levels when compared to students from higher income families (Clark, 2002; Lacour, &Tissington, 2011). The data collected around the administration of the NAEP also support this contention. The results reveal that the performance gap can be linked to low socio-economic status (NCES, 2013). Black and Latinx students consistently score lower in reading and writing than White students (NCES, 2013). Those students have a family income gap that correlates closely with the achievement gap. This pattern applies across grade levels tested and in every state in the United States that participated in administering the NAEP from 1992 through 2007 (NCES, 2007a). Besides income levels predicting the gap, families that are close to or below the poverty line also face disparities in the quality of education their students receive.

There is a trickle-down effect that plagues families from low-income neighborhoods beyond the quality of life they lead. Most low-income neighborhoods are impoverished to some degree. This leads to several extenuating circumstances. First, there is typically not a

large retail presence in these areas. This is because there is not a large amount of disposable income (Reardon, 2011). The second is a substantial lack of home ownership. In most cases, individuals in low-income areas are tenant renters of some type. Finally, there is a low rate of civic expenditures in these neighborhoods (Lee & Burkam, 2002). All of these elements combine to create a situation in which there is a limited influx of tax money into the community. Historically, the status-quo in education has been to use tax dollars where the money is spent. Put another way, communities with a large cash flow generated by taxes expect that money to be spent on those communities' students. Therefore, the per-pupil spending in suburban areas versus urban areas is dramatically different (Reardon, 2011).

When considering some of the larger populations in the United States, discrepancies become very easy to see. In Chicago, the average spending per year on a student in the public-school system is roughly $8482 annually. The Chicago public schools are approximately 87% Black and Latinx. In the much wealthier area of Highland Park, which is 90% White, the per pupil average is $17,921 or double the urban areas. In New York, the public-school system spends approximately $11,627 per pupil with a student population that is 72% Black and Latinx. In suburban Manhasset, the spending is $22,311 and the population is 91% White. Finally, in the Philadelphia school district, the per pupil cost is $9,299, where 79% of the students are Black and Latinx. In Lower Marion, a suburb of Philadelphia that is also 91% White, amount per student is $17,261 (Ladson-Billings, 2006). This type of disparity in spending impacts all the elements of the educational process. Students in urban neighborhoods are likely subjected to inferior buildings and have fewer resources at their disposal within the walls of those dilapidated buildings (Evans & Rosenbaum, 2008). The pay for teachers and support staff is often sub-standard and creates an outflow of all the best

teachers who leave to seek higher wages (Lacour, & Tissington, 2011). Across the board, the socio-economic factors at play create barriers to success that are very difficult to overcome. However, there is more working against students of color than the impact of money. In many cases, the real issue is what is going on inside the school and not outside the school.

School-based Factors

Students who come from impoverished areas at times face insurmountable odds. Besides socio-economic factors, there are other elements that potentially have a major impact on student achievement outcomes. One of these factors can be categorized as school-based (Jeynes, 2014). This would include anything that happens within the school setting that plays a role in student achievement. Given this setting, one of the largest hurdles potentially impeding student achievement is the classroom teacher (Milner, 2010). In many cases, when a student from a poor, urban neighborhood walks through the classroom door, they are at a distinct disadvantage before they ever open a book.

There has been an ample amount of research conducted with regards to the impact teacher quality has on student achievement. Within this research, there has been an intense focus on teacher quality within urban classrooms and how ineffective teachers have potentially contributed to the current achievement gap between White students and students of color (Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2015; Jerald, & Ingersoll, 2002; Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002; Milner, 2014; Peske, & Haycock, 2006). These studies have examined the quality of teachers by focusing on specific characteristics that are important to the quality of instruction students receive. Some of these characteristics include, experience level, advanced degrees held, certification status, college/universities attended, and even depth of content knowledge. When considering

student achievement, there must be an underlying belief that better instruction for students is heavily impacted by teacher quality. Therefore, teacher quality must be defined by either possessing or lacking some, if not all, of these characteristics (DeSimone & Long, 2010). The research results continuously show that students in poor urban areas are disproportionately taught by less qualified staff having a dramatic impact on over all achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2005; Jerald & Ingersoll, 2002; Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002).

There are many factors at play when examining teacher quality and why instruction might potentially be sub-standard in urban classrooms. As previously mentioned, there are certain characteristics that impactful teachers possess (Milner, 2008). When a classroom teacher is void of these characteristics, students suffer. Consider the situation of students in elementary and middle school grades. In high-poverty, culturally diverse middle schools, seven out of ten instructors who are teaching do not hold a certification in math and do not even hold a major or minor degree in the subject (Peske & Haycock, 2006). When these same students, taught by less qualified teachers, reach the high school level the problem continues. One in three core classes are taught by teachers with no certification in that field (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Even more troubling, when considering all high school classes, again, only one in three teachers has a certification in the area they are teaching (Brewer & Goldhaber, 2000). These numbers are staggering, but when coupled with other characteristics within the classroom, they become absolutely frightening.

Another characteristic of teacher quality that has been shown to dramatically impact the effectiveness of instruction is years of experience. Schools that have a high degree of poverty and a high number of students of color are disproportionately assigned teachers who are brand new in the education profession. When comparing high poverty schools to low

poverty schools, high poverty schools have in many cases double the number of brand-new teachers. Peske and Haycock, (2006), conducted research sponsored by the Education Trust. They examined teacher quality and distribution in three areas: Cleveland, Ohio; Chicago, Illinois; and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In each of these three areas, teams of researchers were pulled together to examine the distribution patterns and characteristics of the teachers in individual schools. They found in all three cities, there was an enormous disparity in years of experience and assignments across the school systems. Schools in Milwaukee with the highest poverty and highest students of color found 48% of the teachers had less than five years' experience. In these same schools, 28% of the teachers had less than three years of experience. These types of findings held consistent in all three school systems. Consistently, students of color in and high poverty schools had the highest amount of novice teachers by an almost two to one ratio. Unfortunately, given all the research data that point to the impact that teacher quality has on student achievement, there is very little understanding as to why teachers end up in the locations they do (Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002).

Currently, limited research exits that examines why and how districts sort their teachers in the manner they do. There have been several hypotheses as to why these patterns exist. However, there is no real empirical evidence to support any real conclusion as this has yet to be a focus of any substantial research. Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, (2002), suggest four possible reasons. First, they suggest residential preferences may dictate hiring practices. Many times, communities want teachers with similar backgrounds and experiences as their students. A second factor might be the efficiency of hiring practices. Some districts are effective at hiring better teachers by effectively recruiting, hiring earlier, and offering better salaries. This increases the likelihood of employing higher quality teachers. A third potential

factor might be that within districts, some schools carry more political clout. It is easier for them to have ineffective teachers transferred to other schools, thereby increasing the quality teacher pool by weeding out the potentially ineffective teachers. Finally, the last possible factor is teacher preference. Ultimately, teachers have the final say so in where their services are rendered. They are swayed by many things, such as, salary, school location, class sizes, subjects taught and even student population make-up to name a few. Unfortunately, there just is not enough current information and research data to pin point how this sorting process takes places in an attempt to alter some of the current realities being faced by poor students of color. For now, the focus must continue to be on raising the quality of all teachers in the classrooms of marginalized students. However, as research would point out over the decades, teacher quality was not the only thing that had a significant influence on achievement gaps. There were other elements that needed to be considered.

A disproportionate number of Black and Latinx students, when compared to White students, live in poverty in this nation. This has created predominantly Black and Latinx urban student populations all across the United States that now make up the majority of students who are educated in this country (Paris & Alim, 2017). Urban students frequently attend sub-standard schools that offer sub-standard resources. This becomes a driving force in helping to create an achievement gap. Because these problems become cyclical, the ability to address the issue of literacy education in urban school districts becomes an even greater problem to address (Flood & Anders, 2005). As is always the case with urban students, there are several issues that play a predominant role in poor academic performance levels. These issues include funding inequity, poverty, high student and teacher mobility, a home–school "disconnect," and lack of adequate teacher preparation to name a few (Brewer & Goldhaber,

2000; Clark, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2010; DeSimone & Long, 2010; Milner, 2008). Not only is there growing concern over stagnate literacy achievement numbers in the United States, a closer examination of the research data show that students from Black and Latinx backgrounds suffer from even lower rates of achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2005; Haycock, 2001; Jerald & Ingersoll, 2002; Lacour, &Tissington, 2011; NCES, 2013). Finally, add to the mix a low socio-economic status and some students often appear to face insurmountable odds. However, research has revealed that there are areas of hope in closing the achievement gap if education is willing to shift its focus to potential solutions beyond what has been the traditional way of doing things.

Cultural Elements

In 2015, William Jeynes published his findings to address the question of how best to reduce the achievement gap. This research was a meta-analysis which included the examination of 30 previous studies which were attempts to bridge the achievement gap for Black and Latinx students. To be included in his research, the studies also had to meet four criteria:

1. The study needed to examine the achievement gap and the specific independent variables in a way that could be conceptually and statistically distinguished from other primary variables under consideration. For example, if a researcher implemented a program that involved nine key features, including an attempt to decrease the achievement gap and the influence of the nine features could not be statistically isolated from the other features; the study was not included in the analysis.

2. The study needed to include a sufficient amount of statistical information to

determine effect sizes. That is, a study needed to contain enough information so that test statistics, such as those resulting from a t test, analysis of variance, and so forth, were either provided in the study or could be determined from the means and measures of variance listed in the study.

3. If the study used a control group, it had to qualify as a true control group and therefore be a fair and accurate means of comparison. Moreover, if the research utilized a control group at sometimes but not others, only the former comparisons were included in the meta-analysis.

4. The study could be a published or unpublished study. This was to reduce the likelihood of publication bias (p. 529).

Once the studies had been identified, they sought to answer two questions. First, were efforts to initiate programs or identify factors to reduce the achievement gap generally successful? Second, were there specific factors possibly associated with the reduction of the achievement gap (Jeynes, 2015)? This focus would produce some surprising results.

When examining the studies and attempting to answer the proposed questions, the meta-analysis failed to produce a desired outcome with regards to question number one. The studies failed to identify any strong relationships that correlated to a statistically significant effect size. However, attempting to provide answers for question number two provided some surprising results. This time, the analysis was able to identify certain factors that were associated with the reduction of the achievement gap. The factor that had the largest impact on closing the achievement gap for Black and Latinx students was religiosity. The results, as shown in Table 1, that had the highest effect size and suggested the largest potential yield for

Black and Latinx students was personal religious faith or a student's religiosity. However,

there were other areas of impact:

Table 1

Effects Sizes for a Reduction in the Achievement Gap for Factors Differentiated in the Preliminary Meta-Analysis (Jeynes, 2014).

Variables examined in the reduction of the achievement gap	Overall effect size for reduction in the racial achievement gap	Effect size for reduction in the racial achievement gap without sophisticated controls	Effect size for reduction in the racial achievement gap with sophisticated controls
Classroom structure	.25	.25	NA
Cultural factors	.02	.02	NA
Curriculum	.22* [.02, .42]	.22* [.02, .42]	NA
Family factors	.22** [.08, .36]	.21* [.03, .39]	.23* [.04, .42]
Government policy	−.09	−.09	NA
High expectations in	.23	.23	NA
Religious faith	.35* [.05, .65]	.40* [.06, .74]	.30* [.04, .56]
Religiously oriented schools	.16* [.01, .31]	.20* [.02, .38]	.12

Note. NA = not applicable.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

There is a certain element of irony in these findings. There are few if any public schools that

consider the personal faith of their students when making instructional decisions. To the

contrary, most public institutions shy away from such cultural matters as they are seen to be

taboo for schools. Family factors and curriculum also showed potential in reducing the

achievement gap. Jeynes' (2014) study identified areas outside the school community that

can potentially support the efforts of closing the achievement gap. However, the concept of

religiosity proposed by Jeynes (2014) was just one option that held promise in potentially

aiding in closing the achievement gap. There were other cultural elements to be considered.

In 2014, research focusing on the needs of English Language Learner (ELL) students addressed school-based factors and the willingness of teachers, both novice and experience, to value the cultural capital that students bring to school with them from their homes and communities (Drake, 2014). Cultural capital was first used as a concept by Bourdieu (1977). He utilized this concept as a way to analyze how culture and education interacted and how this interaction contributed to social inequality. Drake uses Yosso's concept of Linguistic capital to emphasize the assets students from communities of color bring to school that can build bridges to literacy and close the achievement gap.

Drake (2014) noted some second-langue theorists have suggested that "contact with the English language through native-language speakers is critical in developing proficiency in a second language" (p. 328). This has been the opposite of school language polices that contend children "whose native language is not English" (p. 327) or ELL students should be isolated from native speakers to achieve success at all levels of schooling, including high school (Drake). Other researchers have pointed to the cultural capital (Yosso, 2005) that exists in neighborhoods described as high linguistic isolation enclaves where students learning another language out-performed their peers in low linguistic neighborhoods. Yosso (2005) asserts "community wealth is an array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and utilized by communities of color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression" (p. 77). One of these being linguistic capital of students of color, defined by Yosso as follows:

> Linguistic capital reflects the idea that Students of Color arrive at school with multiple language and communication skills. In addition, these children most often have been engaged participants with storytelling tradition, that may include listening to and recounting oral histories, parables, stories parables, stories (*cuentos*) and proverbs (*dichos*). This repertoire of storytelling skills may include memorization,

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attention to detail, dramatic pauses, comedic timing, facial affect, vocal tone, volume, rhythm and rhyme. Linguistic capital also refers to the ability to communicate via visual art, music or poetry. (pp. 78-79)

With the above concepts in mind, Drake (2014) used data from a national sample of 10th grade LM ("Language Minority", p. 327) students, he followed from high school to college and eventually to work, and the 2000 U.S. Census to learn about how living in linguistic isolated communities might affect their achievement. He defined linguistic isolation as one or two languages, other than English that existed in a zip code. Drake asked the question: "What is the effect of community linguistic isolation on LM ["Language Minority" (p. 327)] student achievement in high school?" Using Yosso (2005)'s theory of cultural wealth, he also defined linguistic isolation as a "measure of a community's cultural wealth, or forms of capital that included aspirational, navigational, resistant, familial, social, and linguistic capital" (p. 328). He incorporated data from the Educational Longitudinal Study (ELS) (2002) combined with census data used to describe communities. "The ELS is a multilevel study, with questionnaires collecting data from students, parents, teachers, and administrators" (p. 329). This information was useful for learning about student and family backgrounds as well as individual schools. Cognitive Measures of reading and math for the ELS were obtained from frameworks used in the "National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS:88), and items from previous assessments, including NELS:88, National Assessment of Educational Progress, and the Organizational for Economic Co-operational and Development Program for International Student Assessment (ELS,2004)" (Drake, p. 330).

Drake (2014) concluded in linguistically isolated communities with adults "(ages 15 years and older)" (p. 328) that speak another language and are not competent English speakers, schools can learn about what goes on in these communities "where LM test score

gaps are reduced by 31% and 68% in reading and math respectively" (p. 337). Advocating

for linguistic isolated communities is not the appropriate policy response; however, future

research should explore the qualitative differences in school and community contexts toward

"uncovering the interaction between home, community and school environments, and their

relationship to LM student achievement" (Drake, p. 337). For a school system, this can seem

like a daunting task to try and overcome. There are so many potential solutions to be

considered and none of them appear to address the needs of all the students. Unfortunately,

there are cultural elements that still must be addressed.

One of the central tensions found between research findings and current instructional

practices is a focus on deficit thinking. By today's standards, deficit thinking is a modern-

day form of racism. This position believes that students of color come into schools lacking

any type of cultural knowledge and limited skills. It further believes that family units neither

value education or offer very little support (Yosso, 2005). In order to truly address the

achievement gap, schools are going to have to embrace a position that finds value in the

cultural capital of all students.

Yosso (2005) examines cultural capital at length. By using a lens of Critical Race

Theory (CRT), he shifts the discussion from one of defect to that of wealth. He identifies six

types of capital that could potentially provide wealth for students of color. They are

aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant capital. They are defined as

follows:

- *Aspirational capital* refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers.

- *Linguistic capital* includes the intellectual and social skills attained through

communication experiences in more than one language and/or style.

- *Familial capital* refers to those cultural knowledges nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition.

- *Social capital* can be understood as networks of people and community resources. These peer and other social contacts can provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society's institutions.

- *Navigational capital* refers to skills of maneuvering through social institutions. Historically, this infers the ability to maneuver through institutions not created with Communities of Color in mind.

- *Resistant capital* refers those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality. (pp. 77-81)

All six types of capital form a type of community wealth that should be embraced and valued not just within that community, but by society as a whole. It will only be through the acceptance of the community cultural wealth of all students that research practices outlined by study after study will begin to have an effect on student achievement. Sometimes the best place to start is by focusing on the school-based factors that have the greatest potential for making a difference in the lives of students. By blending into these practices cultural capital that is representative of all, new outcomes can be expected. In order to proceed down that path, practitioners must first have a working definition and understanding of literacy.

Working Definition of Literacy

It is impossible to discuss the definition of literacy without also discussing the context in which literacy occurs – in this case the classroom. To define something such as literacy, one must first know the circumstances of the use of the term. If we speak of literacy in terms

of reading a manual for a job, the context defines what literacy is at that moment. However, if literacy is the exchange between a mother and daughter while the mother teaches the daughter to cook a recipe that has been passed down for generations, defining that type of literacy becomes something completely different. Context is everything when determining how to define a concept as complex as literacy. Therefore, trying to establish a simple working definition of literacy can be a daunting task (Keefe & Copeland, 2011; Koppenhaver,1995; Roberts, 1995).

Historically, the acquisition of the ability to read and write by a nation's citizens was considered to be a crucial component of economic, technologic, and physical growth (Kirsch & Guthrie, 1977). The goal in many industrialized nations has always been to establish a level of "functional literacy". The term functional literacy was first coined during World War I. Functional literacy was used to define the skills needed by a soldier during war time (Harmon, 1970). This approach to literacy utilized during the early and middle part of the twentieth century focused on the enhancement of cognitive skills (Bloome, 1987). Literacy was thought to be important because it improved the economic conditions of it citizens. The intent was to provide the citizenry of the country with improved social and economic conditions. This type of literacy would come to be known as an *autonomous* model and be shaped by Western Eurocentric thinking. The need for functional literacy would be the driving force of school pedagogy and practices for decades (Hull & Schultz, 2001). Unfortunately, one of the underlying problems with defining literacy is the inability to isolate and agree upon the different contexts in which literacy occurs. During the early decades of school-based literacy instruction, the definition of literacy was tied to the concept of economic enhancement. However, as more and more research focused on literacy and the

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acquisition of literate skills, it became clear that literacy existed outside the realm of simple functional literacy and there was a need for a broader understanding of contextual literacy.

Changing Views of Literacy

In the 1960's and 1970's there was a literacy renaissance driven by new areas of research and study. The impetus of this rebirth the research of anthropologists and linguist who were trying to better understand the use of language within different cultures (Hull & Schultz, 2001). The utilization of research by those outside the field of education would begin to introduce a new way of thinking about literacy. Soon this research led scholars to apply some of the initial findings to educational settings. The original shift in focus was spawned by a growing concern that students of color were not doing well in school (Morrell, 2015). In 1965, commissioned by the U.S. Office of Education as part of President Johnson's Great Society Program, a group of scholars examined school success and language acquisition. The intent was to try and determine if a correlation existed between current schooling practices and the continued failure of low-income, students of color (Cazden, 1981). Findings suggested that discontinuities between how language was used at home and in the school community played a crucial role in the struggles of students of color (Cazden, John, & Hymes, 1972). The diverse contexts of socialization were not played out in school settings. Therefore, the school experience was different for all students. Some managed to be successful while others continued to fail (Hull & Schultz, 2001). As scholars were beginning to consider the context within which literacy occurred, they were also starting to turn those contexts into defined categories.

Some of the early research called for the use of three broad literacy categories. The first is instrumental, such as, the ability to read a newspaper. The second is social, such as,

possession of functions deemed necessary for survival. The third is philosophic, such as, the capacity for critical thinking and social action (Resnick & Resnick, 1977). Research conducted by Northcutt (1975) attempted to employ topical categories, such as, Occupational, Health, Government, Community, etc. Mikulecky, Shanklin, and Caverly (1978) conducted a random survey of over 500 adults. The survey established the following purposes for adult reading, as perceived by the interview subjects, in order of importance:

1. To keep up with what is going on.

2. For relaxation and personal enjoyment.

3. To find out how to get something done.

4. To study for personal and occupational advancement.

5. To discuss what has been read with friends. (p. 61)

These were very broad and loosely defined categories. They did not come close to providing a clear understanding of how literacy is intertwined in the lives of everyday people. Therefore, attempting to define literacy was still an arduous task at best. However, the next wave of research would provide an even better understanding of literacy and allow for new ways of seeing literacy context.

During the 1980s, literacy research would take another giant step forward. The transition would begin with the work of John Szwed (1981). He challenged that research had yet to conceptualize literacy. Szwed expanded the area by stating that there was still no understanding of the role of reading and writing in a students' social life. Schools were not considering the literacy that students were learning outside of school. The push by Szwed would entice researchers to examine the relationship of schools and the outside world in a much more intricate fashion (Hull & Schultz, 2002). These studies ultimately led to the

concept of *multiple literacies* (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008; Gee, 1996; Hornberger, 2001; Li, & Wang, 2016; Shuman, 1993; Weinstein-Shr, 1993). Scribner (1984) points out, the answer to a truly understanding literacy should be focused beyond the need of the individual person. By attempting to identify individual needs, educators are missing possibly the most important component of literacy needs:

> Most efforts at definitional determination are based on a conception of literacy as an attribute of individuals; they aim to describe constituents of literacy in terms of individual abilities. But the single most compelling fact about literacy is that it is a social achievement; individuals in societies without writing systems do not become literate.... Since social literacy practices vary in time and space, what qualifies as individual literacy varies with them. Literacy has neither a static nor a universal essence. (Scribner, 1984, pp 7-8)

What was becoming clearer, as more research became available, is that to understand what literacy truly is, there is not a single notion as to its place in instruction (Barton, & Hamilton, 2012). Therefore, the idea of one definition of literacy soon seemed sophomoric. In order to define and ultimatly understand literacy, the first question has to be what is the reason students are reading and writing and in what context?

In 1981, Scribner and Cole published their research which had been conducted in Liberia. Specifically, they researched an indigenous group of people known as the Vai (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000). There were a couple of unique factors that dramatically helped with the study's outcomes. First, the Vai had a unique writing system that was specific to their people. They had invented it. This language was learned outside of the school setting and was utilized within their culture for specific tasks, such as, record keeping and letter writing (Brandt, & Clinton, 2002). Individuals who learned to read and write in English only received that training in schools. Therefore, Scribner and Cole (1981) had the ability to research three very distinct group of individuals. There were those who had

experienced literacy solely through school, solely through cultural interactions, and a combination of both. This allowed for the testing of the theory that somehow cognitive ability and literacy were not only related, but one predicted the other (Hull & Schultz, 2002). What the research revealed was that Vai literacy utilized multiple methods of engaging literacy just like those who received instruction in school. However, the research also demonstrated that those who had engaged literacy from the schooling system did not have a higher aptitude for learning than those who engaged other forms of literacy outside the school setting (Hull & Schultz). Scribner and Cole (1981) were also able to show that the different ways in which the Vai engaged literacy fostered specialized forms of thinking. This meant that different types of literacy interactions could foster different skills (Cope, & Kalantzis, 2000). In the end, Scribner and Cole would be the first researchers to acknowledge that in fact literacy was not an autonomous act, but one built on *Literacy practices.*

For decades, scholars and educators alike viewed the process of becoming literate as an isolated practice controlled primarily by the schools (Pahl & Rowsell, 2012). The researches of the 1970's and 80's would finally dispel these notions. Two studies in particular were paramount in this shift. Scribner and Cole (1981) produced some of the first research to show that literacy was not an isolated, teachable skill (Street, 2002). Rather it was a series of practices that built upon themselves and were most of the time not inter-connected. In *The Psychology of Literacy,* Scribner and Cole (1981) defined what they had come to believe a literary practice was:

> a recurrent, goal-directed sequence of activities using a particular technology and particular systems of knowledge. Literacy is not simply knowing how to read and write a particular script but applying this knowledge for specific purposes in specific contexts of use. In order to identify the consequences of literacy, we need to consider the specific characteristics of specific practices. (p. 236-237)

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They would be credited as the first to use the phrase *literacy practices*. This marked the beginning of the idea that literacy was made up of multiple interactions to build on ability.

The second study that played a major role in this new way of conceptualizing literacy was the previously discussed work of Bryce-Heath (1983). Bryce-Heath would define the elements of the *literacy event*. From her research, Bryce-Heath (1983) conceptualized these events as a type of social action. The action, most of the time, centered around a piece of writing and it was the writing that dictated the way people interacted. Generally, *literacy events* are observable happenings, such as, composing a text. The combination of both *literacy practices* and *literacy events* would allow literacy to be understood in a more concrete fashion. However, there were other outcomes from Bryce-Heath's (1983) work that would prove valuable as well. The research helped to expand the categories of how one interacted with literacy or the context in which it occurred. From her work in the Piedmont region, Bryce-Heath (1983) would develop a list of meaningful literacy purposes and uses:

- Instrumental: Information about practical problems, such as, price tags, checks, bills, ads, street signs, house numbers.

- Social interactional: information for social relationships, such as, greeting cards, cartoons, bumper stickers, posters, letters, newspaper features, recipes.

- News-related: information about third parties or distant events, such as, newspaper items, political flyers, or messages from government offices.

- Memory-supportive: memory aids, such as, messages on calendars, address and telephone books, or inoculation records.

- Substitutes for oral messages: notes for tardiness to school, message left by parent for child.

- Provision of permanent record (birth certificates, loan notes, tax forms).

- Confirmation: support for currently held ideas and attitudes, such as, brochures on cars, the Bible, directions for putting items together (Bryce-Heath, 1983).

Bryce-Heath's research also reaffirmed the findings of Gilmore and Glatthorn (1982). In their work, released as a collection of educational ethnographies entitled *Children in and Out of School* (Gilmore & Glatthorn, 1982), the assertion was made that school and community belief systems infrequently matched. This would become known as continuity-discontinuity theory (Jacobs & Jordan, 1993). Identifying the different ways people engage in literacy was an important first step. However, if formal schooling was going to take into cultural transmission, then the exchange of influences between community and school needed to be studied more in depth.

What becomes apparent from these studies is that in order to understand and ultimately define literacy, educators must break free from the autonomous model that had existed previously (Street, 1984). In this model, autonomous literacy is viewed as a set of defined skills that are applicable across varied contents. Unfortunately, the autonomous model does not consider the various needs and experiences of the students when creating pedagogy (Street, 1995). Literacy must be examined as a series of practices to be identified more clearly and understood in terms of the overall contexts in which these events occur. The research of the 1970's and 1980's allowed for a better understanding of how to define literacy. This research was also paramount in dispelling some of the old myths that had led to counter-productive instructional practices for decades. These practices were based on the flawed contexts in which educators assumed literacy existed. Therefore, the definition of literacy was never truly accurate.

An Understanding of Context

In 1998, David Barton and Mary Hamilton published their landmark research study, *Local Literacies-Reading and Writing in One Community.* This was the culmination of a six-year study that took place in Springside, a neighborhood in Lancaster England. This research would be considered one of the seminal works on literacy. The study would lay the foundation for most of the research conducted in this arena for the next two decades. It caused a shift away from an autonomous acquisition of skills towards a deeper understanding of the broad reaching influences that actually shaped literacy and literacy instruction. From their research, Barton and Hamilton (1998) would offer six propositions regarding the nature of literacy:

- Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these can be inferred from events which are mediated by written texts. [e.g., baking a pie]

- There are different literacies associated with different domains of life. [e.g., film, cultural, computer, academic, and work place literacy]

- Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies become more dominant, visible and influential than others. [e.g., family, religion, libraries, and education]

- Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices. [e.g., cooking, caring for others, reading clubs, political participation, and membership in communities]

- Literacy is historically situated. [both culturally and individually]

- Literacy practices change, and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making. [in specific vernacular and formal settings]. (pp. 31-32)

These ideas formed the basis of what would develop into our current day understandings of

literacy and would also be instrumental in the new approaches to classroom instruction and

pedagogy.

The work of Barton and Hamilton (1998) would finally start to pull all the

components of literacy together into a framework that could be understood. Basically,

literacy events and *literacy practices* are all components of *literary social practices*. In their

book, *Local Literacies: Reading and Writing in One Community* (1998), they explained

literacy this way:

> Literacy is primarily something people do; it is an activity, located in the space
> between thought and text. Literacy does not just reside in people's heads as a set of
> skills to be learned, and it does not just reside on paper, captured as texts to be
> analyzed. Like all human activity, literacy is essentially social, and it is located in the
> interactions between people. (p. 3)

This move away from viewing literacy as deficit learning, where by the individual was

acquiring skills that had previously not existed, was inevitable. Literacy was no longer

viewed in terms of absolute levels of skill (Barton, 1994). Literacy was now a social practice

with a need to better understand the many ways in which individuals engage in the many

diverse and socially rich practices experienced in everyday life (Street, 1995).

Toward a Working Definition

As the idea of how to view literacy and the contexts in which it exists has developed,

so too has our ability to define it. The research of the 1980s not only helped to expand the

view of literacy, it helped to clear up some misconceptions about literacy. First, no longer

could literacy be viewed as unitary. Literacy was not a single "thing" that was the same for

everyone. There had been this notion that if one was "literate" they were in possession of this

"thing". Those that were illiterate were not in possession of the "thing" (Lankshear &

Lawler, 1987). The second misconception about literacy that was dispelled was the idea that literacy was somehow neutral. There had been the misinformed idea that literacy was distinct from its setting. It was not swayed by any particular set of values, practices interests, or doctrine (Lankshear & Lawler, 1987). Of course, the research of the 1980s and 1990s dispelled these notions.

In his work, Knoblauch (1990) cautioned, "Literacy is one of those mischievous concepts, like virtuousness and craftsmanship, that appear to denote capacities but that actually convey value judgments" (p. 74). Through all the research and studies focused on literacy during the past three decades, one thing has become clear, one is doomed to failure if the sole purpose is to find one universal, accepted by all definition of literacy (Keefe & Copeland, 2011; Roberts, 1995). Koppenhaver, Pierce, & Yoder (1995) describes literacy as existing on a continuum. This means that literacy develops across the entirety of an individual's life and the definition changes over that lifetime. This would then mean that there is no such thing as a singular definition that is defined by the narrow scope of one being either literate or non-literate (Kliewer & Biklen, 2007; Downing, 2005). The quest should then become attempting to identify a set of core principles that capture the essence of literacy.

In their work examining literacy definitions and practices for students facing significant literacy defects, Keefe and Copeland (2011) authored a set of what they deemed to be *Core Definitional Principles* in the hope of better understanding the nature of what literacy is and is not. The five core principles were:

1. All people are capable of acquiring literacy.

2. Literacy is a human right and is a fundamental part of the human experience.

3. Literacy is not a trait that resides solely in the individual person. It requires and creates a connection (relationship) with others.

4. Literacy includes communication, contact, and the expectation that interaction is possible for all individuals; literacy has the potential to lead to empowerment.

5. Literacy is the collective responsibility of every individual in the community; that is, to develop meaning making with all human modes of communication to transmit and receive information. (p. 97)

These five beliefs help to give perspective to all the elements that come into to play when examining literacy. Literacy is constructed through human activity and will be something that changes over time and is defined in part by the contextual setting (Meek, 1991). Education will never be able to settle in on one basic definition of literacy as long the continuum of literacy shifts and changes over time. Teachers must learn to embrace certain core beliefs and adjust the instructional process given the life experiences of those in their class.

For many decades, the driving force for the changing understanding of literacy was economical (Neuman & Dickinson, 2003). In most cases, the job of the school was to mirror the work requirements as defined by the economic engine of the country. However, in recent decades the target has moved as to what constitutes literacy and exactly what its role in society truly should be. Today, literacy has evolved to mean the level of proficiency required for effective performance in a range of settings and customary activities (Scribner, 1997). In order to understand these changes, one must first understand the contexts in which literacy is proliferated. There is a growing trend in society that is moving reading content away from what education use to consider relevant. The reading of fiction, poetry, plays, etc. by students

and the average citizen is on the rapid decline, while the reading of fiction and the

engagement of other domains of literacy is on the ascent (Grenfell et al., 2013). Many

scholars point to the changing requirements of today's jobs as a potential reason for this shift

in focus (Barton & Hamilton, 2005). However, as is often the case, instruction in most high

school classrooms is still geared toward an antiquated notion of how to address literacy

utilizing outdated content (Brandt & Clinton, 2002). High schools are not embracing the

societal shift. This causes an alignment problem with instruction and real word application.

This also highlights the aspect of context. More and more in education, the notion of "in what

context are individuals reading" is becoming a crucial part of the puzzle. Street (1997),

considered by many modern educators to be a leader in the area of literacy research,

attempted to create a list of considerations to be made when examining literacy practices.

Street's (1997) checklist included:

- Literacy is more complex than current curricula and assessments allow.

- Curricula and assessments that reduce literacy to a few simple and mechanistic
  skills fail to do justice to the richness and complexity of actual literacy practices
  in people's lives.

- If educators want learners to develop and enhance the richness and complexity of
  literacy practices evident in society at large, then students need curricula and
  assessments that are themselves rich and complex and based upon research into
  actual literacy practices.

- In order to develop rich and complex curricula and assessments for literacy, we
  need models of literacy and of pedagogy that capture the richness and complexity
  of actual literacy practices.

- In order to build upon the richness and complexity of learners' prior knowledge, we need to treat "home background" not as a deficit but affecting deep levels of identity and epistemology, and thereby the learners take with respect to the "new" literacy practices of the educational setting. (p. 53)

These ideas form a framework to potentially be utilized when considering the task of creating a useable instructional model. An equally important question concerns the concept of uniformity. Do all communities and cultural groups in our class-based and heterogeneous society confront equivalent functional demands in the same manner? Since there seems to be no real universal truths, then the next question has to be how to tackle the notion of instruction of a subject that has few defined boundaries and changes the level of acceptable practices based on a vast number of variables.

Literacy Instructional Practices

In 2014, Joanne Larson and Jackie Marsh published their work, *Making Literacy Real: Theories and Practices for Learning and Teaching.* Part of their work was to try and help educators better understand how to merge instructional theory and instructional practice into a usable model so educators could benefit students in their quest to become literate. However, as Larson & Marsh, 2014, explain theory needs practice to evolve and practice requires theory to be useful. Theory and practice are ever changing and will continue to do so because this is how the evolution of the instructional processes works. Unfortunately, theory and practice do not always have a harmonious existence which can create conflict leading to a failure to create impactful instruction.

Instructional pedagogy has failed to have any substantial impact on literacy achievement scores for several decades. One element that continues to hamper instruction in

most schools is a Eurocentric approach to teaching. There is still an adherence to a singular

set of norms that dictate how to accomplish the task of educating the nation's students

(Schultz, 2002). However, we no longer live in a society dominated by White ideology and

presence. In 1970, White students comprised 80% of public-school population. By 2014,

students of color made up many students attending public schools. This signals a major shift

that must be accounted for and addressed in instructional pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017;

Strauss, 2014; Taylor, 2014). Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate published an article

in 1995 entitled "Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education". One of the focuses of

Ladson-Billings and Tate's article, (1995), was the function of exclusionary Whiteness in

education and the impact on students of color:

> In schooling, the absolute right to exclude was demonstrated initially by denying
> Blacks access to schooling altogether. Later, it was demonstrated by the creation and
> maintenance of separate schools. More recently it has been demonstrated by White
> flight and the growing insistence on vouchers, public funding of private schools, and
> schools of choice. Within schools, absolute right to exclude is demonstrated by
> resegregation via tracking. (p. 60)

The work of these authors, coupled with the ethnographic research of the 1980s and 1990s,

brings attention to problem that has plagued education for decades and has always kept

marginalized students on the fringes of their own learning. Cornel Pewewardy (1993), a

Native American educator, argued that one of the primary problems with educating Native

American students was that education had always attempted to insert culture into education

instead of inserting education into culture. Not only is this a barrier for Native American

students, but realistically it is a problem for all non-White students in this country. As there is

a need to build an instructional literacy model based on current best practices in literacy, it is

impossible to do so without making sure a large part of the focus examines the role race and

ethnic culture play in that paradigm.

For decades, educators have attempted to address the achievement gap in many different ways. At the very least, this work has met with limited success at some grade levels (Lee & Burkam, 2002). However, when considering the amount of time and effort put into these endeavors, the pedagogical shifts of the last several decades must be viewed as failures because of the never-ending inability to address the achievement of those in the most peril. There continues to be a complete disregard for the role that diverse cultures play in the learning process in our nation's classrooms. The Theory of Structural Inequity states that the cultural discrepancies found in our schools are simply a smaller scale representation of the ills found in our overall society (Hernandez-Saca, 2017; Sullivan & Artiles, 2011; Thompson, 2004). Schools are representative of the types of historical, political, economic, and social forces that are at odds with each other in a larger societal context (Bates, 2014; Noguera & Wing, 2006; Thompson, 2004). Just as it is in the larger society, schools have a class of students that have been served by a dominant Eurocentric ideology and a class of students that have been marginalized by an exclusionary curriculum and instructional discourse. Therefore, since a large number of students do not fit the hegemony of a Eurocentric model, there are obvious issues of alignment when examining the classroom practices and classroom populations (Gay, 2010). Students who are marginalized in classrooms face many of the same societal injustices within the context of school as they would in their communities at large (Bates, 2014). The Theory of Cultural Discontinuity attributes the continued failure that diverse student populations experience with teachers lack understanding and awareness of other cultures (Lovelace & Wheeler, 2006). This could be in part because 82% of teachers in public education identify as White (United States

Department of Education, 2016). How then can teachers, who come from backgrounds void of any real understanding of diversity, create environments within their classrooms that not only recognize the diversity of today's schools, but also welcome the instructional shifts required to create nurturing and challenging literacy environments for all learners? In order to accomplish this task, there must be a change in classroom practices, as well as, a better understanding of how to train teachers to be better practitioners of literacy in schools with growing populations of students of color.

Teacher Preparation

To close the achievement gap for a marginalized student population, teacher pre-service education must change to embrace the elements required to make literacy experiences inclusive of all learners found in the classroom. Etta Hollins has spent a life time examining the elements required to effectively teach a diverse group of students. Specifically, Hollins has spent a good portion of her career examining teacher preparation and its impact on student success. Hollins (2011) describes teaching as:

> a complex and multidimensional process that requires deep knowledge and understanding in a wide range of areas and the ability to synthesize, integrate, and apply this knowledge in different situations, under varying conditions, and with a wide diversity of groups and individuals. In quality teaching, this knowledge is applied in ways that provide equitable access and opportunities that build upon and extend what learners already know in facilitating the ability to acquire, construct, and create new knowledge. (Hollins, 2011)

All these elements, as outlined by Hollins (2011), play important roles for educating students in a meaningful manner. Nash and Waddell (2015) identify four themes that should be of importance when considering the development of programs for pre-service teachers. The themes include:

- developing holistic, practice-based teacher education programs

- engaging pre-service teachers with counter-narratives

- leveraging context-based and culturally relevant teaching pedagogies and classroom management

- rethinking achievement gap language and other neoliberal discourses. (pp. 9-11)

These themes are broad in nature. However, getting to the specifics of what is required of a good pre-service program that will develop teachers who are adept at teaching students from all backgrounds is the ultimate goal. However, educating students in meaningful ways that lead to literate learners requires a paradigm shift in the ways teachers think about the teaching of literacy which requires rethinking pedagogical practices.

Paradigm Shift

For most of the twentieth century, teachers viewed literacy as an autonomous practice. Students are taught specific skills and given specific knowledge at certain ages. In the case of the underlying power structure driving instructional decisions, the foundation was centered around that of White, middle class values. Those cultural values and norms shaped classroom instruction for over one hundred years (Solorzano &Yosso, 2002). The instructional process was conducted in a sequential manner and students were assumed to acquire the skills at roughly the same pace (Collins, 1995). The model begins to show stress when students struggle to master the prescribed proficiencies or fail to adhere to the sequence in a timely fashion. This pedagogical practice is one that is very individualized and views the learning of reading and writing as something that involves discreet skills being taught in isolation and being guided by an underlying set of culture norms (Tate, 1997). At the heart of all instructional pedagogy created in such a manner is a belief that learning is an individualized acquisition of skills, done in an isolated repetitive manner with the school

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alone acting as practitioner (Lave & Wenger, 1991). However, events over the last thirty-five years have challenged that theory and started to reveal that the foundations of our instructional practices within education might in fact be constructed utilizing a theoretical framework that is actually hindering the learning process for a large number of marginalized students (Street, 1993).

As long as there has been reading and writing, there has been a debate as to what is the most effective way to teach literacy to learners. In the past half century, the debate has settled into two basic camps (Wray, 1997). Chall (1967) first explained literacy practice as those who supported a code-based approach to teaching reading and those who focused on the place of meaning. His explanation has held true over the decades. Street (1985) coined the two approaches as autonomous and ideological. Willinsky (1990) and Ofsted (1996) referred to the processes as naturally learned and formal delivery. In more modern times, these instructional methods have been identified as a skill-based approach, which emphasizes the use of phonics and a meaning-based approach, with an emphasis on reading comprehension, fluency, and enrichment (Johnson, 1999). In the past ten to fifteen years, these two styles have become known as a Phonics approach and a Whole Language approach (Wren, 2009). As he discusses in his work, *What Does a Balance Literacy Approach Mean,* Wren, 2009, describes the "Great Debate" or "Reading Wars" that have been at play in education for decades. Over the years, education has vacillated between a phonics approach and a whole language approach to literacy. Unfortunately, neither approach has had a significant impact. The achievement gap data have shown students continue to fall behind, especially high school students (NCES, 2013). One must begin to wonder if the reason for the increase in the gap is because literacy instruction and literacy theory are in direct conflict

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with one another (Flippo, 2011). How does education balance the view of literacy as a set of skills possessed by an individual with literacy as a set of social practices impacted by daily cultural influences (Barton & Hamilton, 2012; Gee, 1999; & Street, 1996)?

Social Context of Literacy

At the same time that Szewd (1981) was developing his ethnographical literacy framework, there was other research happening that would be even more impactful. Soon, these ethnographical studies were showing a direct link between their cultural study findings and literacy practices found in classrooms. This included studies conducted by the likes of Bryce-Heath (1981), Hymes (1981), Gilmore & Glatthorn (1982), Vygotsky (1978), and Scribner & Cole (1981). The ethnographical research of these scholars revealed that certain sets of values and beliefs defined school communities. Often times, these values and beliefs were not shared by the diverse group of students that attended these schools. This in turn led to what would become known as continuity-discontinuity theory (Jacobs & Jordan, 1993). Furthermore, from this body of work was born the idea of Activity Theory. This allowed for literacy to be viewed not in isolation as it had been before, but now literacy was believed to be made up of a series of *events* and *practices* that took place not only in school, but out of school (Hull & Schultz, 2001). The work of this researcher led to not only a closer look at the relationship of community, culture, and the schools, but also the practices that defined these interactions.

As the ethnographic research of the 1980s ended, the research and theory of the 1990s gave way to a new approach to literacy that blended many of the previous decades' theoretical frameworks into a new model, New Literacy Studies (Gee, 1991). The work of James Gee and Brian Street was reflected in the New Literacy Studies (NLS). The NLS

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approached literacy as a series of social practices rather than a single set of technical skills (Street, 1997). In order to fully understand literacy and literate practices, they must be viewed in the social context in which they occur. Furthermore, educators must acknowledge the diverse backgrounds and experiences each student brings into a formal setting, such as, a classroom. Finally, the NLS characterized literacy as a series of social practices. They acknowledged that there were multiple literacies that are imbedded within cultural practices and traditions (Hull & Schultz, 2001). School based literacy is just one of these literacy practices. If there is an acknowledgment that there exist multiple literacies both inside and outside of school, then any type of instructional framework needs to incorporate the ability to address multiple literacy practices.

In Joanne Larson's classroom at the University of Rochester a discussion occurred about understanding the meaning of participation in the educational process and the need to shift views of participation in one's education (Larson & Marsh, 2014). She posed this question to her class:

> If we learn to ride a bike by riding a bike with the help of someone who already knows how, or we learn to knit by watching our mothers or grandmothers, getting samplers to practice and sitting with her as we try our own piece, getting help as we need it, why do we change the context of learning so dramatically in schools?" It seems like common sense to think that participation changes over time as expertise and ability increases. So, if people learn by participating in culturally valued activities, what are we doing in schools? In what are students participating and for what or whose purpose? (p. 7)

Several decades ago, Deborah Ball and Susan Wilson (1996) in their work *Integrity in Teaching: Recognizing the Fusion of the Moral and Intellectual*, wrestled with the dilemma that faces most practitioners even today. The central conflict was how to incorporate the content concepts and skills required for all learners when those learners bring rich and full

life experiences that often times are in conflict with the learning at hand (Moje, 2007). There is a constant failure by schools to blend what is known from scholarly research with what constitutes effective literacy instructional practices. Only by understanding that there are multiple elements constantly in play can educators begin to construct an instructional model to address the literacy needs of all students.

As one examines instruction as a modern-day practice, the notion of in-school and out-of-school literacy unfolds (Xu, 2008). Students acquire skills in a linear fashion during in-school learning. Out-of-school literacy is the acquisition of knowledge through the everyday interaction and participation we have within our own culture (McCarthy, 1998). Connecting local literacy practices with the dominant classroom literacy practices in schools is incumbent upon educators (Mahiri, 1998; Street, 1995). How then does education allow these two differing prospects to exist and blend them into a cohesive model that produces higher achievement results?

Third Space Theory was so named by Bhabha (1994) in his work *The Location of Culture.* In his work, the focus was actually political in nature. The intent was to create a *space* where people could resist racist, classist, and other oppressive forces imposed on their lives (Benson, 2010). Third Space theory would find its way into education through the research of Moje (2004). In Third Space, there is a shift in what is deemed as instructional capitol. In their work on Third Space, Gutiérrez, Baquendano-Lopez. & Turner (1997) explained it this way:

> The "radical middle" or "third space" we propose is not a compromising, liberal middle or a "balanced" curriculum, but rather a new theoretical and pedagogical space in which learning takes precedent over teaching; instruction is consciously local, contingent, situated, and strategic; and our current knowledge about language learning and language users informs the literacy curriculum. (p. 372)

Third Space becomes the place where the resources of instructional pedagogy become language, cultural knowledge, and sociocultural practices. Instruction is no longer about the underlying power structure that has existed for decades. The goal is to create the ability for the diversity of all learners to coexist and have this uniqueness of interaction become the learning platform.

There have been many examples of educators creating a Third Space for their students within classrooms allowing for improved learning to exists. One such example was documented during the infancy of the ethnography movement in research during the early to mid 1980s. This research is still considered one of the most well-known studies documenting the modification of instructional practices to benefit culturally diverse learners.

In 1985, Au and Kawakami studied the Kamehameha Elementary Education Project (KEEP) in Hawaii. Students in Hawaiian schools had historically been poor achievers when the focus was on reading achievement. To test the theory that reading achievement levels could be improved by departing from traditional instruction, they observed two lessons, taught by two different teachers to the same group of sixth grade students. While both teachers had been teaching for the same period of time, one teacher had no experience with Hawaiian children. The second teacher had extensive experience working with Hawaiian children. The teacher with no experience had trouble with the lesson. The students appeared to be off task, talking out of turn and often times at the same time. The lesson of teacher one became as much about classroom management as instruction. Teacher two did not have these types of issues. She did not try to control the perceived off task behavior. Upon close examination of this behavior, researchers determined that the students were in fact engaged

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in the text. What was actually happening was a practice known as a "Talk Story". This process was actually a product of Hawaiian culture. Children from ages as early as kindergarten participated in this type of group story telling. Instead of requiring the students to conform to "traditional" classroom practices, teacher two allowed traditional Hawaiian practices to lead the class. Basically, the study found that utilization of elements of the student's home culture proved pivotal at improving reading instruction for these children. This is just one example of the need to create a place, Third Space, where culture and teaching can exist to benefit student outcomes. There are more recent examples of these types of practices that have impacted high school student's lives in dramatic ways.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

To address the needs of preparing teachers to teach a culturally diverse group of students and combine several theoretical frameworks already in existence, the *Culturally Relevant Education* (CRE) framework was developed (Aronson & Laughter, 2015). The CRE framework was created by attempting to synthetize two distinct strands of research. The first was a theoretical strand based in large part on the work of Gloria Ladson-Billings and *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy* (1994, 1995, 2006). The second strand was a practical strand based on the work of Geneva Gay and *Culturally Responsive Teaching* (2010, 2013). The aim of CRE was to offer both a practical and theoretical perspective for training pre-service teachers. The CRE examined the tenets of each researcher's work to combine their basic principles into a working roadmap to be utilized in forming a methodology for training teachers to be more successful in urban settings.

Geneva Gay's (2010) work focused on the roles of the teachers in the instructional process and what their responsibilities were to students. Her work established four essential

elements that must be present in all culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2013). They

included: a) replace deficit perspectives of students and communities; b) understand the

resistance to culturally responsive teaching from critics so they are more confident and

competent in implementation; c) a need to understand how and why culture and difference

are essential ideologies for culturally responsive teaching given they are essential to

humanity; and d) make pedagogical connections within the context in which they are

teaching (pp. 53-64). Gay's work took the path of exploring what good teacher practice

looked like in the classroom. She was trying to identify what instruction practices should be

utilized to achieve culturally responsive teaching.

      Gloria Ladson-Billings' work took a more theoretical approach to understanding how

pedagogy that focused on social justice and culturally relevant teachings could, "empower

students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically using cultural referents to impart

knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (1994, pp. 16–17). This approach allowed her to develop a

framework that was comprised of three main components:

- Culturally relevant pedagogues think in terms of long-term academic achievement
  and not merely end-of-year tests (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

- Culturally relevant pedagogues focus on cultural competence, which refers to
  "helping students to recognize and honor their own cultural beliefs and practices
  while acquiring access to the wider culture, where they are likely to have a chance of
  improving their socioeconomic status and making informed decisions about the lives
  they wish to lead" (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 36).

- Culturally relevant pedagogues seek to develop sociopolitical consciousness, which
  includes a teacher's obligation to find ways for "students to recognize,

understand, and critique current and social inequalities" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p.

476).

Ladson-Billings' work paid careful attention to how one's pedagogy affected a teacher's overall disposition and attitude towards students and their profession. She also indicated that pedagogy was constantly evolving and needed to do so to meet the changing needs of students (2014). Pedagogy had to exist outside the framework of just racial grouping and include a more global perspective in its approach (Aronson & Laughter, 2015).

The convergence of frameworks established by these two researchers helped build the foundation for *Culturally Relevant Education* (CRE). By synthesizing these two strands together, CRE developed a framework comprised of four markers that need to be present to create a social justice teaching environment:

- Culturally relevant educators use constructivist methods to develop bridges connecting students' cultural references to academic skills and concepts.

- Culturally relevant educators engage students in critical reflection about their own lives and societies.

- Culturally relevant educators facilitate students' cultural competence.

- Culturally relevant educators explicitly unmask and unmake oppressive systems through the critique of discourses of power. (Aronson & Laughter, 2015, p. 5)

The acknowledgment of these best practices allows for the ability to determine the relevance and effectiveness of not only pre-service teaching programs, but also the effectiveness of teachers coming out of programs with foundations in CRE and their impact in the classroom.

There is growing body of research that is examining the impact of CRE in the

classroom. One must keep in mind the measure of success regarding CRE is not always just conceptualized by increased test scores. One of the goals of CRE is to connect students with learning and make the experience more relevant. This is not always captured by an increase in achievement scores since many achievement tests are still constructed utilizing many of the previously mentioned Eurocentric norms. However, there are studies to show that CRE is impactful in the classroom.

In a study of two fifth grade classes, involving 49 participants from a school in northern California, Bui and Fagan (2013) utilized a pretest-posttest design to identify the impact of utilizing culturally relevant materials and instructional practices. The classes were evenly divided in terms of race and ethnicity. The classes were given two sets of literature. One set was district mandated, main stream, curriculum. The second set of literature was multicultural and more relevant to the students' backgrounds. Students were measured in reading comprehension, word recognition, and story retell. The results of the study found that by adding the relevant practices and multicultural literature, there was an increase in student motivation and pretest-posttest increases in word recognition. The summary finding indicated students were able to increase overall reading comprehension by utilizing research based instructional practices that were culturally relevant. In a second study, Dimick (2011) conducted a qualitative case study in a science classroom in an Urban High School located on the East Coast. The goal of the study was to better understand how the participants constructed meaning from the classroom content within a social justice framework. The class was comprised of a White, male teacher and 24 Black students. Data were collected from observation, individual interviews, focus group sessions, and achievement data. Upon analysis of the data, Dimick (2011) discovered the social justice approach to the science

content of the class allowed for increased interest in the content especially in the areas where a multicultural approach was taken. This included such notions as social, political, and academic empowerment. Students had a more positive experience with their learning given the social justice framework utilized by the instructor. While there is still a need for much more research, there are ample findings to show a strong correlation between student engagement and achievement and a culturally relevant approach to instructional pedagogy and practices.

High School Literacy Instructional Development and Effective Literacy Practices

Research data on literacy achievement levels establish that there is a gap that while occurring at lower grade levels, begins to grow wider in most cases starting in the high school years (Strickland & Alvermann, 2004). One of the problems that become paramount during the high school experience, when the literacy learning gaps become the most pronounced, is the notion of content accumulation versus skill development (Alvermann, 2002). Since literacy is developmental, it is a skill that must be practiced under varying circumstances and utilizing different mediums of delivery (Flippo, 2011). This literacy developmental process unfolds for students differently based upon their age. However, students in high school are faced with increasingly more complex literacy demands. In 2009, the Carnegie Council sponsored research on literacy development and practices. The study found that high schools face seven very distinct challenges regarding literacy instruction:

- Texts become longer in high school and require increased student reading stamina to complete assignments
- Word complexity increases, and students are expected to learn a great deal of vocabulary through context alone

- Sentence complexity increases, and the longer sentences need to be parsed automatically while the student reads, or fluency suffers

- Structural complexity increases as signals for changes in topics and logical relationships are not as explicitly delineated or clear in content area texts

- Graphic representations become more important in higher grade level texts and are critical to helping the students interrelate and synthesize the material in surrounding paragraphs

- Conceptual challenges in the texts increase and students are expected to learn more abstract concepts that need to be connected to previously learned concepts

- Texts begin to vary widely between content areas with high school chemistry textbooks looking much different from high school literature books or social studies texts. (p. 11)

To make sure that high school students can perform at an acceptable level, these challenges must be taken into consideration when deciding how to best instruct high school students. Unfortunately, this is not always the belief system within most high schools (Heller & Greenleaf, 2007).

High school curriculum is almost exclusively tied to specific content areas. Each content area has distinct ways of delivering the subject matter and its own set of internal processes to accomplish the task. Typically, high school teachers are not concerned with student literacy capacity (Burroughs & Smagorinsky, 2009; Pearson, 2009). Therefore, content area teachers become resistant to integrating literacy instruction in their own classroom practices (Moje, 2008). Furthermore, when attempts are made to integrate literacy strategies across content areas, teachers are met with poorly designed models, that are

comprised of generic strategies, and staff are given minimal support during implementation (Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, & Morris, 2008; Wilson, 2011). Unfortunately, because of this continuing trend, high school students enter the classroom struggling to read on grade level and are offered no real resources or instruction to achieve the level of academic success needed to be successful in post-secondary endeavors. For students that are in the later stages of literacy development, reading fluency and comprehension are integral aspects of literacy that focus on the meaning and the context of language (Goering & Baker, 2010). Teachers must provide students with authentic opportunities to practice these types of endeavors. As established by Whithear (2011), fluency and comprehension have been identified as areas in need of attention as students are not presented with enough opportunities to refine that skill in high school. Studies have further shown that in some cases, students who are deemed literate lack fluency (Luke, 2012). This is becoming especially common in secondary and post-secondary settings (Whithear 2011). Students need to be given opportunities to interact with high-level text across several different subject matters to increase comprehension strategies. In the end, more attention needs to be given to high school instructional practices (Strickland & Alvermann, 2004).

With a goal of insuring a successful educational experience for all high school learners, several considerations must be acknowledged. First, every student that walks into a classroom brings a different set of expectations and needs with regards to literacy (Alverman, 2003). These needs are shaped by their gender, ethnicity, socio–economic standing, life experiences, and cultural beliefs. Second, literacy instruction is a developmental process that does not end after the grade school years or during middle school (Luke & Elkins, 2000). The development of these skills and need for support continues during a student's high school

experience. Third, regardless of what the literacy experience looks like for high school

students, literacy support and instruction must no longer fall solely at the feet of the high

school English teacher (Heller & Greenleaf, 2007). Literacy instruction is a building-wide

shared experience by all instructional staff in the building. Finally, even though concepts

such as phonics or whole language literacy look different dependent upon the content, there

are some common instructional best practices that can be utilized by all teachers to increase a

student's literary capacity given any type of setting (Rycik & Irvin, 2001). Duke & Pearson

(2002) propose five components needed to provide quality instruction for students:

- Explicit strategy instruction (declarative, procedural, and conditional knowledge about the strategy)

- Modeling of the strategy by teacher and/or student

- Collaborative use of the strategy

- Guided practice of the strategy that includes scaffolding and fading/release of responsibility

- Independent practice

By providing increased opportunities for students to interact with text, they grow in

confidence and increase achievement. Donna Alverman and Jonathan Eakle (2003) discuss

the importance of student engagement with literature and how important a student's

confidence is to the overall learning process:

> Adolescents' perceptions of how competent they are as readers and writers, generally speaking, will affect how motivated they are to learn in their subject area classes (e.g., the sciences, social studies, mathematics, and literature). Thus, if academic literacy instruction is to be effective, it must address issues of self-efficacy and engagement. (p. 6)

By understanding the elements required for literacy development and considering some basic

guidelines to potentially be followed that include certain components, the identification of

solid instructional practices become possible. For today's growing diverse population, a

paradigm shift must occur which no longer views literacy as occurring in isolation but as

social practices that involve valuing the cultural backgrounds that students bring to school

with them. These cultural assets can be used as the foundation for producing literate learners,

who are critical and creative thinkers.

High School Literacy Strategies

There have been recent attempts to blend student culture into secondary classroom

teaching practices in an attempt to more fully engage students in literacy. One way of doing

this has been the inclusion of different elements of popular culture. One significant area of

pop culture to be utilized has been the blending of hip-hop culture into the literacy instruction

in urban high schools (Morrell &Duncan-Andrade, 2002). Hip-hop music has been the most

popular genre of music, based on record sales, in the United States since 1998 (Stovall,

2006). At a high school in Northern California, the English teachers brought hip-hop culture

into their classrooms in an attempt to engage students in critical literacy. What the staff found

was that first, the utilization of Hip-hop music transcended race. Students of all ethnicities

found relevance in its inclusion. Second, even though the content was not that of a traditional

English literature canon, students were still learning critical thinking skills, as well as, strong

analytical skills. Third, regardless of one's position either in favor of or against the messages

found within the music, Hip-hop provide a platform for students to have relevant, meaningful

discourse on a number of important topics. Finally, once students were engaged, teachers

were able to blend current Hip-hop music with classical works, such as poetry, to show

students similarities in the process and make both genres more relevant (Morrell, 2002). The

utilization of Hip-hop culture in classrooms is just one of the ways that educators are attempting to bring the *voices* of all students into the classroom in an attempt to provide a diverse, rich experience for all students, not just the dominant *voice*.

Another example of blending culture and classroom practices can be found in Tucson, Arizona. The focus of the research study in this region was an attempt to blend the cultural practices of working-class Latinx communities with the instructional practices found in the classroom to create a more engaging instructional framework for students (Moll, Amanti, Neff and Gonzalez, 1992). The basis of this research approach was to immerse the teachers in the Latinx culture of the students. This would be accomplished by having teachers visit the homes of their students. The purpose of the visits was to give the teachers a chance to learn about the cultural practices of the students in their classrooms. This was done so teachers could understand household knowledge. One of the unique features of the study is that part of the process is utilizing the teachers as the researchers. This was a qualitative research study and the teachers took part in the entire process. The utilized questionnaires as the tool for gaining insight into the lives of the families in this community. Upon completion of the process, several things became apparent. When teachers based their instruction on elements of culture that they had gleaned from the research, the students were much more engaged in the learning process and even expanded their own learning beyond the original scope of many lessons. Teachers had much great appreciation for the backgrounds and life experiences that so many people within the school community were willing to share. The staff quickly realized that there was a depth of understanding and a shared commitment to the educational process between student, family, and teacher that would not have been possible without the qualitative inquiry. The work of this study again showed that instructional

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practices constructed without first understanding the cultural backgrounds of the students who come to class everyday will be met with limited success. However, by synthesizing instruction with culture, learner outcomes can be vastly improved. As research studies continue to confirm what has been known for decades, education must now begin to better understand what literacy and literacy instruction look like for not only cultures within the classroom, but the blending of cultures from around the world.

Global Literacy

By the year 2050, the United States Census Bureau (2000) projects that ethnic groups of color will comprise 47% of the nation's population. Couple this with the fact that at no time in history has the global population been more connected and one must begin to question just how accurate our current outlook on literacy truly is (Gutmann, 2004). Today's educational institutions deem literacy to be the acquisition of the basic skills in reading, writing and mathematics. Unfortunately, this narrow view of literacy fails to consider one's participation in the much larger global context. In his work on global literacy and social justice, James Banks (2004) states the following:

> Literate citizens in a diverse democratic society should be reflective, moral, and active citizens in an interconnected global world. They should have the knowledge, skills, and commitment needed to change the world to make it more just and democratic. The world's greatest problems do not result from people being unable to read and write. They result from people in the world-from different cultures, races, religions, and nations-being unable to get along and to work together to solve the world's intractable. (p. 298)

How then does one make the shift from the narrow paradigm currently held by educational practitioners to a much more global view? One that will be needed for students and citizens for decades to come.

Amongst researchers working in the field of global literacy and global community,

there is this idea of a *Global Village* (Hawisher, & Selfe, 2000). Within this myth, there is the notion of all the world being connected mostly by utilizing current technology. The hope is that by utilizing technology, national barriers can be broken down and a free-market society will be developed in place of the current nation-state model we adhere to across the globe (Wallace, 2002). However, these hopes, and dreams are fraught with misinformed concepts. Ironically, many of the viewpoints and stances currently debated by scholars regarding technology and a connected global community fall in to the same dark hole we were in for decades before.

As of 2017, just a little over half the earth has access to the World Wide Web (Park, 2017). However, these statistics can be misleading. Consider what is known as the internet penetration rate. This is a country's percentage of available internet users that actually engage the web. In the United States, our internet penetration rate is 96%. The entire continent of Africa has a rate of 32% (Pinto & Poornananda, 2017). It becomes easy for many to see these new digital spaces as the next evolutionary step in creating a global community for all to access. However, there are some issues to be consider first. To begin with, one of the elements that has constantly plagued literacy in this nation has been the presence of a Eurocentric set of values that would undermine the assertion of any type of counter culture (Schultz, 2002). The digital technologies that connect us as a group are no different. More than two-thirds of all web content is based on Western European principles and language (Davies, Evans, & Reid, 2005). There is very little content developed that is not being shaped by Western values. Does not this in fact present the same problem the United States has been grappling with for decades, only on a global scale now? There are actually those who view this expanse of digital technologies as the next form of colonialism.

Countries that have a much more advanced technological standing globally are able to take advantage of less-developed nations in both the economic and political realm (Davies, et al., 2005). This in turn allows nations with a stronger position to flourish, while those less fortunate nations are again shifted into a position of servitude. This would appear to be very similar to the state of globe just two-hundred years ago. While the idea of a digitally connected globe appears on the surface to provide a vast ocean of possibilities, there are many perils waiting just below the surface.

The definition of what and whom is literate seems to change constantly as technologies change rapidly in this new age of information. Donald Leu (2001) stated that there were four components to be considered crucial in the new global literacy as a global economy comes into focus. They were: a) identify important problems central to their own unit, b) gather relevant information and critically evaluate it, c) use the appropriate information to solve central problems, and d) then clearly communicate the solution throughout the organization (p. 568). Literacy is at the heart of each of these four tasks. Based on these four elements, it is clear to see that new literacy strategies must be collaborative based, oriented around problem solving, and require components of critical thinking skills (Albers & Cho, 2011). The synthesizing of literacy practices and a global technology platform is a relatively new field of research. The notion of global literacy is still absent a widely accepted theoretical framework upon which to build practice. The new technologies and their impact change so rapidly, it is often times hard to keep up. Researchers will continue to study this phenomenon, but there is still more work to be done.

There is an irrefutable decline in the literacy skills of high school students in every part of America. Furthermore, the gap between White students and Black and Latinx students

continues to be an area of concern (NCES, 2007). Students from low socio-economic status perform well below their more affluent counter parts (Crum, 2008). One of the major factors in the decline in high school reading achievement is the lack of any type of uniform instruction at the high school level that considers the diversity of the learners. The teaching practices found in today's classrooms do not align with what current literacy theory is telling us (Flippo, 2011). Furthermore, educational institutions are still falling to hear the voices of all the students within their schools. Finally, the failure to reconcile the existence of in-school and out-of-school literacy practices and combine them into a cohesive existence cripples the ability to move instruction forward (Xu, 2008). However, research in this field of study continues to provide a growing collection of effective literacy practices that can be utilized to improve achievement. These practices most certainly focus on comprehension strategies that include fluency and a balanced literacy approach. Yet, the success of these skills is also grounded in the acknowledgement of student cultures and lived experiences as a back drop for beneficial instruction (Moje, 2007). In order to stop the decline in literacy achievement, all these factors must be taken into consideration and building leadership must provide a vision and guidance to create a platform to allow for the inclusion of a new learning paradigm.

Thomas Kuhn (1962) is responsible for one of the most influential theories to date that tackles the structure of scientific revolutions. He states that science does not evolve and develop in a linear fashion as some people might think. These scientific shifts are actually periods of continuous revolution when one powerful set of ideas replaces another. The steps of the process are a) consolidation of a paradigm, b) period of doubt with regard to the paradigm, and c) paradigm shift or scientific revolution where old paradigms are replaced by

new ones (p. 67). One cannot help but see within this theory the last five decades of research, theory, and practice when considering literacy and its place in education. However, as can be seen from the continued low achievement scores from students who have been marginalized for decades, the attempts to blend student cultural experiences with classroom experiences are still nominal at best. Education has yet to reconcile what research has shown to be crucial in student success with what goes on every day in classrooms across this nation. Thus, we have still failed to have a true literacy revolution.

Effective Leadership Practices and Instructional Impact

Effective leadership is a topic of discussion that can be dated to the ancient writings of Plato and Plutarch (Bass, 1985). Given its long history of discourse, there is no shortage of leadership theories. However, when it comes to educational leadership, there is not as much research as one might think. Through the decades many different theories have been considered as to what is a good leader and what the potential leadership impact is on an organization. How do school administrators impact school culture and student achievement? Consider the definition of leadership as presented by Bossert (1982) in his work on the impact of successful school leaders:

> School leadership can be seen as the identification, acquisition, allocation, co-ordination, and use of the social, material, and cultural resources necessary to establish the conditions for the possibility of teaching and learning. Leadership involves mobilizing school personnel and clients to notice, face, and take on the tasks of changing instruction as well as harnessing and mobilizing the resources needed to support the transformation of teaching and learning. (p 74)

The definition only addresses the "what" of school leadership. At no point does the author consider "how" these tasks are achieved. There is a gap in today's research or "blank spots" as Hallinger and Heck (1998) describe them that need much further analysis and research

conducted before a true definition of leadership can be developed. There have been countless

research studies focusing on various types of organizations attempting to identify the traits of

an impactful leader. However, in the field of education, this has not been the case.

During the period from 1980 to 1995, there were only 40 studies that attempted to

look at the relationship between school leadership and student achievement (Hallinger and

Heck, 1998). In his book, *School Leadership that Works,* Marzano (2005) analyzed the

research on school leadership from the past 35 years. He was only able to identify 69 studies

that examined academic achievement and school leadership. However, the past ten to fifteen

years have seen an increase in the amount of research in this field. Various studies have

started to zero in on common practices and traits found in leaders at buildings that are

academically successful and maintain that success over time (Jarrett, Wasonga, & Murphy,

2010). Slowly but surely, the characteristics that define quality academic leadership are

starting to take shape.

In order to fully comprehend the academic achievement of high school students, areas

besides just instructional practices must be considered. One such area is the impact school

leadership has on building pedagogy and student success. The past decade has seen a

dramatic increase in the amount of research being produced focusing on the value of strong

educational leaders. It is hard to deny the correlation between high achieving schools and the

impact effective principals have on those buildings. Outstanding leadership has emerged as a

key element in outstanding schools (Beare, Caldwell and Millikan 1989; Hallinger, 2007).

However, examining leadership in schools and its impact on achievement is a very complex

issue. To begin with, how does one define leadership. Also, what are the characteristics of

"quality" leadership? Unfortunately, most scholars agree that there is no one definition of

what is a good school leader (Cuban, 1988; Leithwood, 1998; Marzano, 2003; Spillane & Diamond, 1999).

In his work on leadership practices, Yukl (2002) notes, "the definition of leadership is arbitrary and very subjective. Some definitions are more useful than others, but there is no 'correct' definition" (pp. 4). Cuban (1988) describes the problem by stating that "there are more than 350 definitions of leadership but no clear and unequivocal understanding as to what distinguishes leaders from non-leaders" (p. 23). Since it is widely accepted that school effectiveness and academic improvement is tied to strong leadership, it becomes important to establish at least a working definition that contains some common threads to identify successful practices.

One of the critical elements in defining leadership must be identifying what good leaders do. However, even this can be a daunting task. Leadership should be viewed as a combination of the activity's leaders engage in and their interactions with others in particular contexts, around specific tasks, that require a certain level of knowledge (Spillane & Diamond, 1999). Therefore, school leadership is not simply a function of what a school principal does. Leadership is not even a product of what a principal knows. One must be able to evaluate and articulate the impact of the combination of these elements on the overall culture of a building and how that increases or hinders student achievement.

Leadership is a person's ability, using minimum coercion, to influence and motivate others to perform at a high level of commitment (Bass, 1985). As the stakes have risen during the era of high stakes testing, the styles of leadership have been looked upon in a much more critical light. Decades ago, leadership was thought of simply as democratic or autocratic (Day & Leithwood, 2007). As time progressed, so did the complexity of the models. In the

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80's, the work of Hersey and Blanchard (1988) established the well-known Situational Leadership Model. In this model, they identified four styles of leadership. The first style was autocratic. In autocratic leadership, the leader is prone to "telling" others what to do. The second style was democratic. These leaders adopted a style that required them to "sell" ideas. The third style of leadership was encouraging and social. In this style, leaders look more towards staff "participating" in the processes of a building. The final style was lasses-faire leadership. In this style, the roles of leadership were "delegated" to others. The concept behind this model was that leaders must exist in all these instances. Basically, quality leaders learn to operate within a context given the specific situation. Around the same time that the Situational Leadership model was developing, Burns (1978) and later Bass (1985) developed a theoretical framework that would soon have a major impact in the field of education. This theory was Transformational Leadership Theory.

Transformational Leadership Theory was developed first by James Burns (1978) and then Bernard Bass (1985). This work expanded upon the notion of what truly motivates people to work and commit to an organization. From this work, two distinct leadership styles developed; transformational leadership and transactional leadership. Each leadership style has basic key components. The transformational leadership style comprises the following four first-order factors:

- Intellectual stimulation, referring to leaders' actions, challenging their followers' thinking to be more creative and to find solutions to difficult problems, with the leader acting as a mental stimulator.

- Individualized consideration, namely leaders' behavior that contributes to their followers' satisfaction by giving advice, support, and attention to each

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individual's needs.

- Inspirational motivation, referring to leaders' motivating their followers by viewing the future with optimism, projecting an idealized and achievable vision, and stressing ambitious goals.

- Idealized influence, which refers to leaders' charismatic actions centered on values, beliefs, and a sense of mission. (Antonakis, Avolio, & Sivasubramaniam, 2003)

The transactional leadership style is an exchange process based on the fulfillment of contractual obligations. Transactional leadership comprises these three first-order factors:

- Contingent reward leadership, which refers to leaders' behaviors focused on clarifying role and task requirements and providing followers with material or psychological rewards.

- Management-by-exception (active), referring to the active vigilance of a leader whose goal is to ensure that standards are met.

- Management-by-exception (passive), where leaders intervene only after noncompliance or mistakes by followers. (Antonakis et al., 2003)

Bass (1985) in his initial work on transformational leadership also included a third type of leadership, laissez-faire leadership. This type of leadership represents the absence of any type of transactions. The leader avoids making decisions, abdicates responsibility, and does not use his/her authority (Antonakis et al., 2003). Laissez-faire leadership is virtually the lack of any discernable leadership behaviors and the avoidance of taking any action (Bass & Riggio, 2006). This style can be thought of as non-leadership or a model that is completely passive. All of three of these leadership components would become known as Full Range of

Leadership or FRL (Stewart, 2006).

The development of the Full Range of Leadership theory gained prominence from the work of Avolio and Avolio (1990). As interest in transformational leadership grew, Avolio and Bass (1990) continued to conduct research and soon developed the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ). The purpose of their work was to create a tool that could measure the full range of leadership practices. The MLQ was designed to measure the continuum of all three leadership styles: transactional, transformational, and laissez-faire leadership. The utilization of the MLQ within the Full Range Leadership model permits observations across the entire spectrum of behaviors that can be expected from leaders (Avolio and Bass, 1990). The questionnaire is constructed of 141 statements. Its original target audience was U.S. Military officers. The score range is constructed by giving each response a rating of 1-4, with 4 being a rating of high. The MLQ would be utilized in an attempt show that transformational leadership could impact given outcomes. This was especially true in the case of education. However, since the tool proposed and utilized by Bass and Avolio (1990) was new to the field of research, it needed to go through a process of theory development (Hunt, 1990).

In 2003, Antonakis et al (2003) examined the validity of the MLQ measurement model as well as its factor structure. The purpose of the follow-up study was to determine if the context in which leadership was observed and evaluated impacted study results. The study set out to accomplish this by considering three basic questions. First, does the MLQ reliably assess the nine factors with in the questionnaire? Second, Is the interfactor structure and measurement model of the MLQ (Form 5X) invariant in different samples and contexts? Finally, is the interfactor structure and measurement model of the MLQ (Form 5X) affected

by the context in which data were gathered? After dozens of studies testing the validity of the instrument, including four meta-analysis studies, the predictive validity of the instrument was considered to be high (Antonaksi et al., 2003). This included examining both subjective and objective measures of performance. The conclusion was there was no controversy surrounding the predictive nature of the theory. Therefore, Antonaksi's work strengthened the validity of the nine factors as established by Avolio and Bass (1990) at predicting leadership impact when considering the three styles as set forth in Bass's original theory. Therefore, validating that in fact transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and laissez-faire leadership traits could be measured and their potential impacts determined. As this theory grew and expanded, it would not take long for these principles to be applied specifically to the field of education.

Kenneth Leithwood is considered by many to be instrumental in bridging the work of Burns and Bass into the field of education (Stewart, 2006). His research sets the stage for transformational leadership to be a primary theory in education for decades to follow. In their work Leithwood, Begley and Cousins (1994) define transformational leadership as follows:

> The term 'transform' implies major changes in the form, nature, function and/or potential of some phenomenon; applied to leadership, it specifies general ends to be pursued although it is largely mute with respect to means. From this beginning, we consider the central purpose of transformational leadership to be the enhancement of the individual and collective problem-solving capacities of organizational members; such capacities are exercised in the identification of goals to be achieved and practices to be used in their achievement. (p. 7)

Leithwood (1994) would expand on the work of Burns (1978) and Bass (1985) by including elements that applied specifically to education. In his model, Leithwood (1994) established seven dimensions to describe the leadership traits in an educational setting. They were:

1. building school vision and establishing school goals

2. providing intellectual stimulation

3. offering individualized support

4. modelling best practices and important organizational values

5. demonstrating high performance expectations

6. creating a productive school culture

7. developing structures to foster participation in school decisions. (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000)

Leithwood's model also included these managerial dimensions: staffing, instructional support, monitoring school activities, and community focus (Leithwood, 1999). Finally, one of the major components of this model is the underlying assumption that there is shared leadership between the principal and teachers. Leithwood and his contemporaries would press forward the notion that given the right circumstances, strong transformational leadership would lead to an increase in academic achievement (Stewart, 2006).

Leithwood and Jantzi (1998) were some of the first researchers to conduct wide scale empirical studies in an attempt to determine the influence of transformational leaders within the realm of education. In one of their initial studies, they utilized survey data from 2677 teachers and 9025 students in 110 schools all located in a single district. The research utilized two surveys. The first was given to teachers to determine their attitudes towards school conditions and leadership. The second survey looked at student engagement and family educational culture. The surveys utilized a five-point Likert scale. The intent of the study was to build on the work conducted by Hallinger and Heck (1996) in which they examined quantitative empirical research conducted between 1980 and 1995. Leithwood and Jantzi

(1998) looked to expand and clarify the findings of the Hallinger and Heck (1996) analysis.

The research conducted by Leithwood and Jantzi (1998) found that transformational leadership did in fact have a major influence on organizational management and potential student outcomes. Utilizing the teacher survey data, Table 2 identifies nine major areas of influence. The analysis of the teachers' surveys provided insight into the major influences on school decisions and outcomes.

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations for Sources of Leadership: Ranked from Least to Most Direct Influence (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1998).

	Mean	SD
Students	3.49	.41
Parent Advisory Groups	3.84	.58
Some Individual Parents	3.96	.49
Some Individual Teachers	4.28	.30
Staff Teams (e.g., depts. grade levels)	4.36	.41
Teachers with Designated Leadership Roles	4.43	.37
Other (not principal) Building-level Administrators	4.75	.41
District-level Administrators	5.28	.31
Principals	5.30	.28
Collective Leadership Aggregate	**4.42**	**.24**

Rating Scale: 1 = None, 2 = Very Little, 3 = Little, 4 = Some, 5 = Great, 6 = Very Great

The table shows the mean score with standard deviation of teacher's responses with regards to influence. Leithwood and Jantzi (1998) used paired sample tests to estimate the significance of differences in these ratings. The research indicates that principals and district administrators were given the highest ratings (M = 5.30 and 5.28, respectively). The people acting in these roles had considerable influence. This finding was also reinforced by the

small standard deviations of these ratings. This indicated a strong agreement among respondents. There is a significant drop in the rating of the next most influential role, building level administrators other than the principal. This would typically be the assistant principal who had a mean score of 4.75. As the roles of others bearing influence are considered, the drop continues to occur. In summary, the research shows a strong correlation between principals utilizing transformational leadership qualities and overall influence on teacher outcomes.

Kenneth Leithwood would study the impact of leadership on schools and achievement levels throughout his career. He paid specific attention to the roles played by various individuals and their impact on student achievement. In one study, Leithwood (2010) looked at 65 schools. He divided them into five quintiles based on student achievement scores. The scores were disaggregated by a three-year mean average. The schools were divided into groups based on the mean average of the students' scores and grouped by like score ranges. Once completed, Figure 1 shows how teachers rated the sources of collective leadership across all five of the quintiles*1*
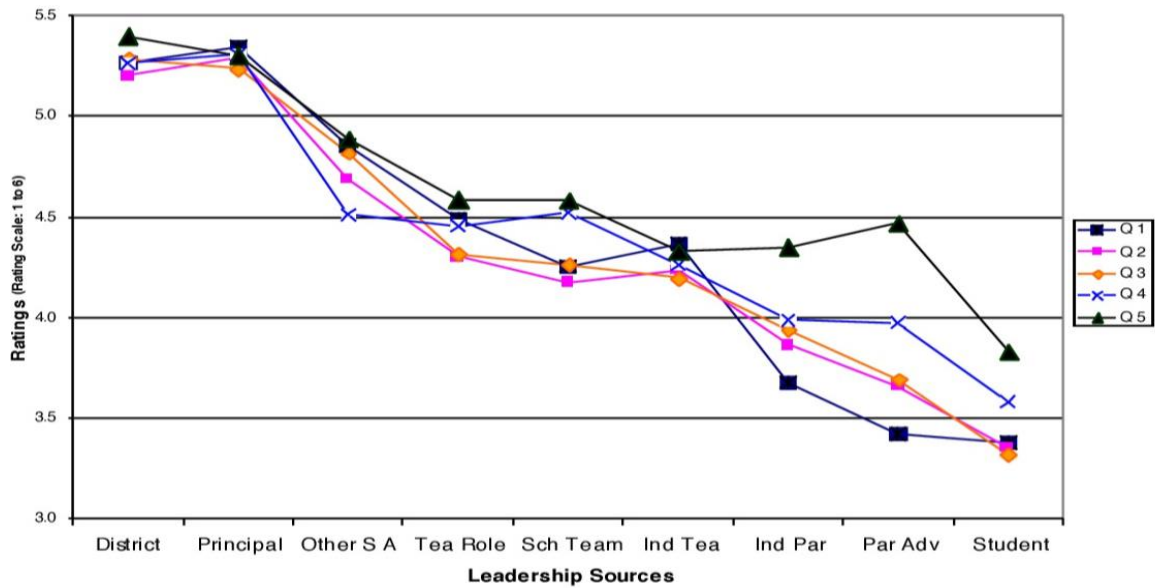
Figure 1. *Relationships between Sources of Collective Leadership Influences and Student Achievement (Leithwood, 2010).*

The results of the research indicate that despite achievement level, with regards to building level personal, the building principal was considered by teachers in all quintile groups to have the most influence on student achievement. This was just further validation of what many of his earlier studies had found.

Leithwood would spend more than a decade considering the influence of building leadership on student achievement. He was one of the initial researchers to look specifically and empirically at Transformational Leadership Theory in the field of education. His research confirms that when demonstrating the habits of a transformational leader, student achievement is impacted in a positive manner. His work also confirms that transformational leaders have considerable influence in their respective buildings and impact the academic achievement of students.

There is an irrefutable decline in the achievement levels of high school students in

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every part of America. In order to correct this continued decline in achievement, school leaders must begin to transform the manner in which they conduct the everyday tasks of operating educational institutions. The interactions of leaders with their staff and students allow them to employ a combination of traits, skills, and behaviors that is called a leadership style (Lussier, 2004). These styles are formed through a combination of the leader's beliefs, ideas, norms, and values. The effectiveness of the leader depends on the manner in which they choose to carry out tasks. As research has steadily shown over the past two decades, transformational leaders have a large impact on teacher buy in and student achievement when compared to other leadership styles. These types of leaders are able to create a shared vision that in turn leads to behaviors by the collective group that inspire and motivate leading to increased student achievement. The research conducted by academics such as Avolio, Bass, Burns, Jantzi, and Leithwood has established that transformational leaders have a major influence on achievement in schools. Furthermore, in low achieving schools, the research has proven that transformational leaders have an even greater impact on student achievement. In order to stop the decline in literacy achievement, building leadership must provide a vision and guidance to create a culture of literate learners. This can best be achieved by taking a transformational approach to building leadership.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The intended purpose of this heuristic, narratological, descriptive case study was to capture the individual experiences of a group of high school students as they pertain to literacy developmental opportunities. Today's high school students continue to perform below expected achievement levels compared to their international counterparts (Voogt, Erstad, Dede, & Mishra, 2013). There are certain skills every student needs to master in order to compete for jobs in today's global economic climate (Brown & Lauder, 2016). It is also incumbent upon educational institutions to ensure that the students they are sending out into the world are well-rounded citizens who are able to be a part of the democratic process. Unfortunately, there is still a learning gap between students of Color and White students (Griffin & Care, 2014; National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Coupled with the fact that literacy is no longer as simple as the traditional tasks of reading and writing, today's students must be able to engage information at much deeper levels utilizing several modalities (Anstey & Bull, 2006).

The overall intent of this work was twofold. First, identify the components that actually make up a student's literary experience. Are these experiences simply products of their interactions with pedagogical practices in school settings or are there other elements that come into play that have an equal impact on the desired outcomes? Second, determine if the current instructional practices in high schools are reflective of the needs of today's students. Is there a need for the pedagogy to shift in order to adapt to the needs of this generation of students? Based on these two areas of focus, the central research question was: What can the personal narratives and life-long literacy experiences of urban high school

students' reveal as to the practices required to effectively improve literacy skills? The three sub-questions that were addressed are:

1. What instructional experiences create the productive learning environments?

2. What is the relationship between cultural expectations and experiences and literacy development?

3. What role does school leadership play in developing and supporting the literacy practices found in urban high schools?

Moustakas (1990) noted that the research process begins with the identification of a deeply felt question. The question has an emotional impact that cannot be ignored by the researcher. The searches for the right question can ultimately be more important than understanding the right answer. Teachers must begin to first understand the increased importance literacy has in a student's life. This added importance arises from the ever-changing components that define literacy in the 21st Century. Most high schools are no longer equipped to provide the literacy instruction required of 21st century students (Bedard, Horn, & Garcia, 2011).

The purpose of this chapter is to communicate the design of a research project to explore ways to help students achieve academic success. Thus, this chapter will expand on the following elements: the rationale for qualitative research, the design of the study, including setting, participants and sampling strategies, data collection and analysis, limitations, validity, reliability, and ethical considerations. The utilization of the design elements discussed in this chapter allowed the research to produce valid data that enhanced the understanding of the phenomena, the source of the proposed inquiry. The intended outcome was to capture student narratives through a precise examination of the data captured

from participants in order to more fully understand the meanings they ascribe to their experiences.

Rationale for Qualitative Research

Qualitative and quantitative research are very different endeavors. Quantitative research is defined by the very formal and rigorous standards that dictate the practices. Therefore, quantitative research does not always allow the researcher the latitude to become fully immersed in all the elements that affect the nature of the study (Corbin, Strauss, & Strauss, 2014). Quantitative research is a much more controlled process that can maintain a very narrow scope and limits the latitude of inquiry for the researcher (Liamputtong, 2013; Patton, 2005). The study is often times very controlled by employing mathematical models to examine a phenomenon. This approach to the research process is assumed to provide a reliable and valid outcome. Qualitative research allows participants to be much more open about their experiences and to honestly address the phenomenon at hand (Patton, 2015). This allows the researcher to explore the totality of the situation. Qualitative research also allows for vast amounts of data to be produced from a small number of participants. The exploration of these participant experiences through the lens of their own context made qualitative research a valuable practice in the research process (Silverman, 2016).

The goal of qualitative research is to be non-judgmental in either process or application. This is accomplished by examining the research topic in its most natural environment (Liamputtong, 2013). Qualitative research also allows for the inclusion of many different settings. This could include specific groups, certain segments of the population, or even particular phenomenon experienced individually or as a collective (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research also supports the inclusion of the experiences of the study participants in

a very unique and personal manner. This provides for a better understanding of the information gathered by blending their beliefs, outside influences, and shared experiences into a deeper, richer tapestry to explain the perceived phenomenon. For this reason, qualitative research was the chosen method for the purposes of my own research.

With regards to this heuristic, narratological, descriptive case study, there is a need to understand many different facets of the learning experiences of the research participants. This will include such things as the role of instruction in the classroom as well as the role of the family and culture in literacy development. As these experiences provide data and create layers of understanding, there was the need to consider new understandings of the information as presented (Grbich, 2012). This required the ability to alter the focus and scope of the research. Therefore, qualitative research was the necessary medium for conducting a study that allows all characteristics and facets of the data to be considered.

One beneficial characteristic of the use of qualitative research is the ability to frame the context based on theoretical traditions. The utilization of these traditions is to clarify the ideas found within the research (Patton, 2015). The uses of these traditions aid the research in establishing the design of the study, as well as, creating the research questions that will drive the data collection process. The qualitative traditions also help determine the methodology that will be utilized in constructing the procedures to be adhered to throughout the process (Patton, 2015). All these elements guide the research process by providing the clarity necessary to construct a unified study. For the purposes of my research, both case study and narrative traditions were utilized. These traditions provided the most appropriate paths for collecting the data in a manner that best addressed the research question and unit of analysis. A discussion of these traditions follows.

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Case Study

The utilization of the case study tradition, in most instances, traces its roots back to the Chicago School. In the 1930's and 1940's, the tradition of case study began to take its form based on the scholarly works produced during this era (Stake, 1978). However, case studies draw from the fields of political science, psychology, sociology, clinical science, and even the health sciences. Because the use of case study crosses so many social and behavioral sciences, it is often hard to pin down the exact origins of case study traditions (Swanborn, 2010). I used a case study so as to better understand the individual life and educational experiences of high school learners. Yin, (2014) notes that, "the case study is used in many situations to contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social political and related phenomena" (p. 1). A case study, by definition, is an empirical enquiry that investigates a single individual, group or event phenomenon within its real-life context (Hatch, 2002). As Yin (2014) states, a case study design should be considered when: (a) the focus of the study is to answer "how" and "why" questions; (b) you cannot manipulate the behavior of those involved in the study; (c) you want to cover contextual conditions because you believe they are relevant to the phenomenon under study; or (d) the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context (p. 8 and 9). With regards to my own work, the examination of the developmental factors impacting the achievement of a particular group of students in relation to potential secondary environmental factors was the essence of the case study.

The utilization of a case study was one that must adhere to certain parameters. First, the approach was an in-depth examination of a single unit or case. The case was most certainly a bounded phenomenon and the intent was to elucidate features that can then be applied to a larger class when considering a similar phenomenon (Gerring, 2004). Case studies are almost always utilized when using an intensive approach to research as opposed to an extensive approach to research. Merriam (1988) outlines three distinct characteristics found in a case study. They are:

- the "specificity of focus" to the unit of analysis allowing for concentrated attention.

- a descriptive nature resulting in the development of "thick descriptions of the phenomenon under study"

- a heuristic quality which illuminates the understanding of the phenomenon under study so that new meanings or discoveries emerge. (p. 29)

In the instance of this research, the case was the five participants. They were bound by examining their educational and cultural experiences during their high school years. The phenomena being examined is literacy development. When utilizing a case study tradition, the focus of the study is on process tracing. This is the explanation of varying social processes that unfold for participants experiencing the research phenomenon (Swanborn, 2010). The understanding of this process leads to the close examination of the data collected and formulates a more precise research question. This, in turn, can open up the research to unexpected aspects of the process, which will help determine methodologies. Once qualitative case study is identified as the best research method and the case has been bounded, the type of case study must be determined.

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The purpose of a study will guide the decision as to what type of case study will be utilized. Both Stake (1995) and Yin (2014) provide related terms for defining the types of case studies. Stake identifies case studies as intrinsic, instrumental, or collective. Yin categorizes case studies as explanatory, exploratory, or descriptive. He also differentiates between single, holistic case studies and multiple-case studies. When considering these categories, Yin (2014) defines a descriptive case study as an intervention or phenomenon and the real-life context in which they occurred. The examination of the literacy experiences of high school students as determined by classroom interactions and cultural influences most closely fits the use of a descriptive case study.

Narratology

The narrative tradition is one that can be traced back to the 1960s (Clandinin, 2006). In the 1990's, Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998) noted there was a "narrative revolution". Narrative inquiry provides a path for researchers to utilize stories as a means of capturing the essence of lived experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Creswell, 2007; Merriam 1998; Webster & Mertova, 2007). Within the field of education, Connelly & Clandinin (1990) identify why narrative inquiry fits specifically;

> The main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world. This general notion translates into the view that education is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; teachers and learners are storytellers and characters in their own and other's stories. (p.2)

This idea was what led to the utilization of narratology in my own work. Through the careful examination of these narratives of the students involved in this research, I aimed to collect stories grounded in a foundation of their learning experiences. These experiences were not

only rooted in their classroom interactions, but also attempt to capture meanings of race and culture in their learning experiences. Understanding the experiences of the individual is critical, but one also needs to understand meanings brought to the experience by the context as well. Connelly & Clandinin (2000) capture this idea when they state, "People are individuals and need to be understood as such, but they cannot be understood only as individuals. They are always in relation, always in a social context" (p. 2). The outcome then must be to attempt to identify and understand the commonalities and differences of experiences. Thereby allowing one to potentially identify instructional practices that either advance or hinder student learning. The critical element within narratology is how to construct a process of analysis to accomplish this task.

In order to be of benefit, narrative inquiry must have some type of methodology to be useful and sustainable. The work of Clandinin and Connelly (2000) provides an excellent starting point for how to approach the methodology of narrative inquiry. Clandinin and Connelly base a large portion of their foundational principles on the work of John Dewey (Pinnegar, & Daynes, 2007). Utilizing some of Dewey's (1997) ideas, there are three elements that exist in all narrative inquires. First, is the notion of some type of personal and social interaction or sociality. Second, is the idea of continuity in that there is always a past, present, and future, also known as temporality. Finally, there will always be a place where by all of this exists in space or location, also referred to as positionality (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Clandinin and Rosiek, 2006). Clandinin and Connelly used the metaphor of these three elements existing as three-dimensional space. All narrative inquiry takes place within this type of environment (Silko, 1997). Based on this premise, there are certain rules that exist for a researcher. First, narrative inquiry can never truly be bracketed. Continuity of

time does not allow for someone's story to bracketed. Second, the researcher can either engage a participant through the act of story-telling or interact alongside the participant via observation. Finally, the researcher must always acknowledge that the very act of conducting the research does in fact insert them into the participant's story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). There is no possibility of engaging a participant and not becoming an element of this three-dimensional space. My hope was to engage the participants of my work through both storytelling and observation. By being aware of and understanding the rules that govern narrative inquiry, the stories of the students provided a rich and detail strand of data. This data when crystalized with the other elements of the study aided in providing some clarity regarding the literacy experiences of students and how to improve on future outcomes.

Design of the Study

Setting

The site for this research was exclusive to one suburban Midwestern high school, located in a major metropolitan city. The district had approximately 19,500 students. There were four high schools in the district. At the high school chosen for the study, there were roughly 1550 students, Grades 9 thru 12, attending the institution. The surrounding community was comprised of mainly low, middle class, blue collar families and a small segment of middle-class families. The student population had 61% of its students receiving free and reduced lunch (Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2017). This indicates a high level of poverty for the school. The school had a diverse student population with regards to both race and ethnicity. The racial make-up of the school was 2% American Indian, 8% Asian, 20% Black, 19% Hispanic, 10% multiple-race, 1% Pacific Islander, and 41% White (Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2017).

There was a high mobility rate, over 30%, across the student body. There was a large population of both English Language Learners (ELL) and Special Education students. These two groups comprised almost 19% percent of the overall student population. The student body historically performed below the state and national average on most measures of academic achievement (ACT, Inc., 2017; Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2017; Scholastic, 2017).

ACT
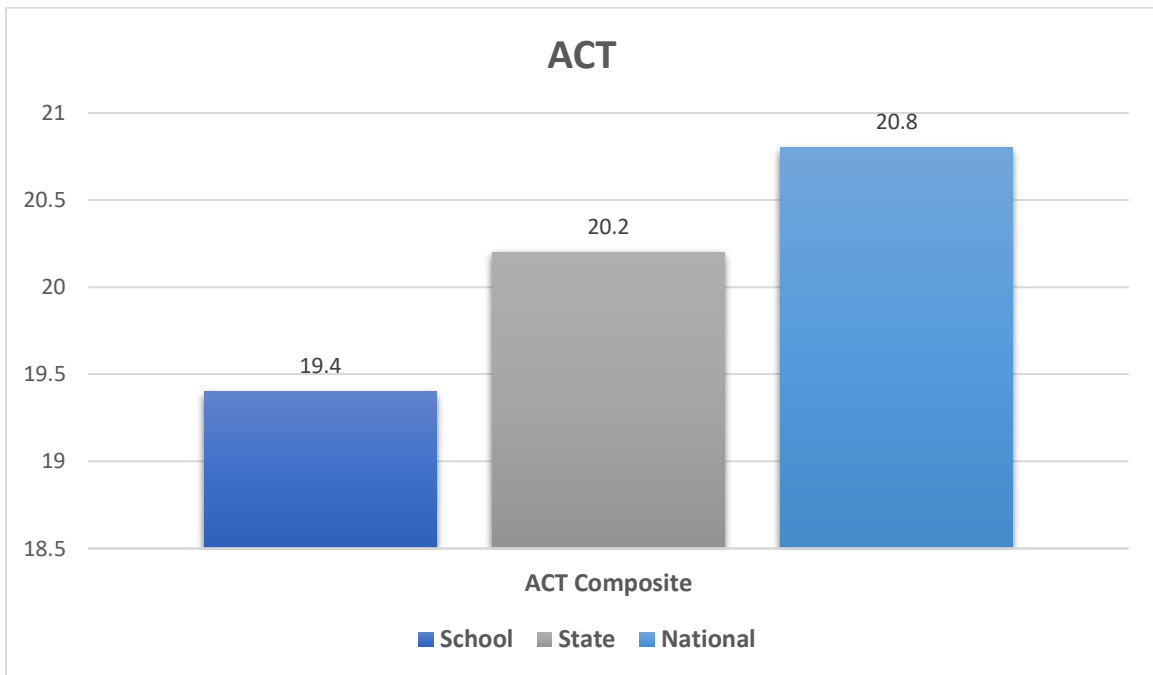
Figure 2. *Comparison of ACT composite scores for the academic year ending in 2016 for the research high school, state of Missouri, and nationally (ACT, Inc., 2017)*

State End of Course Exam
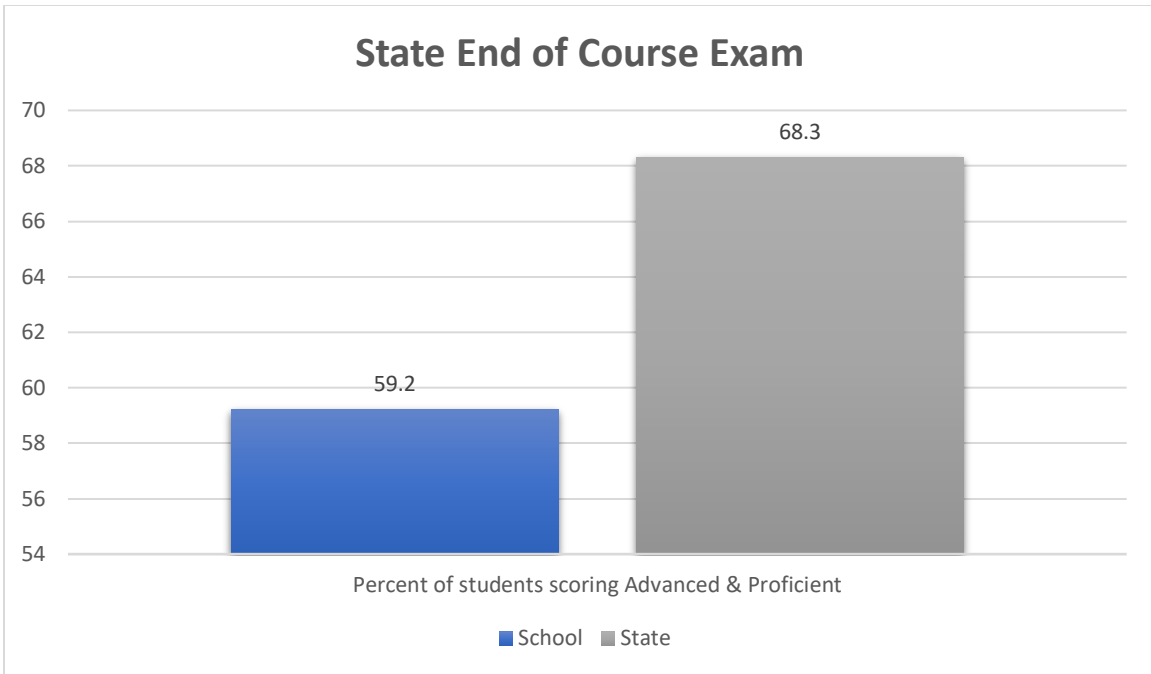
Figure 3. *Percentage of students who scored Advanced and Proficient on the Sophomore*

English End of Course exam administer to all students in the state (Department of

Elementary and Secondary Education, 2017).
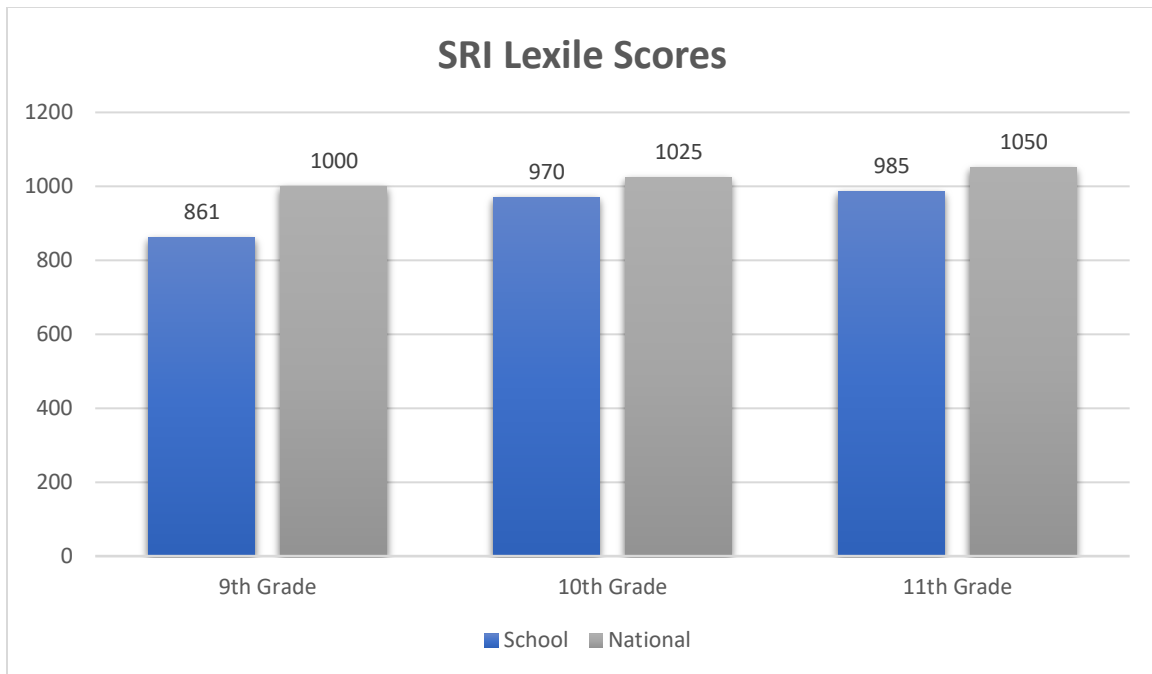
Figure 4. *The Scholastic Reading Inventory Lexile Scores showing a comparison of Suburban High School students versus expected national benchmark scores (Scholastic, 2017).*

The high school had an excellent graduation rate. The site, known for the purposes of this research as Suburban High School, graduates over 95% of the students. This rate was above the most recently reported national average. Nationally, the last full reporting listed the graduation rate at 80% (Stark, & Noel, 2015). The site was considered a convenience site in that the location was a part of the researcher's district. However, the site provided the type of backdrop needed for a narratological heuristic case study of this nature.

Participants

The participants of the study were a mix of high school aged students. They were all over the age of eighteen. The type of sampling utilized was what Maxwell (2013) describes as *purposeful sampling*. In this type of sampling, "particular settings, persons, or activities

are selected deliberately to provide information that is particularly relevant to your question and goals, and that can't be gotten as well from other choices" (p. 97). Purposeful sampling helps to establish a broad cross section of participants. However, purposeful sampling can be broken down even further by utilizing one of the many sub-types of purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2013). First, maximum variation sampling was utilized to allow for the diversity of individuals in this sample. This was accomplished by utilizing race, class, gender, and other person-related characteristics as key factors in sampling decisions. There was also an element of criterion-based sampling. Criterion based sampling allows for the designation of a list of attributes that are crucial when identifying cases to be studied (Merriam, 1998). This is necessary to ensure that the proper sample of students is utilized in the research. The main criterion for this sampling was that they have been in high school for four years and are over the age of eighteen. At the initial stage of research and data collection, current reading levels were not of importance. Previous performance on academic testing was not utilized either. It was important to examine students who have had success in school, as well as, those that were failing. Therefore, academic achievement was not a criterion. This study hoped to identify causes in the achievement gap and provide possible solutions for remedying that gap. This was accomplished by examining students that are successful and those who fail.

Data Sources

Qualitative research can be very demanding and taxing on those who have chosen this path as a means to better understand a research question. Unlike quantitative research, which ultimately attempts to answer a question utilizing numerical representations, qualitative inquiry must utilize various methods of collection to understand a phenomenon (Grbich, 2013; Yin, 2014). In the case of qualitative research, most often there are three types of data

collection that are utilized; document analysis, observations, and interviews (Grbich, 2013; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Each component of the process yields varied elements that are vital to establishing the thick and rich descriptions that are crucial in the qualitative research process (Patton, 2015). The research can never achieve the thick, rich descriptions provide by the crystallization of data needed to support the central question if all types of collection are not utilized. Each type of collection has unique features. Document analysis provides a behind the scenes look that might not come out in an interview or observation (Yin, 2014). Observation allows the researcher to view the subject in a natural state and witness interactions as they occur (Patton, 2015). Finally, interviews allow the researcher to have a guided interaction with the subject that is somewhat controllable and offers an insight into specific questions if so desired (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2014). Of course, all these collection types have strengths and weaknesses, but the characteristics of them all taken together create a solid system of analysis (Grbich, 2012).

Documents. Documents can provide a rich source of information that can be used to support data gleaned through narratives and observations. They can also help to create a road map allowing the researcher to validate identified themes in a more objective manner. Qualitative research often includes the use of such documents as study of excerpts, quotations, records, and open-ended written responses to questionnaires and surveys (Patton, 2015). These documents are utilized along with the other data strands to create a first-person narrative capturing an individual's actions, experiences, beliefs and accomplishments (Creswell, 2013). The utilization of these artifacts will help enrich the data analysis process

The analysis of the documents relating to the student participants included academic achievement data collected from their middle school and high school years. As stated

previously, none of this information was utilized as part of the sampling criteria. Once the sample had been selected, the information provided through document analysis was utilized to compare achievement levels of all students that were part of the sample. This included such items as benchmarking exams, state mandated tests, standardized tests, and district created exams. Grades were utilized, but with limited consideration. The assigning of grades was such an ambiguous task. Therefore, grades are extremely hard to quantify with any type of reliability. The most important data was standardized testing measures. Of particular interest was the Scholastic Reading Inventory and the ACT battery of exams. Most middle and high school students have been given the EXPLORER test, as well as, the PLAN test. These two exams helped to track student academic growth or decline over a four-year period of time. As stated earlier, the document analysis process is intended to help crystalize the data collected during the observation and interview process.

Interviews. Patton (2015) describes three different types of interviews. The three types of interviews are informal conversational, general, and standardized open-ended. Informal interviews rely on loose questions and a spontaneous flow to the conversation. General interviews establish some wide parameters with the questions but have an element of relevancy dealing with similar issues for all respondents. Finally, standardized open-ended interviews pose the exact same interview questions to the participants in the exact same order (Patton, 2015). For my purposes, I utilized a standardized open-ended interview approach. This format proved to be the most useful given the elemental structure standardized open-ended interviews provides. As noted by Ryan, Coughlan, and Cronin (2009):

> Interviewers pose the same exactly worded questions in the same order to interviewees. Berg (2009) suggests that this form of interviewing is based on the premise that responses to questions will be comparable. Standardized interviews

are formally structured and are similar in nature to a questionnaire survey whereby there are no deviations from the sequence of questions or the language used. (p. 310)

The formal interviews occurred on sight during the school day. This allowed for easier access to the students, as well as, a place the students felt comfortable. Interviews were conducted utilizing a small conference room or some other type of room to allow for privacy. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. The interviews were then analyzed utilizing a phenomenological case study process to accurately interpret the findings. The questions (See Appendix A) that were utilized are as follows:

1. Discuss the value of reading and writing in your everyday life.
   a. Where does your enjoyment/dislike of reading stem from?

2. Discuss the importance of reading and writing in your house/classroom.
   a. Describe some daily interactions you have with reading and writing in your classes/home.
      i. What types of texts do you read?
      ii. What types of writing do you do?

3. What do you believe is the impact of a person's culture on their reading and writing experiences in school?
   a. Discuss the manner by which you learn best.
   b. How much does your ability to read material impact your learning?

4. How important do you think reading and writing is in your school?
   a. What are some specific things I would see in your school that indicate the importance (lack of importance)?
   b. How is literacy supported by your school for those who need help or more support?

The intended purpose of this line of questioning was to better understand the participant's interactions with literacy on several different levels. They were also intended to try and understand how things such as culture and ethnicity play a role in the development of literacy habits and practices. In the end, the narrative process was a major source of data. I

anticipated a wide array of themes to be provided for consideration as the coding processes progressed.

   Observations. Participant observation was utilized as a form of data collection. Observation allows the researcher to gain a much clearer understanding of the studies' themes by exploring first-hand the research participants and specific settings (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013). Participant observation can be divided into two sub-categories; participant and onlooker (Patton, 2015). My observations were characterized as an onlooker (Patton, 2015). This description outlines the limited role that the researcher will play during an observation of research subjects. There can potentially be many variables that can come into play during the observation process. Of course, once a researcher has considered and understands the various facets that must be consider before beginning the process, limited variability can be accomplished. Equally as important as understanding and planning for external factors, one must also focus on internal procedures as well (Liamputtong, 2013). This included planning for the collection and interpretation of the data gathered during the process.

   The over-all intent of the observation process was to observe students during the school day. The most likely scenario was choosing several different rooms and observing the student as they took part in a class. In order to allow this process to be repeatable, it was important to utilize an observation protocol when constructing the procedures. There are several options when it comes to developing a protocol. Regardless of the type of protocol chosen, the key points are replication and organization. It is important for the researcher to be able to accurately take field notes and then methodically gather them to create usable data. More importantly, the protocol must allow for the process to be repeatable as there will be

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observations conducted with several participants throughout the study. It is impossible to control the all the variables that can come into play during an observation. However, the protocol should focus the observation on key elements (See Appendix B). Some examples might be defining specific things to look for during class room visits. This could include configuration of the rooms, lessons being taught, time of day, specific teachers. It is important to determine what the desired outcome of the observations is intended to be in order to develop an appropriate observation protocol. This will reduce variability and allow for consistent data to be developed through the observation process.

The purpose of the observation was two-fold. The first was to witness the student's interaction in the classroom as they take part in a normal school day. The second component of the observation included observing the level and quality of literacy instruction received by the students in various subjects. Determining how the instruction provided impacts the level of learning demonstrated by the students was important as well. Observing the students was also a critical function for determining what the level of student-initiated engagement might be. One must keep in mind that not all learning deficits are the responsibility of the educational institution. There are times when the deficit is the result of the student and their own failure to engage. That was why the cultural component was so crucial. If a student was exposed to quality literacy instruction, teachers who care, and an institution that provides a sound education, then other factors must be at fault if they were not performing at accepted levels. Hopefully, if this is in fact part of the equation, the observation process will help provide evidence to shed light on some of the elements.

Data Analysis

The intent of the data analysis process was to provide a deeper understanding of the central research question. Data was provided primarily by three sources; document analysis, interviews, and observation. The reason for utilizing three strands of data was so the researcher can provide crystallization as a means of narrowing the understanding of the researcher's focus (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). The researcher tried to better understand literacy development by asking: *What can the personal narratives of urban high school students, as well as, their classroom literacy experiences disclose as to the best practices to effectively engage students in the reading and writing process?* The data collection and analysis process hopefully provided a glimpse of some possible answers to questions raised by the research.

As with all elements of the research process, the data analysis protocol was defined by the type of study being conducted. For the purposes of my research, a heuristic, narratological, descriptive, case study was the methodology utilized. (Patton, 2015). Narrative and case study analysis protocols were utilized to construct a process for examining the research data. By analyzing the data attributed to each individual case, personal narratives began to be constructed.

The data analysis process was one that was generated by weaving multiple layers of data together to create meaning. The type of data and how it was collected will often times determine the methodology being utilized (Cortazzi, 2014). In the case of my own research, the initial phase of data analysis involved the examination of each individual case or student. To begin with, the individual interviews for each case were deconstructed in an attempt to identify themes. The documents associated with the individual student were examined and coded to develop themes and patterns. Finally, individual observations were analyzed to

further expose themes. Once all three strands of data had been analyzed and coded, the information provided was woven together to create a personal narrative for each individual student or case. Each case stood on its own as a distinct analytic unit. This process is known as within-case analysis (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The notion was to make sure the researcher was intimately familiar with each case.

The coding process for data sources was conducted using the process suggested by Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2013). The exact same process was used to code the documents, observations, and interviews. Within a case study analysis, there are four approaches that may be utilized to synthesize the data; direct interpretation, categorical aggregation, cross-case synthesis, and naturalistic generalization (Creswell, 2013). The final step in the data analysis process consisted of a cross-case analysis of the personal narratives for identifying common themes found predominantly in all cases and potentially providing insight into the research questions.

Coding the Data. In qualitative research, coding is assigning symbolic meaning to the descriptive information compiled during the collection stage of the research (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The process is designed to help categorize similar types of information and lend itself to a system that is better suited for grouping that information. There are many different methods that can be utilized to group the information. Some are very sophisticated systems that depend on a computer program to help group and categorize the information that is input. However, others will utilize a written record such as an excel spreadsheet to keep information organized (Grbich, 2012). For the purposes of my own research, I utilized a series of excel spreadsheets to organize the data and codes produced by the analysis process.

The coding process is usually broken down into two initial parts; first cycle and second cycle coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013). The first cycle coding process helps initially group the chunks of information into common ideas and thoughts by developing descriptive codes. The process of second cycle coding takes the first cycle descriptive codes and begins to form the interpretive codes. The interpretive codes will be grouped into themes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013)). This is not to say that coding will only involve there two cycles. There are many times that the process will involve third and even forth cycle coding (Saldaña, 2014). The themes created by the coding process are the heart of the qualitative research process. Miles and Huberman (1994) state:

> codes are tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study. Codes usually are attached to "chunks" of varying size- words, phrases, sentences or whole paragraphs, connected or unconnected to a specific setting. (p. 56)

This grouping of information is utilized to support or detract from the unit of analysis. The process described here was utilized for all three types of data collection.

Once the descriptive and interpretive codes have been established, the next step in the process was to develop patterns. This required the grouping of different data segments into smaller units of analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013). As one begins to group the interpretive codes based on meaning, the themes begin to develop by revealing patterns. Patton (2015) describes these themes or patterns as clusters. The understanding and analysis of these themes begins to support the research question, as well as, reveal new areas previously not considered. Merriam (1998) establishes five guidelines to be observed while creating themes or clusters. They include; being reflective of the purpose of the research study, thoroughness, particularity (inclusive to the study), an awareness of theoretical

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sensitivity, and congruent concepts and meanings. The development of themes will occur in the later part of the coding process. Miles and Huberman (1994) state the process unfolds in the following manner:

> Coding involves the listing or classifying items by percentages, frequencies, ranked order, or whatever is useful to the research question. These approaches involve you in the production of 'objective' accounts of verbal, written, or visual texts, the development of codes or categories, and the definition and measurement of units of analysis. (p. 18)

This process is what eventually develops the larger themes and gets to the heart of the participant experiences.

The coding process is the backbone of qualitative research. This is a lengthy process that requires the researcher to examine and reexamine the data. By utilizing this process, the data can begin to effectively answer the research question. The mode of collection is not relevant to the steps in the process. Pattern coding is applied to all forms of data collection. Therefore, the collection process must be constructed in a very methodical manner allowing data to be coded in a proper and repeatable manner. By utilizing a systematic process, the research hopefully provides valid and reliable results. This process must be replicated for all cases using a particular analysis protocol.

Narrative Analysis. Narrative analysis is described by Riessmen (2008) as "a family of methods of interpreting texts that have in common a storied form" (p. 11). Narrative analysis will be an important component of my own research as it relies heavily on constructing meaning and forming personal narratives of the students that make up each individual case. Narrative analysis can be divided into two classifications or types. They are *sociocultural* and *sociolinguistic* (Grbich, 2012). In a sociolinguistic approach to narrative analysis, the focus is much more centered on the construction of the narrative and "how"

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things are said. In a sociocultural approach, the focus is on "what" is being said as opposed to how it is being said (Grbich, 2012). Riessmen (2005) provides even more specifics to the narrative approach by identifying four models or approaches to the narrative analysis process. The first model is *Thematic Analysis*. In this model, the emphasis is on the content of the text or the "what" instead of the "how". The second model is *Structural Analysis*. This method focuses on the way a story is told. The third model is *Interactional Analysis*. This focuses on the interaction between the person being interviewed and the interviewer. The final model is *performative analysis.* In this model, the focus moves beyond just the interactions between the interviewer and the interviewee and examines to a large extent what the participants are "doing" throughout the process (Riessmen, 2005). My own research used a thematic analysis approach when examining data. This required further coding within each individual case. The separate data strands were analyzed to determine if themes existed between sources. The presence of similar themes and patterns lend itself to the strengthening of theories that began to emerge from the narrative analysis process. Once each case had been constructed and analyzed, the individual cases were examined as a group.

Cross Case Analysis. Upon completing the narrative analysis portion of the research, one must then begin to pull together the information from each case and look for patterns and themes. This process is known as cross-case analysis (Gribich, 2012). It has been said jokingly that there are as many methods for attacking a cross-case analysis as there are researchers (Miles & Huberman, 1994). However, there are tactics that can be utilized to make this process more efficient and provide more valid results. In their work on case study analysis, Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007) offer several tactics for increasing the validity of cross-case analysis. For example, one could choose to select dimensions or categories and

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search for within-group similarities coupled with intergroup differences. A second approach is to pair the cases. This is accomplished by listing the similarities and differences between each set of cases. Given the number of cases, one then proceeds to compare data sets for the pairs and develop the themes even further. This process continues until all paired cases are examined. The final approach is to look at the data from all the cases grouped by sources. All the observation data would be analyzed. Then all the interview information would be analyzed. Finally, one could examine the document coding from all cases (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). For my own research, the third approach was the most enticing. This approach allowed for unique insights that were revealed from each source of data. Furthermore, when patterns and themes are corroborated from one data source to another, it strengthens the findings and allows for a more solid grounding process (Eisenhardt, 1989). In the end, cross case analysis should allow the researcher to improve the likelihood of the data having a close fit with the theory by using a structured process for data to be examined through multiple lenses.

The design of any research study is crucial to the over-all success of the project. Of course, the methodology is paramount to insuring that crucial elements of the study can be repeated from case to case. Without this underlying framework, there is little doubt the research would not maintain the tight controls necessary for success. However, equally as important, the overall design is critical for guaranteeing that the results are valid, and the process was ethical when scrutinized by outsiders.

Limitations, Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

When considering the potential limitations found within this research, Maxwell (2005) outlines two specific threats to the process. He highlights researcher bias and

reactivity. Bias is the preconceived notions and beliefs all researchers bring into their work. Bias can potentially be found in all segments of the data collection process. This would include interviews, observations, document collection, and even survey construction. Acknowledging my own bias was paramount to the success of the research. This included being aware of my own cultural background and understanding the impact on how I viewed things. By doing so, I could implement strategies, such as journaling and peer review, in an attempt to eliminate this type of limitation to this work. Reactivity is when the researcher exhibits too much influence on the overall process, which could include setting and individuals (Maxwell, 2005). Because the heuristic tradition will contribute to this work, I had to be mindful of potential reactivity issues and take steps to limit them. As an administrator, I needed to be aware of the role my position in the school could potentially have on the overall process. I had to also acknowledge that there were certain elements of power issues that played a role in this as well. Power issues included having access to student information, such as, grades, test scores, and extensive historical student data. These types of power issues can often times lead to research subjects developing trust issues with the researcher. Ultimately, there is no way to completely remove reactivity from my work. However, by making sure I utilized multiple data streams and focused on the design of the study, I limited the potential impact this potentially had on the outcome.

Validity

Validity and reliability are topics with an extensive history in qualitative research. Just as there are multiple methods and traditions within qualitative research, there are multiple perspectives with regards to validity and reliability. Validity must be addressed for both internal and external integrity (Maxwell, 2005). Merriam (1995) summarizes internal

validity when she states, "Are we observing or measuring what we think we are observing or measuring?" (p. 53). The ability to understand internal validity comes down to the notion of understanding reality. Qualitative researchers believe that reality is something to be constructed and interpreted. Therefore, reality is not a fixed, stable state of affairs, as a positivist would believe (Merriam, 1995). In qualitative research, with regards to internal validity, the most important aspect to remember is that reality is constructed and therefore always changing. Given this precept, that means the internal validity of one's research can have a moving and shifting dynamic throughout the process. Therefore, the researcher must employ strategies to attempt to maintain a high level of internal validity throughout the research process.

To insure a high degree of internal validity, I utilized several strategies. First, I insured there was crystallization of my data. Crystallization allows a researcher to consider an infinite number of outcomes by considering several different viewpoints in an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of a data stream (Ellingson, 2009; Hatch, 2002). My primary data source was interviews. However, utilizing several types of document analysis, as well as, observations helped support the crystallization process. A second strategy for insuring internal validity was the utilization of peer/colleague examinations. By allowing them to examine the data and discuss the plausibility of the information, there was an add level of credibility to findings (Earl, Katz, & Fullan, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Merriam, 1995). Maintaining an outside perspective to one's research from someone that is not nearly as close to the information as the researcher was important to remember. This final strategy for insuring internal validity was accomplished by checking back in with study participants throughout the entirety of the research (Yin, 2014). This is done to insure the information

being collected adequately represents the point of view of research participants. There can be opportunities during the research process for themes and ideas to become confused. Maintaining contact and establishing clarity with the subjects as the research process unfolds is also important.

External validity is one of the most difficult areas to be addressed in qualitative research. External validity is the extent to which one's research findings can be applied to other situations (Merriam, 1995). In quantitative research, this is known as generalizability (Merriam, 1995). In short, generalizability is the researcher's ability to design a study in such a manner that replication is possible. To do this adequately, one must take into consideration several areas of focus. They include a working hypothesis (Cronbach, 1976), concrete universals (Erickson, 1986), and reader or user generalizability (Wilson, 1979). Furthermore, in the case of generalization, the responsibilities lie squarely on the shoulders of the researcher. However, my own research sought to offer validity not through the process of generalizability, but in transferability (Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Jensen, 2008; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Schwandt, 1997). Transferability allows for the findings of a study to be transferred from the research to specific situations on a case-to-case basis. (Maxwell & Chmiel, 2014). One way of accomplishing this in my own research was the utilization of thick descriptions. This technique of providing multiple descriptive layers of feedback enhances the probability of transferring findings to other situations (Creswell, 2013). The use of multiple cases benefited the process as well. I also utilized a multiple cases design to incorporate case perspective from several sources. Finally, the strategy of seeking multiple samples from within the site was utilized by including the perspectives of not only the

students, but also teachers and administrators. All these strategies are intended to help insure a high degree of external validity.

Reliability

Equally as important to the research process as validity is reliability. Simply put, reliability is determining if the findings of the work can be replicated in another research study (Merriam, 1995). Qualitative research creates some problems when considering reliability. Human behavior is never a static item and changes constantly. The behavior is impacted by a vast number of factors. Because of the unpredictability of qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1986) suggest the research strives for consistency or dependability. As with validity, there are strategies one can utilize to increase the likelihood of reliability. Triangulation and peer review, which are covered with validity, can also be utilized to insure reliability as well. Another strategy is to establish an audit trail. This will require the keeping of detailed records as to all the elements that were involved in the research process. This would include where interviews took place, what time they happened, detailed notes about setting, how were documents procured, etc. Basically, I am creating a road map that would allow another researcher the ability to recreate my own process in exactly the same way. A detailed audit will ensure a high degree of reliability.

Ethics

Qualitative research has many pitfalls that must be accounted for throughout the research process. Creswell (2003) reminds researchers that they must be mindful of the ethical issues that can plague a study during all parts of the process. While there are many ethical theories to be considered, Rallis and Rossman (2003) group the ethical issues that might arise into three types. The groups are privacy and confidentiality, deception and

consent, and trust and betrayal. Each one of these ethical considerations must be dealt with during the course of the research. These three groupings are similar to those identified in the Belmont Report (1979).

The Belmont Report was issued in September of 1979. It was commissioned in part because of unethical practices utilized during the Tuskegee Syphilis Study that concluded in 1972. The Belmont Report was published with the aim of outlining steps for how to conduct research in the biomedical and behavioral research fields. The intent was to insure the protection of human subjects during studies. The report identified three ethical principles to be observed whenever the use of human subjects occurred. The three principles were beneficence, respect for person, and justice. The Belmont Report, 1979, is still considered the essential reference for most institutional review boards and forms the ethical foundations for most fields of research today.

When considering the ethical conduct of any research, privacy and confidentiality are paramount to insure a successful study. During my research, participants always remained anonymous. All the information collected during the course of the interview process remained secure at all times. Deception and consent were handled during the initial stages of the research. I utilized the University process for engaging participants in a study. During the process, I insured that all participants were informed of all aspects of the process. Being upfront with all participants in order to maintain the integrity of the research was also a crucial step to be taken (Punch, 1994). Finally, in order to avoid trust and betrayal issues, do not attempt to hide any information from study participants at any time in the research study. I maintained a transparent relationship with all involved in the research process. This included being open and forthright regarding findings and potential outcomes. Knowing how

to anticipate and handle these ethical dilemmas and situations will aide any researcher in creating a successful and beneficial study (Rallis and Rossman, 2003).

University's Ethical Review Protocol

The final step required for insuring my research met all ethical guidelines was following the criteria set forth by the University of Missouri – Kansas City Institutional Review Board or IRB. The IRB establishes the research guidelines and code of ethics for all research using human subjects. Three ethical principles guide research at UMKC:

1. inform subjects about the nature of the study and to ensure that their participation is voluntary
2. ensure that the benefits of the research outweigh the risks
3. ensure the risks and benefits of research are evenly distributed among the possible subject populations

In order to insure my research was in compliance, I utilized the IRB checklist of items to be completed during the research process. I also utilized the consent forms as well as other literature required of IRB research and researchers; including taking the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) required by all researchers working with human subjects.

<div align="center">

Conclusion

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A well-constructed qualitative research study has the potential to impact future practices and behaviors. In the case of my own research, the outcomes had the chance to have far reaching consequences. Therefore, the choice of a proper methodology and study design was critical not just for insuring a quality process, but also enhancing the usefulness of the

findings. The implementation of narratology allowed the process to focus on the personal stories of each case. It was the ability to examine the very real experiences of these students that provide an insight that is not possible or quantifiable in a quantitative study. There are other factors that must be considered as well. It is the researcher's job to create a design structure that takes into account all the elements that can potentially create validity and reliability problems. Finally, and possibly most importantly, an ethical process is paramount. In the end, it does not matter if the research is qualitative or quantitative. The audience must be able to have faith that the design and implementation of the process met the highest ethical standards. Only then will the finds potentially hold the merit all researchers hope for from the outset.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This heuristic, narratological, case study was constructed to allow me to utilize my 23 years of educational experience as a teacher and administrator, as well as, my personal experiences with the selected phenomenon as an avenue to tell the story of the findings from this research (Patton, 2015). The problem I sought to study that I have encountered throughout my career and most recently at the site chosen for the study was the limitations and or lack of effective literacy instruction and its overall impact on the learning outcomes of high school students. The purpose of this case study was to examine the experiences of five high school students from diverse backgrounds and the relationship of their experiences to literacy obtainment and literacy instruction. The findings were developed through a careful examination of data sets that included, personal achievement data, classroom observations, my personal reflective notes, and interviews.

For the purpose of this study, I had one central research question with three sub-questions. The central question was: "What can the personal narratives and life-long literacy experiences of urban high school students reveal as to the practices required to effectively improve literacy skills?" The three sub-questions were:

1. What instructional experiences create productive learning environments for literacy development?

2. What is the relationship between cultural expectations and experiences and literacy development?

3. What role does school leadership play in developing and supporting the literacy practices found in urban high schools?

Before I embarked upon this research and the examination of each case, I was not sure how literacy developed and evolved over the course of their education. However, the more I immersed myself into the lived experiences of these five students, I quickly began to see that each student arrived at their place in the literacy continuum through different experiences. While they all arrived at different levels of attainment, there were certain commonalities with the journey. However, as the research unfolded there were also elements that surprised and even shocked me as I began to understand them. For instance, the level of *personal self-awareness* demonstrated by all the percipients was amazing, but also distressing in several instances. It was important to try and understand the experiences that would shape the growth and development of each student and in part form that student's sense of self. This idea of self-efficacy is basically a student's belief in what they are capable of doing and is the product of the interactions a person has with relation to school, peers, and even family over the course of their life (Zimmerman & Cleary, 2006). The idea of self-efficacy manifests itself in the judgements a person makes in the process of completing a task, such as, school work; significant to their *personal self-awareness*.

As the information unfolded and I was able to begin to form a picture of what it all meant. I discovered that there were some truths to how students become literate and also some truths for why others do not. Within this chapter, I share the themes and interpretive codes that revealed themselves from the interviews, observations, and achievement data. This information is presented in Table 3, located in the section, Within - Case Analysis. This chapter will also present the five case studies that reveal the stories of the five participants as told through their interviews, observations, and personal achievement data. Finally, this chapter will conclude by presenting a cross-case analysis of the five cases in order to determine if the

presence of the identified themes was evident in all cases or isolated to certain individuals only. What were the commonalities and differences related to literacy development across the five cases? The cross-case analysis also aids in answering the research questions.

<h2 style="text-align:center">Reflection about the Process</h2>

As I set about on this undertaking, I did not yet appreciate what it meant to perform qualitative research. I did not have a true understanding of the value of conversations and observation. However, the research process slowly began to open my eyes to the rich veins of data that could be extracted from conversations that were conducted in a manner that was not only informative, but also personal for the participants. It was the personal nature of the process that I quickly began to enjoy and appreciate on a much deeper level than I ever imagined. Asking an individual to share and experience is one thing. However, asking an individual to share their failures and shortcomings is a completely different endeavor. This requires the researcher to develop a level of trust with the participant that is needed to render useful information. These types of exchanges are the heart of qualitative research and something that I grew to truly enjoy about the process. They are also critical in slowly uncovering the essence of the phenomenon I chose to study.

The ultimate success of this process was deeply tied to the willingness of the participants to become involved with this research. All five of the individuals were very generous with their time and allowed me to have complete access to aspects of their academic and personal lives that were important to this study. Over the course of four months and several interactions, a level of trust developed that allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the circumstances that surround the relationship of their experiences to literacy obtainment and literacy instruction during their schooling years. These were not

always easy conversations, but really became the heart of much of this work. I quickly realized that understanding the failures of these individuals was every bit as important as understanding their achievements. In several cases, it was more important. The process also gave me a much greater understanding of how important the experiences of students outside of school are to their own development inside the school. The totality of this process from beginning to end made me a much better researcher by the time it was complete and gave me a much better appreciation for the daily struggles and successes experienced by these five students, who each represented a research case, in this Midwest high school.

The selection of the participants was a complicated task and required more thought and process than I had originally anticipated. It was important that the cases represented a cross section of gender, race and ethnicity. Therefore, the initial potential participants were initially comprised of only 12th grade students. I then used gender to identify a group of female and male students, followed by further grouping students by race and ethnicity. For this task, I utilized the racial and ethnic identifiers utilized by Suburban High School in the state where the research site is located. Categories of racial and ethnic groups include Asian, African-American, Hispanic, American Indian, Multiple, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and White. In an attempt to represent the school with the cases chosen, American Indian and Pacific Islander were not used in the selection process as there was only one student that belonged to either of these groups. This decision left five groups to select from. Upon completing the selection process, the five cases were comprised of students from the following racial and ethnic groups: African-American student, African ethnic (Sudanese), Hispanic [Latinx], White European American, and Arab. In all, this collection of cases fairly represented the site for the research.

Setting and Participants

The research setting for this study was a suburban Midwestern high school, located in a major metropolitan city. The school has a diverse population of students with regards to both race and ethnicity. The school is 2% American Indian, 8% Asian, 20% Black, 19% Hispanic, 10% multiple races, 1% Pacific Islander, and 41% White (Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2017). The site is comprised of Grades 9 through 12. There is a large population of both English Language Learners and Special Education Students. A sizeable portion of the student body has performed below grade level on most standardized measures of literacy achievement. The school population has a high mobility rate, but also has an extremely high graduation rate. Currently, the school graduates over 95% of its students. The site possesses all the qualities necessary for this type of qualitative research. The site also provides the backdrop needed for a narratological heuristic case study of this nature. It allowed for the selection of cases that provided a great deal of variance and the opportunity to construct impactful themes and data that potentially encapsulated a good portion of the school.

Hence, the participants for this study were a cross section of high school age seniors. The type of sampling is described by Maxwell (2013) as *purposeful sampling*. Furthermore, I utilized a more refined type of purposeful sampling known as *maximum variation* (Sandelowski, 1995). This type of sampling breaks purposeful sampling down even further by creating three categories of sampling; maximum variation, theoretical variation, and phenomenal variation. In this maximum variation sampling, race, class, gender, and other person-related characteristics are key factors in sampling decisions. These categories were all of significant importance when determining the research participants. The final cohort of

participants consisted of a culturally diverse group of two males and three female students. This decision was significant to the study in an attempt to identify cultural tendencies that might also impact the development of literacy skills. In order to insure fidelity to the research and to avoid any type of preconceived bias in the sampling of students, the students' reading and writing levels were not known prior to selection.

The motivation for this study stems from a career in education and watching the dire consequences poor literacy skills had on students. As I grew into a seasoned educator, my perceptions about importance of good literacy skills became galvanized. Year in and year out, I tried to perfect a process that would teach students the appropriate skills for success in later life. However, I quickly learned that in order to be an excellent teacher, I needed to understand the experiences of my students. As I moved into the role of administrator, the goal became one of a school wide literacy program that would enable students to reach their full potential. I soon began to view my research for this dissertation as a means to better understand the needs and experiences that shape the literacy outcomes of high school students. Because of my own experiences and expertise, I chose to bound this study to include only high school students. More specifically, I wanted to understand students who had completed the first part of their educational journey. Therefore, I only included students in the 12th grade. I wanted to try and understand why at the end of an educational cycle, teaching and pedagogy did not have the same impact on every student. Furthermore, I needed to better understand what other factors were creating voids in learning and inhibiting the progress I believed students needed to be making annually.

An important element of this study was the ability to develop a trusting relationship with the five students. One of the ways I accomplished this was getting to know these

students as people and not just cases. In most of the initial interactions, we did not speak about schooling or literacy. I found I went back to my teaching roots. I was an excellent teacher because I could build relationships that students appreciated. With these students, we talked about their jobs, plans after school, families, and things that interested them. It was not until my second and in a couple cases third meeting that we got to the heart of the purpose of the research. My patience and initial approach to the students helped me earn their trust and provided me with much deeper conversations in the end and allowed for a better understanding of the experiences I sought to interpret.

Understanding the Story of the Data

During this study, I utilized three different sources of data which I examined in conjunction with my research questions. The three sources of data were personal academic records, interviews, and observations. To begin with, the use of academic records helped me better understand the student's current level of literacy development. By examining national, state, and local test scores, I was able to gain a perspective as to the student's level of achievement. Through individual interviews, I attempted to learn about the students' perceptions of not only literacy, but also their interactions with literacy instruction both within and outside of school. The interviews also allowed for an insight into the students' perceptions about learning in general. I had not expected to see linkage between the students' personal observation of the learning process and their brutal understanding of the part they played or failed to play in their own learning. During the interview process, I also utilized several informal interviews with teachers to gain a better understanding of some of their interactions with students. Finally, I utilized classroom observations of the students. This occurred over two days and always included an English Language class and some other

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content that will be identified within each case study. The intent was to see how students interacted with their teachers and the different ways that teachers attempted to bring literacy into their classrooms.

Data Analysis Procedures

When conducting a heuristic case study, Moustakas (1990) indicates that there are six parts or phases to this process. These steps include (1) initial engagement, (2) immersion, (3) incubation, (4) illumination, (5) explication, and (6) creative synthesis. My entire career has basically been the corner stone for my initial engagement. I have developed a deep-seated belief about the importance of literacy attainment and the importance it plays in not only achievement levels, but also the quality of one's life. This has led me to the point of needing to better understand how students become literate and what are the elements that play the greatest role in this process. One the flip side of that thought is what are obstacles that inhibit this process. It was the contemplation of all these elements that led me to the central question: What can the personal narratives and life-long literacy experiences of urban high school students' reveal as to the practices required to effectively improve literacy skills?

As I pondered the notion of this question, I began to immerse myself in the very core of this topic. This included the study of numerous volumes and reams of research on this central issue. It also entailed engaging the essence of this idea with other teachers, as well as, administrators. During the incubation phase of the process, the intent was to allow for multiple view points as I considered all the different information. This allowed me to contemplate the problem utilizing many different lenses. Data collection and analysis provided an avenue for understanding the elements of my question through the identification of themes. A careful examination of the themes across the different cases soon allowed me to

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carefully examine my research questions. This process or explication required me to attempt to bring into alignment the preconceived notions I had about this phenomenon with the information I had uncovered through data collection and analysis. Finally, pulling all this information together from the conception of the idea many years ago to the collection and understanding of the data, I was able to synthesize this information in an attempt to form a new and more comprehensive view of the phenomenon by utilizing the narratives from each case. These narratives were constructed in a fashion that emphasized the utilization of a three-dimensional process (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006). This process utilized the examination of temporality, sociality, and positionality in constructing this three-dimensional framework. To understand an individual's narrative, these three elements must be the separate lenses through which the narrative is examined. Temporality helps frame the context of a narrative by understanding it against the back drop of the past, present, or future. By using a sociality lens to examine a narrative, the researcher is viewing the social elements that surround a narrative to better understand its context. Finally, one must consider the element of positionality to understand the place because of the impact it can have on the story. Research must take this three-dimensional approach to deconstructing narratives in order to truly gain a holistic picture created from the telling of one's story.

One of the paramount tasks of completing this study was insuring that the research was valid and reliable. The only way to achieve this goal was by utilizing crystallization throughout the process. In the past, researchers would have used a process known as triangulation. However, qualitative research has moved away from the positivist view of triangulation to the idea of crystallization because modern research acknowledges that there are more than three ways to approach a given subject (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008).

Crystallization allows one to achieve depth in research by considering many details from many different points of view. It also requires the researcher to analyze and organize those details in a very systematic manner (Ellingston, 2009). One of the ways to insure validity and reliability is to utilize multiple sources of data just as I have done in this research. The goal of this method of approach is to reach a point of data saturation.

In the case of reliability, this was achieved by insuring a high degree of clarity. It was important that there was no ambiguity with regards to my questions. I toiled over the proper wording of my questions for months. Even one word that seemed out of place sent me back to the drawing board on several occasions. The central question and four sub questions were the very heart of all that I was going to research and hopefully uncover. I took this same approach when creating the interview protocol to guide my interviews. Again, this process was the essence of my data collection process. It had to be created with a high degree of reliability. After completion of the interviews, I use member checking to allow each participant to review their transcript to insure the document accurately reflected their thoughts. The final task to ensure reliability was an audit of the research process to confirm alignment and careful implementation of each step. This included every element of my study from problem, to purpose, research questions, theoretical framework, methodology, limitations, strategies related to validity and reliability, and ethical considerations. It was paramount that all these elements were aligned and connected in ways to insure the research process was valid and reliable.

Within - Case Analysis

The data that were analyzed for this research was conducted on a case by case basis or what is known as within-case analysis. Each case participant was identified using a

pseudonym that they chose for the research; Hailey, Tina, Ray, Charlie, and Stacy. The entirety of the process lasted a little over four months. The process started by conducting interviews and performing observations. The interviews for this research study took place from May 2018 through August 2018. For each participant, there was a total of three interviews. The first interview was what I would describe as a "meet and greet". These usually lasted about thirty minutes. With this group of students, I had minimal interactions prior to our interviews. In order to gain thick-descriptive insights from the students, trust needed to be established. The first meeting was not scripted and simply consisted of getting to know the student and taking just basic overview notes. What were their plans after school? What non-academic areas of interest did they participate in? We also talked about their families and just general experiences from their childhood. Where had they grown up? Did they move a lot? Did they have siblings? I also concluded this initial meeting by discussing what we would be doing the next time we met. I found there to be a lot of benefit to these initial meetings. They really helped me establish a level of trust with the students that I do not believe would have been there had this process not occurred. The second interaction with each participant was about delving into their experiences with literacy. I had a script with four questions. These interviews lasted from thirty minutes to one hour. Some of the questions had sub-questions to utilize as follow-up questions. These questions were:

1. Discuss the value of reading and writing in your everyday life.

    a. Where does your enjoyment/dislike of reading come from?

2. Discuss the importance of reading and writing in your house/classroom.

    a. Discuss some of the ways in which you are able to either read or write in your classes/home on a daily basis.

i. What types of texts do you read?

ii. Discuss the manner by which you learn best

iii. What types of writing do you do?

3. Do you think your culture is valued when determining the reading and writing experiences assigned to you in school?

4. How important do you think reading and writing is in your school?

a. What are some specific things I would see in your school that indicate the importance (lack of importance)?

b. If you needed help or more support reading and/or writing, where could you find that help?

These interviews were at the heart of my research. They provided the insight into literacy development and what was needed to construct some type of framework related to the successes and barriers of current practices. My final meeting with each student lasted about ten to fifteen minutes. It was to simply show them what a transcript of our conversation looked like. It was also a chance for them to read over it and for me to explain the next steps of the research process.

As themes were identified in the analysis of the interview process during the illumination and explication phases of heuristic inquiry, they were further supported utilizing the observations notes and personal achievement data. These two pieces of data, as utilized within each case, provided further insight into the phenomenon being studied. The personal achievement data helped me formulate a picture as to the current state of the student's level of literacy. The observation data gave me a window into the everyday interactions that each student was having with literacy and literacy instruction. For the observations, I attempted to

capture as many of the instructional elements in each given classroom environment as possible. The observations took place for all students in an English class and some other class that will be specifically identified in each case. The total amount of observation time spent with each case was three hours.

In order to construct themes, the collected data were deconstructed and analyzed utilizing an open coding technique. This process is a means of going line by line through data sources and identifying descriptors within the data. As the data reveal more and more descriptors, these elements begin to form clusters or interpretive codes. It is the presence of groups of interpretive codes that develop into themes. The coding process for this research helped formulate four central themes that were pivotal in understanding literacy development or the lack of growth. The four themes were *self-awareness*, *teacher relationships*, *self-destructive behaviors*, and *cultural/home influence*. In order to be considered a theme, there needed to be at least three interpretive codes that were comprised of multiple descriptive codes. The descriptive codes were not necessarily found in every case, the phenomena or descriptors that formed the interpretive codes were often contextual and unique for each participant. However, there was enough of a presence of descriptive codes to be considered important elements of an interpretive code.

The case study analysis findings are organized by individual case. Within each section, I provide a brief introduction of the participant. This includes background information, as well as, the student's post-secondary aspirations. I then attempt to explain the themes that come to light from the multiple sources of data utilized for the within-case analysis. This allows for each participant to have their own voice during this process. The prospective audiences of the study can not only see how all the cases fit together in this

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manner but can more succinctly appreciate the importance of the experiences of each

individual in this study. These experiences form the essence of the research and provide the

context from which the findings are developed. All the themes are not necessarily present in

every case. Furthermore, in some cases the interpretive codes that formulate the themes

might be different when an identical theme is present in two cases. Each theme will be

discussed in detail as it is introduced for the first time within a case. Table 3 provides the

reader with an outline of the themes found in this research. It also provides an examination of

the interpretive codes that make up a theme. Each case is illustrated with clusters of

interpretive codes or sub-themes that formed a main theme. Finally, the table will denote if

there was a strong presence, moderate presence, or no presence of the interpretive code in

each of the cases.

Table 3

Within Case Analysis

Interviews and Observations	Hailey	Tina	Ray	Charlie	Stacy
Theme: Relationships					
Interpretive Codes					
Influence	S	M	S	S	S
Caring	S	M	M	S	M
Respect	S	-	S	M	S
Expectations	S	M	S	M	M
Theme: Disengaged Learner					
Interpretive Codes					
Self-destructive behaviors	-	-	-	S	M
Defeatism	M	S	M	M	M
Emotional turmoil	-	M	M	S	-
Family strife	M	S	M	M	-
Peer group interactions	-	-	S	S	M
Theme: Personal Self-awareness					
Interpretive Codes					
Post-secondary aspirations	M	-	S	M	S
Personal obstacles	S	S	-	S	S
Real-world application	-	S	S	M	M
Self-esteem	S	S	S	S	S
Perseverance	M	S	S	M	M
Theme: Cultural/Home Influences					
Interpretive Codes					
School dependence	S	S	M	S	M
Living conditions	S	S	S	M	S
Family Dynamic	S	S	S	S	S
Cultural Presence	-	-	S	S	S

Note: S=Strong Presence (10 or more occurrences)
        M=Moderate Presence (at least 5 but no more than 9 occurrences)

The research cases represent the outcomes of the life-long experiences of each student. The information revealed the multitude of factors that can potentially come into play and determine the learning outcomes for a student. The participants in the research were Hailey, Tina, Ray, Charlie, and Stacy.

Case 1 – Hailey

Hailey is a White female student who is a senior in high school. She moved to her current school in 9th grade. Before that, she had lived in a small rural town in the southern part of the state. Our first encounter was at her job. She had worked at this particular establishment for the past year and a half. I met with her about thirty minutes before her shift started. You could tell she was well liked by the peers she worked with by just observing the back and forth between them as they were coming and going while we talked. She was very friendly and very forthright with her answers as we discussed a number of subjects. She came from a divorced family and currently lived with her mother and two younger siblings. These are two factors that will become important areas of focus in a later conversation. She spends time with her father, but it was limited as he still lived in the small town she had grown up in several hours from her current home with her mother.

My second interview with Hailey occurred at school. It was during her study hall period in the school's commons area. This interaction lasted about forty-five minutes. For this interaction, I utilized my set of questions previously referenced. Having examined Hailey's personal academic records at this point, I was able to make the following determinations. Hailey was a struggling reader. She had taken four Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) exams over the past three years. All three exams put her reading level four plus grade levels below where she should have been reading. The SRI she took her senior

year placed her reading at about a 7th grade level. This determination was confirmed with several other items I examined. Her scores on her state End of Course exams put her proficiently level at Below Basic on all four exams. This included tests in English, Science, Math, and Social Studies. Her grades were all over the place. In some courses, she did fine. However, in other classes, she failed all of her course work. There was no real pattern to help decipher why she struggled from one class to another. Therefore, class grades proved to be the least reliable measure of her skill level. The final measure I examined was her ACT scores from her Junior year. This is a required test for all Missouri Juniors. In the two tested areas of English she scored a 14 and 14. This put her well below average. In Math she scored a 14 and in Science she scored a 15. Again, these scores indicated below average achievement levels. Overall, Hailey's four years of personal achievement data indicated a student that struggled academically and had not developed her literacy skills to any real degree. This lack of solid literacy performance was apparent in all areas of her high school achievement. In my discussions with Hailey, she never described herself as a strong student or one that was motivated to achieve. She believed that a lot of assessment of self-stemmed from being identified early on in her schooling as a struggling reader. Since academic achievement was not something that created worth for Hailey or provided a solid foundation in her schooling, her experiences in school always hinged dramatically on her relationships with classroom teachers.

Hailey had strong relationships with her teachers as reflected through the theme of *relationships* formed through the phenomena of influence, caring, respect, and expectations. The *relationships* illustrate the social dimensions of narrative (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). From the very beginning of our formal interview it became apparent that *relationships* with

teachers were significant for her, defined as the interactions between a student and teacher in an instructional environment and the impact those interactions have on a student's commitment to learning outcomes. Most of the elements of influence, caring, respect, and expectations were constantly at play throughout Hailey's story. Noguera (2003) depicted the potency of caring and expectations, "If students do not believe that their teachers care about them and are actively concerned about their academic performance, the likelihood that they will succeed is greatly reduced" (p. 449).

Expectations linked to *relationships* was a subtheme that emerged throughout my interview with Hailey. Expectation is defined in this research as the belief that the adults in charge of learning should always have their student's best interests in mind (Peterson, et al., 2016). During the course of our interviews, Hailey discussed several times that she believed that her own expectations were not high enough for herself. However, she also believed the expectations of those around her were not what they should have been either.

During one portion of the interview, we discussed at length what her thoughts were about how students stayed motivated to learn. She said motivation had always been a problem for her and she did her best work when those around her had high expectations. She indicated that she was nervous about graduating and going to college. She did not believe that she was prepared. If that in fact was true, I challenged her to tell me what the remedy or solution to that particular issue might have been. She did not feel that there had been high enough expectations placed on the need to go to college and what all it entailed. She explained it this way:

> Yeah, so it just feels like there's not enough time taken out for the students to make them understand how hard it will be. Maybe it's because I don't try to put in an effort, but I just feel like everyone has that problem and the counselors are a big part of it

lately, and I feel like if they had sat down and talked to us a little bit more of ... I know that they did have the day where they sat around and kind of talked about for seniors. I wasn't here for that day, unfortunately, I was in Arizona, but I feel like after that we should still have more steps of preparing us for college, getting us ready, explaining to us because they've all been through that. I feel like it would be easier if they took on that approach or even if we had a day where teachers sat down and gave us a discussion about it, advisory teachers or something. Then students would place a higher priority on getting in and maybe try harder for something after school.

I asked Hailey to expand on this notion of how we set higher expectations for students and provide a greater understanding of the process. So, she continued:

No I feel like it should at least start in your junior year. I feel like each year you should have a step of preparing you for the next year, for the next year because high schools a constant ... Everything's different each year. It constantly changes and you are required to achieve different things each year. You might change your mind about classes that you took your sophomore year, and you're like, "I shouldn't have took those. I should have taken these," and it keeps changing. Then when it comes time to graduate, you have been on the right track the entire time and people have given you understanding and things are important like they should have been.

I think her understanding of this process reveals a large hole that exists for a lot of students in high school. There is no "why" to what they are doing. There are no expectations or far reaching goals. Two or three decades ago, the assumption would have been that these expectations were placed on the student by parents and the discussions took place in the home. From my own experiences, I did not need guidance from the school. This happened at home and I know it was the same for most if not all of my peers. However, for a growing number of students, this is not the case in today's society. The school is more frequently looked upon to help students navigate this course. When schools do an inadequate job of helping students work through these tasks, an unintended consequence is it hinders academics in many cases because students see no value in achievement and fail to put forth the necessary effort because there is no "why" (Royster, Gross, & Hochbein, 2015).

Caring was an interpretive code or subtheme that was present in several aspects of my interviews and observations of Hailey and a large portion of the *relationship with teachers'* theme. Caring is defined as the perceived level of concern a teacher either has or does not have for a student's well-being and success in a particular class (Wagner, Wolfgang, et al., 2016). As I mentioned earlier, Hailey is not a strong student. Therefore, the intrinsic drive that many academically strong students have appears to be absent in Hailey. The external forces that drove her to succeed may be her teachers and how she perceived their level of caring about her. This is apparent in several of her comments about teachers she has encountered during school:

> Yeah. When I went to South High School ... I can't remember her name, but I did not like her. She did not really seem to care about her students. I never really did anything in her class. Well, we did do this podcast which I found interesting because it had to do with an issue that dealt with the boyfriend murdering the girlfriend, but they didn't really find out who did it. I liked that, and I didn't have to read it, so I just listened to it. When I came here, I had Ms. Wilson and she's awesome. She really loves her students. She knows how to work with other students, and what their likes and they're not likes. Even in books when we had to read them, she would still find some way to connect it to that book for someone's liking. I think there was only three students that never really found an interest in what she was doing.

Mrs. White was Hailey's junior English teacher. She was also a teacher that allowed Hailey to serve as a student mentor in her class as a senior. In this capacity, students who are seniors are allowed to work as mentors for underclassmen. Even though Hailey struggled with literacy and academically in general, Mrs. White (pseudonym) gave her this chance. When I asked Mrs. White about this, she said:

> Hailey is not one of my strongest students. However, she is a hard worker and always gives me her best effort. When she asked to be a mentor in my class, I agreed. I believed that her desire to do well in my class would possibly help influence, in a positive way, other students. I also hoped that maybe it would help build her confidence. She is a good kid and has more potential than she is aware of.

It was easy to determine that a significant element in Haley's academic development was the level of caring shown by a teacher. If Hailey knew that a teacher had cared about her success, I believe that Hailey tried harder to achieve in these situations academically because she did not want to disappoint these teachers. This idea is in direct alignment with the two remaining interpretive codes for this theme.

Influence and respect are two separate phenomena that were present in Hailey's data. However, these two elements are so intertwined with each other that I am going to explore them together. Influence is defined as another person's capacity to have an effect on the learning outcomes of a student. Respect is defined as the admiration or lack or admiration of a teacher as determined by certain desirable or undesirable qualities (Wagner, Wolfgang, et al., 2016). The people that have been the greatest influence on Hailey academically have also been the individuals she respected the most. However, the inverse is true as well. If she indicates she had a lack of respect for someone, it was obvious to see she was going to have very little respect for that teacher.

During one of my observations, I went into her math classroom. This subject was probably the one she struggled with the most throughout high school. It was also the one setting that I saw a side of her that I had not encountered. She had mentioned in our interview that she disliked math and was intimidated by the class and was not fond of the teacher:

> I feel like I'm completely behind in math and not ready for college level work. I know college is completely different than high school, and I feel like I haven't been prepared for that. The teacher doesn't really connect with students at all. Just stands there at the board and writes stuff down. I know I could have been taking some college level classes or harder math, but I just didn't take that route because I struggle as it is with regular classes, and that's just not something for me.

It was clear that this was a content and class she did not particularly like. When I observed

her in class, she was a much different person from what I had encountered previously. She

was not engaged in the class at all. She was disruptive and almost went out of her way to

interrupt the learning of others. Twice during the class, she had to be redirected by the

teacher. At one point, he asked her to step outside the class to have a discussion with her. Her

total lack of respect for her math teacher manifested itself into a complete lack of learning

and the teacher having no influence on her academic success at all.

This encounter was almost odd when juxtaposed to my observation in her English

class. This class was her multicultural literature class. She seemed to enjoy this course and

mentioned it a couple of times in our interview. Again, it was obvious to see during my

observation that she had a tremendous amount of respect for her teacher and this influenced

greatly her learning during the time I observed her class. During our interview, she provided

commentary about this teacher and the class when discussing teachers who provide support

for their students. Hailey said:

> Yeah, I feel like you definitely have to be like really up front with teachers and ask
> for assistance. No one really notices that you need help. Your kind of just have to
> like, if you want the help, ask them for the help, but from my perspective because I've
> always been a student that kind of slacks off, I tend to slack off in the beginning, wait
> until last minute, and then I either fail or I don't. All classes aren't that way. Mrs. ????
> will go out of her way to try and make sure you understand the material we are
> reading. She even lets you choose different books to read if you don't like or get the
> stuff, she gives you at first. It really helps me learn different stuff I might not have
> otherwise.

During both my observations and during the interview, Hailey demonstrated the different

ways that respect, both given and earned, and the influence respect had on her academic

learning outcomes. These are two very different outcomes that are generated by the same

student. It reaffirms that in her academic journey, it is the relationships she develops with her teachers or lack thereof that play a significant role in the outcomes.

The second thematic area I identified through my interviews and observations with Hailey was *personal self-awareness* which entailed a student's clear perception of who they were as learners. This included knowing what their own strengths, weaknesses, and motivations were regarding learning. This theme clustered around the instances of post-secondary aspirations, personal obstacles, real-world requirements, perseverance, and self-esteem. It was surprising to me how prevalent this theme was throughout Hailey's narrative of her experiences captured through interview data and revealed in my observations of Hailey. There were many times *personal self-awareness* was apparent in the data as she reflected on her academic journey. Multiple instances of events, incidents, and language suggested personal obstacles and self-esteem played a tremendous role in her learning outcomes.

Self-esteem was a subtheme that came into play at various stages of my interviews with Hailey and was very evident in the theme of *personal self-awareness*. Self-esteem reflects the confidence a student has in their abilities as a student to master learning (Tobia, Valentina, Riva, & Caprin, 2017). Hailey comes across as a very shy and insecure person. On the surface she is very pleasant and polite. Once I had formed some trust with her, she was engaging and also very forthright with her answers to my questions. However, there was always this sense of not good enough that was right under the surface of our interactions. You could tell by the way she carried herself and the way she dressed that confidence in herself or who she was might be tenuous or fragile. This appeared to be something she internalized as far back as elementary school and it had a dramatic impact on her learning. In

one exchange, we discussed her reading and, as previously indicated, she was pulled out for "special" instruction as she called it. She lamented

> I hated being pulled out for reading. Everyone in the class knew why I was being pulled out and it embarrassed me. I remember how hard it was to come back into class and try to do what the rest of the class was already doing. A lot of times, I would just go off into a corner and pretend I was reading a book or doing work. Anything I could do to stay away from the other kids.

Clearly this experience impacted her learning and also hindered her ability to learn. Hailey told me her teacher in second and third grade would often let her sit by herself for hours (she had the same teacher two years in a row, but she could not remember why). She did not remember her name, but just remembered how little she seemed to care about her or what she learned.

Personal obstacles were the second interpretive code that I identified as part of the *personal self-awareness* theme found in Hailey's story, communicated as actors in a student's life that hinders or impedes academic progress through no fault of the student. I have observed these occurrences, not only in Hailey's story and several of the other research cases, but in the lives of thousands of my former and current students. So many times, these are experiences and incidents students are likely to have limited or no control over or students may be dependent on others to provide. These personal obstacles often impede their ability to learn. In the case of Hailey, her circumstances were not any different.

During our discussion on schooling, I had asked Hailey if the transition from the small town she lived in was difficult, connected to temporality and place dimensions of her narrative life. She indicated it had been, but it was not so much the move, but the circumstances. I asked her what she meant by that:

My parents had just gotten divorced and my mom wanted to move back up her to be around family. My grandparents lived up her in Gladstone, so this was where we landed. When we first got her, we lived in an apartment up by the park. You know up by the park with the Penguins. My freshman year was probably the hardest of all.

I asked her if it was because she was new and did not know anybody. She indicated yes, but she said she was also behind in class all the time because she had to help with her younger siblings. They were eight and eleven:

My mom got a job and worked some really weird hours. Two or three times a week, she would have to open the store up which meant that she wouldn't get home until 8:30 or 9:00 in the morning sometimes. When this happened, I had to stay at home and make sure my brother and sister got up and were ready to get on the bus. Most of the time, this meant that I didn't make it to school until mid-way through second block. Sometimes I would just tell my mom I didn't want to go because I had missed so much time. So, she would let me stay home from school. Anyway, my attendance was really bad most of my freshman year.

Upon examining her academic record and grades from this time period, as would be expected, she failed three of the four classes she was in during the morning portion of the school day and grades in classes where she had a high number of absences were not good either. I asked her if she spoke to her teachers about her circumstances. She indicated:

I was new to the school, so I didn't really know any of my teachers. Most teachers don't care about that kind of stuff. I remember like my junior year a math teacher telling a girl that sat next to me that he wasn't here to deal with her personal life. Her brother had been in the hospital or was sick or something. A lot of teachers feel that way about students. They don't care about what happens to us away from school.

Unfortunately, Hailey had several instances of obstacles that were beyond her control during the course of her schooling that directly affected her academic outcomes and played a major role in her successes and failures in school.

Cultural/home influences, a dominant theme, identified through my interviews with Hailey and classroom observations, was described within the context of this study as the elements that a student encounters away from the regular school day that have the potential

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to impact a student's academic success. Banks and Banks (2010) describe culture as the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, roles, spatial relations, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people over the course of generations through individual and group striving. This theme was assembled through elements of school dependence, living conditions, family dynamics, and cultural presence. Many times, in my career, it has been painfully apparent that despite the best efforts of a learning institution, there are forces at play outside of the school that will trump the efforts of teachers every time. Sometimes, this is done intentionally and other times they are just circumstances beyond the control of anyone involved. Unfortunately, too often the student's academics are what suffers. Milner (2013) in his examination of poverty is careful not to communicate a culture of poverty exists; however, he suggests that to establish a radical classroom pedagogy, "students are knowers and teachers construct the learning environment in a way that showcases and honors what students know" (p. 41). They help students question the existence of poverty and learn that it affects all of us.

Earlier, when examining the theme of *personal self-awareness*, the interpretive code or sub-theme of personal obstacles was introduced. During the interviews, Hailey revealed how a situation that required her to watch her siblings in the morning because her mother worked until 9:00 am dramatically impacted her grades. In this particular case, this would be an example of the sub-theme of family dynamics. These are interactions, relationships, and socialization practices of family members and their possible influence on learning outcomes. Socialization within the family unit is defined as the life experiences that determine how one interacts with people and situations in different environments (Banks, 2017). The situation

with Hailey's mothers work was just one example of how family dynamics may have influenced learner outcomes.

During our interview, the question of where students were most likely to receive support if they were struggling became a topic of discussion. I asked her to tell me how she would handle that issue:

> Well, Mrs. White is always willing to help me regardless of the subject. The ladies in the library are really nice too. I remember the one lady with the long hair helping me when I needed to make like this house thing for one of my history classes. I can't remember the assignment, but she helped with some sticks and glue and we made this house. It was bad, but I got a good grade.

At this point, I asked her about home. I said surely there was someone there who could help. Hailey's response was, "Not really, not at my house." Then she became quiet, Now this was the first time Hailey had become quiet during any of our meetings. She was always pretty outgoing. I could tell immediately this was a sore spot and one she was uncomfortable with. However, I asked if she would not mind explaining a little more what she meant by that:

> My mom works all the time. I can't ever remember her helping me with homework or any school stuff. Sometimes, I don't think she even cares about school. I know her brother is a drop out. My mom finished, but she never went to any college or stuff like that. She just started working. When I was little, I remember my dad helping me on a project about dogs. He really liked dogs, so we did this thing where we made this poster and he helped me draw some of the stuff out. I try to help my brother and sister with their homework sometimes, but they would rather do other stuff like play or watch tv. So, we don't really do work around the house.

I asked Hailey if she had ever asked her mom for help. She responded:

> I don't think I ever have, but really, we just don't do that stuff. She sleeps a lot because she works lots of hours, so I don't really feel right asking her to do some of those things with me. Plus, she has stuff she has to do for my brother and sister all the time. When I had choir freshman and sophomore year, I know she never came and saw me perform at any of our events. It just isn't important to her. I know she will be proud when I graduate, but I am not sure it matters.

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Two features of Hailey's life came squarely into focus from this exchange. First, her family dynamics provided no academic support or direction for her what so ever. She was just floating in this environment. This, in turn, made it easy to understand why she sought affirmation from those she believed cared about her and respected her academically at school. Hailey had an unwavering belief and need for the support and affirmation from her English teacher. This brought out her will to work. From this exchange it was clear that for Hailey to be successful academically, she needed the support and direction of her learning institution.

The second subtheme associated with the theme *cultural/home influences* is school dependence. Students often need additional support from the school in matters typically addressed and handled by members of the student's family. The reason the interpretive code of school dependence is important is because it parallels the subtheme of family dynamics. In Hailey's particular case, these two codes directly mirror each other.

There have been several examples given already that show how in Hailey's home life, there is little or no focus on a commitment to academic succus. There is actually very little acknowledgment of academics at all. The family seems to be built around the notion of necessity. It is necessary for her mother to work in order to provide for the family (Elliott, Sinikka, Powell, & Brenton, 2017). Therefore, this is the nexus of existence within their home. and easy to understand. As I mentioned before, I met Hailey at her job before work during our first encounter. I had asked her if she liked the job. She told me not particularly. However, if she wanted anything, she was responsible for buying it. She had told me how she had been worried about getting her cap and gown for graduation because they had cut back

on her hours and she was not working as much. In Hailey's world away from school, there was no school. Actually, school seemed to be her escape from the realities of home.

Hailey's case is an example of how the themes of relationships and culture/home influences are closely tied together in this instance. Hailey was a student that did not have strong educational relationships at home. By this, I mean she did not have an influence in her life at home that provide guidance and support in her educational endeavors. More importantly, this lack of educational value at home also led to a lack of self-worth. Therefore, when it came to Hailey's educational experiences and ability to develop literacy skills, her successes were always tied to relationships. Even though she did not excel in many of her classrooms, there were glimpses of what her true potential might have been when she was able to develop strong relationships with classroom teachers throughout her educational experiences. This gave her a sense of caring and was truly the defining element when it came to educational failures and successes in her life. Noddings (2012) pointed to what is required of teachers to have an ethic of caring that allow them to create classroom cultures of positive expectations. An ethic of care involves "establishing and maintaining relations of care and trust which include listening, dialogue, critical thinking, reflective response, and making thoughtful connections among the disciplines and to life itself" (p. 771).

Case 2 – Tina

Tina is an African American female and has attended the same school district since she was in kindergarten. Our first encounter took place in the common's area of her high school. We met after school, so I could introduce myself and get to know her a little bit. As was my practice throughout the research, this first meeting had nothing to do with the research. My questions were typically areas of interest. For example, what extra-curricular

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activities are you engaged with in schools? Are you involved with school organizations? Do you play sports? Are you in the band? Do you have brothers and sisters? The intent was to gain some personal insight into the student's background and establish a level of trust. Typically, when inquiring about background or interests, I would reveal something about myself. Tina currently lives with her mother. She has a twin brother and sister in the seventh grade. She was friendly during our encounters and very forth-coming. However, you could tell there was always a guarded element in her delivery when she spoke. It was almost like she was defensive without trying to sound angry. This was especially true of her academic experiences. There were moments when she would allow her anger about a lack of certain skills to show through, but then she would raise a barrier not allowing me to see it. She has no interaction with her father and has not seen him in over ten years. Tina was not involved in any athletic endeavors and had never participated in any school related extra-curricular activities.

The second interview with Tina again took place at school. This time, we talked after school had let out. We were able to again sit in the commons area and have a discussion that lasted just a little over forty minutes. As was my previous practice, I had looked at Tina's personal academic records prior to our second meeting. Upon looking at her records, I began to understand some of the anger she was experiencing. Tina had SRI data back to 6th grade. Her highest test score in high school put her reading level between fourth and fifth grade. All the other SRI exams confirmed this level of reading for her. On her state End of Course (EOC) exams and the seventh and eighth grade State Exams, she consistently scored below basic, never at a proficiency level. On her junior level ACT exam, she had a composite score of 12. This would be considered one of the lowest scores statistically a student could receive.

Her classroom grades all confirmed the same achievement levels. Her core classroom grades were mainly Ds and Fs. Many subjects she had taken multiple times in summer school to pass. Her elective courses were similar with a couple of notable exceptions. Her Art grades were all As and Bs. She had taken an Art class all four years of high school and had never gotten a grade lower than a B. This would become a topic of discussion during our interview. She also had good grades in her physical education classes. She had even taken a strength and conditioning class, usually reserved for athletes, and she did rather well. All in all, Tina struggled through high school and had in her words, "a very frustrating four years."

Tina's story was very much about two themes in particular. Apparent in her interview and observation data were the dominant themes of *personal self-awareness* and *cultural/home* influences. Her experiences in school may be shaped in large part by the schooling experiences of her mother, who had not graduated from high school, and the role of the school in this student's life. This is most apparent when considering the sub-themes of *school dependence, living conditions,* and *family dynamics*. The combination of these three components paints a clear picture of why Tina's learning experiences and literacy development potentially ended up being what they were. She was completely disconnected from education which appeared to have occurred in her life from a very early age. This is revealed in several very telling parts of our discussion.

Raised by a single parent, who had not graduated from high school, and twin siblings, I surmised that poverty was a key issue in the lives of the family. Single females are 35 percent more likely to live in poverty than men. Furthermore, 23 percent of all African-American women live in poverty (Tucker & Lowell, 2016). This situation can wreak havoc on the children that are caught in a low-poverty situation:

> Low-income children caught up in their parents' economic struggles experience the impact through unmet needs, low-quality schools, and unstable circumstances. Children as a group are disproportionately poor at a much higher rate than their adult counter-parts: roughly one in five children live in poverty compared with one in eight adults. (US Census Bureau, 2014).

During our conversations, the sub-themes of *family dynamic* and *living conditions* were very prevalent. She had a different father than her brother and sister, but none of them had contact with their fathers. Tina indicated that her mom had been married twice. However, both times the relationship ended badly, and they would have to move. Her mother never moved far because their family was in the area where she grew up. It is worth noting that moves like Tina experienced can have a detrimental impact on one's educational outlook:

> Residential instability is related to lower academic achievement for ever-poor children. Ever-poor children who move three or more times for negative reasons before they turn 18 are 15 percent less likely to complete high school, 36 percent less likely to enroll in college or another postsecondary education program by age 25, and 68 percent less likely to complete a four-year college degree by age 25 than ever-poor children who never move. (Ratcliffe, 2015)

I asked Tina if she thought school was important in her house and if she was expected to do well:

> No, it was never important in our house. My mom wasn't like that. She didn't graduate from high school and I don't think it was important to her if I did well in school or not. She never really asked me about classes or anything like that. When I got to high school, she did tell me that she wanted me to graduate, but it really just seemed like one of those things that people say. I don't think she really thought or cared much about it. I am not really sure she even knew what my grades were the last couple of years. Honestly my aunt asks me about stuff like that more than anyone, but I don't get to see her a whole lot. She works a ton of hours.

Tina's family dynamic and living conditions were not conducive or able to provide the foundation she required to be a successful learner. In turn, she was behind early on in her educational endeavors. Because her situation never improved, she was destined to be behind and never really have the chance to catch up with her peers.

It became very apparent that Tina was totally dependent on the school for any type of

guidance or direction with regard to her educational experiences. This was not a function that

her own family unit was going to take part in at all. Unfortunately, in cases where she

required the assistance and direction of her teachers, she seemed to not have had good

experiences:

> I don't really remember too many of my teachers. I liked my sixth-grade home room teacher. She was nice and helped me a lot with my math. I also liked Mrs. Wiley for freshman art class. She encouraged us to paint whatever we wanted when we were in her class…I just didn't have a lot of talks with my teachers. I was pretty quiet in class and never really asked for help.

In the end, one had to look at the educational experiences of Tina and feel like there were

instances in her life where those in charge of her learning should have stepped up and

realized this was a student in need because she was not getting the direction and support, she

needed to be a successful student. During my observations of Tina's classes, this seemed to

play out as well.

For both observations, Tina was passively engaged in her classes. She was never a

disruption, but she also never fully engaged in any of her learning. It was easy to see the

disengaged learner I had picked up on during the interview process emerge in the classroom.

Tina became the invisible student in her classes. In the English class I observed, the class was

doing a worksheet and group project on some story they had read. Tina was compliant, but

not engaged. Over the years, I have conducted thousands of classroom observations. This is a

phenomenon that I see play out constantly. A student is neither engaged or disruptive. Instead

of teachers pushing the student to engage, they reward acts of simple compliance by not

pushing students to a state that might make them uncomfortable; and, in turn, students push

back by acting out. This is a give and take that is common in many urban school classrooms.

It is also one that I am sure has taken place for years during Tina's learning experiences; largely part of the reason she developed into the disengaged, passive learner I witnessed during both my observations. I concluded, no wonder this student failed to develop any type of true literacy skills.

The second theme prevalent in Tina's story was one of *personal self-awareness*. The sub-themes of *personal obstacles, real-world applications,* and *self-esteem* were very prominent in our discussion. To begin, there is a complete lack of any type of self-esteem in Tina's story, which, in turn, is likely related to an academic deficit (Pajares & Schunk, 2011). Throughout our discussion regarding her learning experiences she made comments about her inabilities regarding school and educational achievement. I first asked her if she believed that she was a strong reader:

> No, I have never been able to read. I just am not able to concentrate for long periods of time. I have tried before, but I am just never able to do it.

I then proceeded to ask her about the courses she liked and disliked. She said:

> Well, I have always been horrible at things like math, science, and English. I like social studies because that stuff interests me, but I am bad at it. I just don't make good grades. I guess it's too late to change that now.

So, I pushed a little harder and asked her about the classes she did do well in at school:

> Well, you don't have to be smart to do art. I mean I like to draw and make things, but it doesn't require me to be a thinker or do stuff. I just draw. Like one of the classes was photography. I mean I can take pictures of stuff and you got to color them different ways and stuff, but it wasn't hard. PE was fine because we played like basketball and dodgeball. As long as you dress out you will get a good grade in there. I really liked the weights' class because I just enjoyed lifting and stuff. I kind of regret not being able to be on the weights' team or whatever they call it, but my grades were bad

Tina had struggled academically for as long as she could remember. She made numerous comments indicating she was never good in school and she was always the slowest one in her

classes. She made mention of the fact that there were times she knew it was just easier to not try because she was not going to get it. In the end, this all translated into a student who had absolutely no self-esteem and saw herself as a failure for as long as she could remember.

When talking about literacy and its place in Tina's life, there was a very clear presence of the sub-theme *real-world application*. In the case of this research, real-world application is defined as a student's understanding of how literacy is applied throughout the various areas of one's own life in the age of information (Carder, Willingham & Bibb 2001). As we discussed literacy and Tina's experiences in school with literacy, it became very apparent that she had not connected the importance of literacy with her own development and the role it would play in her life as she got older. I started by asking her simply to define literacy. Tina replied:

> I think it has something to do with English class. So maybe reading books and stuff and then writing down stuff about those books.

I proceeded to give her a broad definition of reading and writing. I then asked her if she had any examples of how literacy played a role in her life and how she thought it might after she graduated:

> Well, I had a job when I was a junior at this Mexican restaurant. When they let me be a server one of the things I had to do was know all the stuff on the menu. The guy who was the manager would get mad at you if you had to ask him what something was. You also had to be able to write out your tickets and stuff.

I asked her again how she might use it in later life after graduation:

> Probably things like reading street signs or maybe knowing how to read signs and ads when you are like in the grocery store or something. Maybe when you fill out a job application or do some type of work that might have books and stuff. You know like manuals or things like that. I really don't want to have a job that I have to write stuff. I really didn't like that Mexican place. So, I don't want to have to do anything like that.

It became very apparent that Tina had no connections to the role literacy skills were going to play in her later life. In reality, she was determined to try and have an existence that required the least amount of literacy possible. Which, if one thinks about it, makes complete sense. This is a student who had struggled in every aspect of her educational experience except in the areas that did not ask her to read or write. Therefore, she was going to seek out a path in life that did not require her to use the skills she had not obtained during her schooling and had no real understanding of for her later life.

By looking at the life story of Tina, it is clear to see that she was faced with personal obstacles at almost every turn of her life. During my interview with Tina, she was very careful not to reveal too much about how she had grown up or the things she had gone through in her life. However, as we bounced back and forth in our conversation, there were times Tina would reveal certain elements of her life I think she was trying to keep hidden. At one point, she spoke about how little room she had for her clothes when they stayed at the shelter. I had remembered her talking about one of the times when her mom got divorced and they had no place to stay. So, I inferred from these two glimpses in her past that she had been homeless for a time. I believe she also was alone most of her life when it came to any type of true guidance or support from a parent or guardian. Several times she spoke of limited influences that people like her aunt and grandfather had on her life. At no point in our conversation did she ever speak in any type of positive manner about her mother or support or influence she had in her life. I asked in passing about why she no longer worked at the Mexican restaurant. She gave an explanation that revealed responsibility for taking caring of younger siblings:

> Hard to be the only adult in your house sometimes. I had to take care of my brother and sister and do most of the stuff around the house. I missed a couple of shifts because of stuff at home and they fired me.

So much of what I inferred from Tina was not about what she said or did not say. Several times it was about tone or even body language when she spoke. It was just evident there was a complete lack of any kind of joy when she was talking about her experiences away from school.

For me, Tina is an example of life getting in the way of learning. Unlike Hailey in case one, Tina never spoke of any real attachments that she had made when she was in school. All she discussed was how she avoided certain elements of the learning process. As I reflected on Tina's story, I realized that her educational experiences and inability to really acquire any solid literacy skills was a product of elements beyond pedagogy and practices. Her educational outcomes were determined by events that were really beyond her control. She faced obstacles in her personal life that precluded her from ever experiencing learning in a truly beneficial manner. She had negative experiences early in her schooling and no one ever took enough of an interest in her to pull her back into the fold and get her interested in her own education again. Hyslop (2006) explained that,

> Schools remain one of the best opportunities for connecting youth and adults in positive ways, giving students the sense that they are valued and cared for, and reinforcing the message that whether they succeed or fail actually matters to someone. (p. 34)

Because of Tina's failure and lack of connections with caring teachers, she also never developed any real sense of self-worth or self-esteem. As Gay (2010) suggests caring involves attending to students and their academic performance and exhibiting "concerns for the students' emotional, physical, economic, and interpersonal conditions" (p. 53).

Unfortunately, her failures in school will likely be the precursor to the failures in her life. Yet for some students growing up in poverty and having such negative schooling experiences, some find ways to perseverance and ultimately pursue healthy and satisfying lives (Chant, Klett-Davies, & Ramalho, 2017).

Case 3 – Ray

Ray, an Arab male, was the first of five siblings to be born in this country. His parents both moved from Palestine to the United States to go to college. They met in college and married. In his home, his parents speak both Arabic and English. When Ray and I met, both times it was at his school. From the very first moment we met, it was very easy to like this young man. He was very outgoing and was more than willing to share his personal experiences with me. The first meeting we talked a lot about his family and his cultural background. I was very interested in his family. He has from a large family. Once his parents were married and had established themselves in the area were he currently resides, his parents' siblings moved to the same area. Even though his parents are originally from Palestine, his entire family now lives in the same city. Both sets of grandparents and all his parents' siblings have now moved to this region. Ray's family and his culture are very important elements for his educational development. As I began to hear Ray's story, it became clear why he had developed such a strong instructional foundation in literacy.

Our second meeting started off much like our first, talking about the roles of his family and culture in his upbringing. As I examined Ray's personal academic data, he was by far the strongest student I had interviewed thus far. Ray was a product of the district where he went to high school. He had attended school in this district since Kindergarten and had extensive academic records. To begin with, his SRI scores were always either right on grade

or above grade level. Starting in tenth grade, he scored college level on all his SRI tests. His

state exam scores were mainly advanced. He had scored proficient on a couple of tests while

in middle school, but the rest were all top tier. His grades were a mix of A's and B's. His

course load was a mix of honors and advanced placement classes. Ray had taken the ACT

three times. His highest composite score was 27. This would place him in the 87th percentile

on this exam. Over all, Ray was a well-rounded student who had made the most out of his

academic journey. He appeared to have strong skills in the classroom, as well as, strong

literacy skills. His academic success seemed to be due in large part to his family and culture.

In previous cases, the theme of *cultural/home influence* had impacted dramatically the

outcomes of the student's performance in school. Unfortunately, family had a negative

influence and hindered the growth of the students in previous cases. However, this was not

the case with Ray. It was exactly the opposite. Ray's family and his culture had a positive

effect on his academic achievement and his development of literacy skills. This can first be

seen in how *cultural presence* impacts his attitude about learning. In the case of Ray, there

are many times that he tells his story much better than I could possibly do. He was very

eloquent and really thoughtful about the questions I asked him before he spoke. I asked him

how he believed his culture impacted his learning:

> Growing up in an all Arabic family ... I'm 100% Arabic although I was born here. My
> mom's parents are both 100% Palestinian and my dad was born in Palestine and his
> parents were both 100% Palestinian. So, my mom's family came here and that's how
> they all met and that's why I'm here. I never thought about my culture being different
> than anyone else. In my house, it was just a part of our life. In our home, we were
> always expected to go to school and do well. It was never a discussion or something
> you did or didn't do. You just knew that you were supposed to go to school and do
> well. My mom and dad we very involved in school. They work hard and work lots of
> hours, but they always came to school stuff for me and my brothers and sisters…. I
> don't ever remember them missing any of that type of stuff. It was the same way for
> my cousins. They don't go to this school, but two of them are my age. In the Arabic

culture, schooling is very important and something that you are expected to do well at.

Ray gave several examples of how he perceived his culture to have influenced his academic development. However, explanations were always connected to the fact that in his family and the families of his cousins and friends that were Arabic, it was expected that you went to school and did well. He mentioned that his sister, who was two years younger than him, ranked number two in her class. You could tell he was proud when he spoke about this. During our exchanges, there was always this underlying presence of pride and self-assuredness that drove Ray's ideas about education and his own accomplishments.

As I mentioned before, many of the elements of this theme were the opposite of what I had encountered within the other cases. In the case of Ray, this theme and all of its sub-themes had a positive effect on how he developed as a learner. In the sub-themes of *living conditions* and *family dynamic*, the value of education in his house was very evident. This was apparent in the structure that existed in his house as well as the emphasis his parents placed on learning. We discussed just school in general at one point and how his mom and dad viewed education in their house. Ray had this to say about school in his house:

> She'll get home at 11:00 sometimes and our family, well, we make our kids go to bed at 10:00. That's how it would be. When I was younger, it was earlier. When I was in that age where I got read to bed, we went to bed at 9:30, so my mom wouldn't even be there sometimes. It would only be on her days off, which is twice a week out of the seven. Importance of school in my house? It's very important. I know that my mom would always tell me to be very studious, if that makes sense. Even if she didn't read to me or study with me, we didn't read in the house that much, she still always wanted me to be the top of my stuff. And when I needed to read, I was supposed to, I wasn't supposed to throw it off. We were expected to do well while we were in school. My mom and dad both worked hard and had long hour jobs. We were expected to have these things done when they got home from work or when they were gone.

I asked Ray what happened in his house when these types of rules were not followed. He said:

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Well, I don't if this will make sense, but we didn't not follow the rules in my house. I can remember two times that bad grades were brought home, or someone didn't get things done. My parents both worked away from our home and we were expected to follow certain rules. My younger brother was the one who would get in trouble for not doing these things.

I asked him what happened when this occurred with his brother:

I would just say that my dad was strict. It isn't a bad thing but there were rules to be followed and you were in trouble if you didn't follow them. Our culture is different with these types of things. I would just say that my brother was punished in a way that the rest of us would expect in our home.

In all of our conversations, this exchange was the only time Ray held back on me. I think he believed I was going to judge him if he had said what I suspected he was going to say. However, I also had the feeling that as he told this story, he believed without a doubt that the punishment was justified and deserved. Regardless of the punishment, these were the conditions established by his parents and they played a large role in establishing a type of routine and rigor in Ray's life that went a long way toward making him successful in his educational pursuits. The family and cultural dynamics in his home were very defined and everyone had a role. It was expected that everyone upheld their role and do so in a manner as expected and defined by not only Ray's culture, but also his family.

As has been the case in all the stories thus far, the theme of *relationships* played an important role in the success of students and the extent to which their literacy developed in high school. This was true of Ray as well. The sub-theme of influence was significant for him. You could tell that his relationships with his teachers had been important to him throughout school. However, *relationships* through the influence of teachers were especially significant during his high school years. Ray expressed the following:

How would I track that down? If I did take ... If any English class I took ... Let me backtrack into elementary school. In elementary school we put on our little enrollment paper that we spoke Arabic in the house and I was in ELL for a year. I didn't really need it, I really didn't, but they put me in there. So, in elementary school, if they saw that even maybe you needed a little help, they automatically got it. However, I didn't need that help but I saw how they worked with other kids and this was at the elementary level. So secondary level right now, high school, let's see. I would take either a regular or normal English class and then if I had trouble with it ... I think I remember having trouble my freshman year, I talked to Ms. Nelson (pseudonym). I told her, I said, "Hey, this is how I'm understanding what you're telling me and what you're giving the class, but I want to go one step further and I wanna know in depth of what I have to do just because to me, it's really, really vague." She stepped right up and really encouraged me. She would help me whenever I need that extra help. She was really a fantastic teacher. You knew she cared about her students and really wanted us to do well. I always appreciated how much she went out of her way to encourage us and help me when I needed it.

Ray's teachers all seemed to have a big influence on his learning and his work ethic which

blended with the theme of *relationships*. As you can tell from the previous statement, it is

also the presence of the sub-theme *expectations* that blends into all these interactions and

relationships. When Ray talks about school and home, there is always the presence of

expectations. In many comments about his home, he discussed the expectations of his

parents. However, the notion of expectations really came through in an exchange we had

about one of his teachers

I'm with Ms. Johnson (pseudonym) And yeah, Ms. Johnson shows us the right way and then it won't be like, oh let me just feed you everything we're doing. It's more of like a little model, if you will, like a really badly drawn blueprint. We'll just try to put the pieces together ourselves and then when we get together in our groups that she assigned us, she sees how we're doing. She expects us to be able to do these things on our own. If she sees the class, usually it doesn't happen, thank God, and sees the class suffering, is how she puts it, we will do another workshop and she'll go more in depth about it. But usually, the way I see if I'm learning right or wrong is how other people do it, how other people take it. You just know she won't let you do it wrong and it had better be right.

As we have this exchange, Ray has this really big smile on his face. I asked him what it was

about story that made him almost happy. He proceeded to tell me how he felt about many of

the teachers he had encountered:

> Just super-duper crazy English skills that the whole English department has and they're are, they all are happy to help. I'm really gifted that I don't need a lot of help with that and I can help myself in that category, but if I ever need help from a teacher, I'm never scared or shy to ask. They're always here to help if I do need help, which I might here soon for Ms. Johnson. But I would ask her, for sure, and she would instruct me the right way.

Ray's relationships and all the smaller pieces that make up those relationships really played a

crucial role in helping to establish an instructional environment that allowed him to thrive

and develop strong literacy skills. It also provided the back drop that allowed him to have

respectful relationships with his teachers.

As I observed Ray in his classes, it was immediately evident that there was a mutual

respect between teacher and student. Of course, this is one of sub-themes that is important in

the development of the theme of relationships. However, as I observed all the interactions

Ray had in his classes, all the qualities I had picked up on during on interviews suddenly

became vividly clear. In the first class I observed, an English course, Ray was exactly as he

had been in our interviews. It was clear to see his teacher had the utmost respect for him. He

greeted him before class began and they exchanged pleasantries. This outgoing attitude was

the same with his classmates as well. You could just sense there was something very genuine

about this student. His classmates and teachers respected him and valued his input in class.

As I observed the second class, a science class, it was like a rerun of the previous class I had

seen. This time I arrived at the class before Ray arrived. When he came into the room, the

teacher immediately acknowledged his entrance and greeted him. He had the same banter

back and forth with classmates that I had witnessed before. Again, it was like watching the same movie twice. During class he was engaged and interactive with every facet of his learning. In his science class, he was the first one to raise his hands when volunteers were sought to give examples of the correct way to set up an experiment. At one point in the class, a student approached him for help on part of the math required to solve a chemical equation. He stopped what he was doing and assisted the student without hesitation. As I indicated earlier, the only way to describe these interactions is to call them the utmost display of respect from teachers to student and classmates to classmate. These were not contrived interactions, they were genuine and authentic. These interactions between teachers and Ray as well as Ray and his classmates reminds me of Noddings (2012) moral nature of caring, which she suggested, must be apparent in schools if educators are to teach children to care and to be moved by the affective identification with others. Ray could express care for other students because of the mutuality of care between him and his teachers. Noddings also described the mutuality of care in adult relations; however, all relations are not equal as in the teacher-pupil relation. Both parties must contribute to the act of caring. The challenge for teachers is that even when there are reasons, they cannot respond positively to expressed needs of students, their responses must be aimed toward maintaining a caring relationship through open communication which teaches the child to engage in the moral aspects of caring (Noddings). This did not happen for Tina and in some situations for Hailey which affected their *personal self-awareness.*

The theme of *personal self-awareness* really came to life during a discussion Ray and I had about his plans after high school. During this discussion all the sub-themes of *post-secondary aspirations*, *real-world application*, *self-esteem*, and *perseverance* were revealed.

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These interpretive codes had been apparent during other parts of our interactions, but this part of the interview was very revealing. While we were discussing the classes he took in school, I asked him why he chose the course he chose and if he felt they benefited his academic growth and represented other cultures:

> The classes I took in school, so Honor's ELA1, Honor's ELA2, and then AP Lit junior year. I would've took AP Language and Comprehension or Language and something else, whatever that class is called, I would've took that, however, I didn't have room 'cause my schedule's really busy. So, I take Multicultural Lit online and that's probably the most diverse, most cultural texts I've read so far in my high school career just 'cause how the curriculum is set up for the pre-IB Honor's classes and the AP classes. I mean, there's no time to just go into every country. But, when I took these classes, yeah, I would say they made me better. I have always known I wanted to go to college. I guess that was one of the reasons my parents wanted us to work hard. You know that in college the work is going to be hard. So, you had better work hard so you are ready to do the work they give you once you get there. I think that had a lot to do with the classes I wanted to take.

Over and over again, Ray talked about realizing that it was going to be difficult once he got to college. However, he was willing to work hard to make sure he was able to get a degree. He really demonstrated a high level of *perseverance.* This in most instances was directly correlated to his desire to attend college or the sub-theme of *post-secondary aspirations.* This of course has led Ray to have an extremely high *self-esteem.* During both of our interviews, it was easy to pick up on the fact that Ray understood that his schooling was a journey and there was a purpose to all of this. In essence, he was acknowledging the *real-world application* of the path he was on and understood the importance of each step.

Ray represented a unique case, but one that was important to examine and understand. Many times, there is an assumption that in order to understand and solve an issue you must only look at the instances when something goes wrong. However, there are times when just as much can be learned when things go right. Ray's case provides the ability to

examine the elements in his life that allowed him to achieve academically and develop strong literacy skills. For all intents and purposes, he appears to be a student that has achieved at a high level academically. From the stand point of literacy, he has accomplished what one would hope all high school students could do to prepare for post-secondary success. By exploring the elements of Rays journey, it becomes possible to zero in on areas that might potentially be important in providing all students with a successful literacy experience while in school.

In order to understand Ray's case and the potential impact it might have on helping answer the research question, one must understand a several components that have influenced Ray's educational outcome. As part of the Arabic culture, it is important to comprehend their value of education. To begin with, the education of both female and male students is a common practice in Arab nations (Bakhoum, 2011). One of the elements that is found throughout most Arabic classrooms is the idea of high teacher expectations. Those who are practicing educators are expected to hold their students to high standards and insure they achieve those marks (Wingfield, 2011). It also worth noting that that countries that make up the Middle East and North African regions spent 5.4% of their gross domestic product on education in 2010-11. That is the highest rate of spending on education of any region in the world (Ofori-Attah, 2015). Arabic culture places a high value on education and reaping the benefits of a good education. For Ray, these cultural values appear to be at play in his schooling. However, there is another element at work in this case that must be acknowledged as well.

In the late 1970's and early 1980's Dr. John Ogbu constructed a framework which could be utilized to view the cultural socialization of children from different cultural

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backgrounds. This framework was known as Cultural-Ecological Theory. This theory attempted to better understand what circumstance influenced the lives of people of color in this country. There are many layers to Ogbu's theory, but one element is of particular importance when attempting to understand Ray's academic achievement versus other students. Ogbu divided the cultures in this country into three distinct groups. They were *autonomous, voluntary,* and *involuntary* (Ogbu & Simons, 1998.) At the time of this research, Ogbu used the term minority which was at the widely accepted during the 70s and 80s. Autonomous groups are minority groups that are very small in numbers, such as Jewish minorities. Voluntary minority groups are those that have willingly moved to this country. Finally, involuntary minorities are those groups that were conquered, colonized, or enslaved (Ogbu & Simons). The reason it is important to differentiate between these groups is because their experiences and views of the American culture are very different. In Ray's case, he is a member of a voluntary cultural group. His family came here on their own free will. Members of this group usually come to the United States in hopes of a better life. They also expect they will have to assimilate to White, American culture if they want to achieve some type of success in this country. Therefore, in the case of Ray or those with similar circumstances, they do not resist the indoctrination into White, Middle-Class American culture. They view it as a part of the process that they freely partook in as a means to an end. While, I must be careful of applying the Cultural-Ecological Theory to all Arab students, in Ray's case, it is possible to see that his success in the classroom and his acceptance of the educational values of his high school, even though the school lacked integration of Arab culture in curriculum and instruction, was really the product of being a part of a voluntary cultural group. Yet, the online multicultural literature course may have included content related to Arab culture in the

curriculum. Ray had a chance to take this course because of the availability of honors and advanced course which were not available to all students.

Case 4 – Charlie

Charlie is a Latinx male. His family moved to this country when he was six years old. He has been back to Mexico many times to visit his family there. He said that his family goes back there a couple times a year. Unlike the cases of Ray and Stacy, the fifth research case study discussed later in the text, Charlie and his parents appeared to still have a strong connection to their family in Mexico. At one point, he even discussed returning there to live at some point in the near future. He has a younger brother and sister that are in middle school. Our first meeting took place in the school library. I met him right after school was out. He drove to school and said he did not mind waiting for me. We discussed simple background information. His father works for a construction company building houses. His mother works with his grandmother and aunt at a market south of the river. He was not one who was overly active in school. He had not participated in very many activities over the four years of high school. He had played soccer his freshman year but did not have the grades to play his sophomore year and never went back out for the team. Hence, Charlie was not involved in any extra-curricular activities. Involvement in extracurricular activities can be a means of bringing struggling students more fully into the school community, thereby increasing their chances of school success (Snellman, Silva, & Putman, 2015; Wong, 2015). Yet, like Charlie, numerous students are uninvolved in extracurricular activities because of the failure to meet academic or behavior requirements. Other barriers that affect involvement include financial and family obligations, and sometimes the lack of such sponsored programs within schools.

His involvement outside of school included periodically working with his uncles when they need help. They hang sheetrock and paint houses. He did not speak of any aspirations to go on to college, university, or even a trade school which may be related to his disconnect from school. Involvement in extracurricular activities correlate to academic success, college aspirations leading to enrollment, and completion, greater self-discipline, lower risky behaviors such as alcohol and drug use and truancy (Zaff, Moore, Romano Pappillo, & Williams, 2003). Charlie was moving through his life focused very much on the moment and did not appear to aspire to any type of post-secondary education for his future.

Charlie and I met a second time during the school day. We again met in the school library. He had a study hall class during this particular period and was given permission to come down and meet with me there. Per my procedures for these case studies, I had looked at all of Charlie's personal academic data before our second interview. However, of all the case studies, his was the only one that did not seem to paint a definitive picture of his academic accomplishments and capabilities. Beginning with Charlie's SRI scores, they told me very little regarding his reading abilities. When looking at the scores from his eighth and ninth grade year, he was reading at grade level and on one test was reading a grade above grade level. On both his exams from his tenth-grade year, his scores indicated he was reading below his seventh-grade scores. Finally, his senior scores were just a confusing, one exam had him two grades below grade level and his other score had him on grade level. His state test scores were equally as puzzling. When comparing his scores from middle school to high school, in some subjects he scored below basic and in others he was advanced. In one of the subjects, he scored below basic in eighth grade and received a proficient two years later. There was no correlation of any type when looking at his scores. Finally, his grades were

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scattered all over the place. There would be semesters that his grades were fine. However,

there were semesters like the end of his ninth-grade year when he failed five of eight classes.

This happened again the beginning of his sophomore year when he failed six of eight classes.

His grades did seem to stabilize after that. He made B's and C's the next three semesters.

Charlie's personal academic data painted a very confusing picture of his learning in high

school and this made it difficult to determine his literacy development. I suspected that there

was something else at play that was creating less than favorable academic conditions for him

to be learning. As we got further into the interview, I found out I was right.

Charlie's case study reinforced this idea that I saw manifesting itself about students

needing to have optimal personal and social conditions in order to be able to learn. Put a

different way, if kids are distracted by other things, then they are not going to be able to learn

very well. As we started to discuss Charlie's school experience, the theme of *disengaged*

learner became very, very apparent. Early on, I had picked up on little things that he had said

about conflicts with peers. At one point he made the comment, "People at this school are

fake. They are always trying to be in your business." We had been discussing extracurricular

activities and why he did not think he had participated in any. Once we had moved on to

academics, it did not take long to for him to reveal the reason behind so many of his

struggles. I asked him why his grades had been poor the second semester of Freshman year.

Charlie stated:

> Yeah, that was a bad semester. I took a lot of problems from my friends when I came
> out as gay. There was a lot of drama and people started a lot of shit with me. Oh,
> sorry, probably wasn't supposed to say that….lots of people decide to get involved in
> your personal life and start stuff just to see if they could hurt you…yeah, my mom
> was cool with it and everything, but my dad not so much. He won't even let me work
> with him in the summer times. I mean he isn't beating me or cursing me. It just like if
> he ignores it, it will go away. You know we just never discuss it. But if it does come

up, he won't talk about it or gets angry and stuff like that. I don't know if he will ever accept me; but right now, things are not cool between us. It just causes problems.

Charlie's revelation to me that he was gay allowed me to understand why there were so many conditions prevalent in his life that were not allowing him to be an active participant in his learning. In his statement about coming out to his family, you can see the presence of *family strife* and *emotional turmoil*. He mentioned the issues between he and his father several times during our discussions. Looking at his grades and seeing other elements of his academic career, it is plain to see there was *emotional turmoil* at play in his life all through his years in high school. Charlie talked openly about the issues he would get into with classmates and his "fake friends". Once again, Charlie's life was in a state of turmoil and never really allowed him to reach a place where he was able to embrace his education and attempt to become more literate as a student.

I believe that the emotional baggage that Charlie carries from coming out as a freshman and being a gay student in high school had a dramatic impact on his learning potential and literacy development (Pearson et al. 2007). Schools not only perform the function of providing knowledge, but they also serve as an institution designed to impart social norms and values. Much of what happens in a school from a social stand point is designed with heterosexuality as the guiding principle (Flowers & Buston, 2001). The issues that homosexual students must navigate are very similar to the issues non-white students must face in those same institutions. In much the same way that most educational institutions are platforms for White-middle class educational norms, these institutions are also platforms for advancing heterosexual social values. In Wilkinson and Pearson's (2009) research around same-sex youth well-being, they state:

In the United States, as in most other Western societies, heterosexuality is normative and upheld in relation to other "deviant" sexualities or sexual behaviors. Heteronormativity denotes "the myriad ways in which heterosexuality is produced as a natural, unproblematic, taken-for-granted, ordinary phenomenon" … and is premised on (and supported by) a "natural" binary division of the sexes and the privileging of other-sex desire and relationships …. Heteronormativity involves the celebration of heterosexual relationships as well as the organization of culture, including institutions, around such relationships. It also involves the celebration of socially constructed gendered behaviors that highlight the differences between men and women as well as the sanctioning of gender transgressions that disrupt this "natural" binary…. (p. 543).

When students feel stigmatized by their own school environment, the research shows they become detached and disengaged from the school environment (Johnson et al. 2001; Needham et al. 2004). By withdrawing from the educational process, this in turn can lead to lower academic performance and decrease success in school. Throughout our discussion, it was clear that Charlie's navigation of the social impact of his sexuality was a focal point of much of his high school existence. The sub-theme of *peer-group interactions* was something he regretted from the early part of his high school experience. Being openly gay in high school does not carry near the stigma it did even five years ago. Students are much more accepting of all life style choices. However, it goes without saying that there are still those that will take issue with some people's choices. Charlies talked about some of those interactions and how he handled them early in his high school career

I have done some stupid things while I was in high school. My freshman year things were really out of control. I got into a lot of arguments with other students and just didn't let things die. There were lots of back and forth with different students and really for no reason. I think that year was the hardest and I just didn't know how to let things go. I would get in trouble in class and do stupid things. I was in the principal's office all the time for cussing out teachers and getting into fights with other students just because they would do things like call me fag or comment on how I dressed. You know just stupid stuff like that. None of it would bother me now but I wasn't the same person then that I am now.

When examining a person's ability to learn, it is important to understand that there is not an endless amount of flexibility within often complicated lives. Students are forced to juggle many things as they grow up and become adults. However, the time allocation for all of these things is not unlimited. Therefore, in the case of Charlie, it is easy to see how his academics would suffer during his freshman and sophomore years. He was dealing with the emotional side of being a gay high school student. All the different elements that were a part of that such as family, teacher, and peer issues, took away from his capacity to be a learner. Again, showing that there are so many more elements outside of just instructional practices and pedagogy that can determine the outcome of a student's learning.

For Charlie, the theme of *personal self-awareness* probably represented the struggles that he was facing more than any other phenomena. This was most evident when considering the sub-themes of *personal obstacles* and *self-esteem*. In every aspect of Charlie's life, he was first and foremost defined by his sexual identity. The fact that he was gay was a driving force in every single facet of his life. At times, it was almost like Charlie had this fierce desire to defend his gayness. I am not sure if this was a product of his father's failure to accept him or the social issues he seemed to grapple with from other students and negative experiences from the past. Either way, this was a central feature in many of the elements of our interview. He viewed the being gay as a *personal obstacle*. At one point, we started to discuss literacy. Finally, we turned to the topic of literacy, I asked him how he saw it fitting into his future:

> Well, a lot of jobs come with a lot of different tasks. So even if I wasn't a skilled worker, really anywhere focuses on your reading and writing. And you have to write up resumes, and applications, and not every job is based off of where you stay, where you can go and have an interview and be like, well this is not gonna work. At lot of places require you to do an essay if you wanna work there. And I thought, if a person

can be super smart, and talk very proper, and use the right ... what is it called ... proper English, and not know how to write.

However, we again segued into literacy and his future regarding what he believed were going to be obstacles that precluded his from becoming employable. Charlie explained:

> You know a lot of times you can't get work because people might have a problem with someone who is gay or lives differently that they might be living. I have seen this a lot with other people I know. I am not sure if it is believed to be you know like full blown discrimination, but it can be bad and really be hurtful and not allow you to get to the job you want or have money and stuff like that.

As I mentioned, Charlie took an almost oppositional stance when discussing or describing his lifestyle. It was easy to tell that much of this stemmed from a lack of *self-esteem*. As mentioned previously, he was prone to lash out about his sexuality, his grades, and even his family situation. When we discussed his grades, he openly admitted good grades were a point of contention for him. He knew he should have done better and regretted many of the choices he had made:

> Yeah, my grades have always been up and down. You just let too much crap get in the way and then I just didn't feel like dealing with the classes and my teachers would get on my nerves too. I should have done better, but I just didn't feel like I could do it at the time and then of course it is too late, and I am stuck with just dealing with it some more.

Charlie struggled to reconcile the choices he had made and how he had handled certain situations. This in turn made him feel bad about himself. I sensed that this was where some of his anger came from and why he indicated he felt alone so much. However, there was always this struggle for him, and the role *relationships* played in his life.

One element that was glaringly obvious was the role that *relationships* played in Charlie's life. There is no doubt in my mind that because his father struggled with him being gay, Charlie had issues with *relationships* everywhere in his life. As hard as Charlie tried to

stay away from it, the emotional entanglement with his father came up over and over again in our discussion. This phenomenon brought into play the sub-themes of *influence* and *caring*. When Charlie took these feelings that he was having in his personal life and turned them toward his school and social life, they manifested in different ways. In his social life, he admitted that friendships had been a struggle all through high school. He knew he had made some bad choices, "Yeah, I use to get into fights all the time when I was a freshman. My parents didn't know what to do."

As mentioned earlier, Charlie had lots of discipline behaviors at school. He fully admitted his freshman year he was suspended multiple times. Therefore, his relationships had a large amount of influence on his educational outcomes. Again, it is the lack of acceptance regarding his sexuality in his personal life and the influence that had over his education that prohibited him from learning and having any real growth in the area of literacy. Just as the influence of his *relationships* had focused on his sexuality, this phenomenon was related to how he defined those who cared about him in the classroom. I had inquired if he believed any of his teachers really cared about him, Charlie replied:

> I don't really like any of my teachers. It is not that they don't care or do care, it is just not something I ever really think about. Several of them still have bad opinions of me from the stuff from my earlier grades. Really, the only teacher that I think really cares about me or the other kids is Mrs. Barry (pseudonym). She is the person in charge of the LGBT club. She really gets what a lot of us go through. I have had some really good talks with her and she tries to help me with my anger and getting thrown out of class and things like that. She is just a good teacher and tries to get us and make sure we have a place to be safe and things like that.

Again, the only solid educational relationships he was able to form were classified as a teacher caring about his well-being, directly associated with his sexual orientation. He never mentioned a teacher pushing him or being proud of his work. This caring and lack of caring

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came out over and over again. During both my observations, it was clear he had no real attachment to other teachers. He was simply a participant in class. In both cases, Charlie was off task and disruptive, but not to the point it required a reprimand from the teacher. However, his lack of focus was disruptive to the extent it removed him from the learning taking place in class.

Charlie's case is extremely intriguing. This was the only case I had where it appeared the presence of one element impacted every aspect of his life. Charlie obviously was suffering academically and failed to develop the needed literacy skills while in high school. However, unlike other cases that had several different factors that created this situation, Charlie's case always came back to his coming out as gay during his freshman year. Thus far, most of these cases have revealed some level of unrest in the student's life that in turn led to academic deficiencies. Of course, this created circumstances that did not allow a student to be ready to learn while in school. In Charlie's case, being gay was the driving force behind all of his decisions. I am not qualified to exactly pinpoint why the occurrences of his reactions to being gay. However, the end result was a disruption in all the aspects of his life, personal, social and finally academic. It would be this singular element that created a path that caused him to fall behind academically throughout high school ending with his literacy skills being substantially hampered as he began his life after high school.

Case 5 – Stacy

Stacy's family was from the Sudan. She was born in United States. However, her parents and two of her older siblings were born in the country of Sudan. Her family had come to this country in the mid-1990s because she told me there was fighting in the country. Her

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parents had relatives in this area, so they came to the mid-west. They first lived in Chicago and later moved to Kansas City when she was very young. Stacy has been a student in this school district since she was in the third grade. She has two older brothers and a younger sister and brother. Her parents both work in the service industry. They are both employed downtown, doing as Stacy put it, "something at some hotels or something. I am not exactly sure." Stacy was very personable and well spoken. Within her home, her family spoke Sudanese and still embraced most elements of that culture. It was easy to realize that Stacy navigated back and forth between her family's culture and the culture she encountered while at school.

During both of our meetings she was very willing to discuss any topic. Our first meeting had taken place at school in the cafeteria. She had been waiting after school for an orchestra event she had later that evening at the school. We talked about extra-curricular activities. She was a member of the school orchestra. She was also a part of the school's business and marketing club or what she called DECA. She indicated that she had done some other stuff her sophomore and junior year, but her classes became a heavy load and she needed to focus on school more. She told me she did not have a job. She was allowed to work during the summer time, but her parents wanted her to focus on her academics during the school year. As Stacy and I discussed different topics, it was clear she was a very focused individual with very real goals planned for her future.

My second meeting with Stacy took place in a counseling conference room. Before our meeting, I had examined all of her personal academic data. Stacy read at a very high level. All of the SRI exams she had taken while in school indicated she was always reading at or above her current grade level. Her middle school and high school state exam scores were

proficient or advanced. Stacy had taken the ACT exam twice. She had scored a composite

score of 23 on her first exam and a 24 on her second exam. This put her in the eightieth

percentile of all students who took the ACT. Stacy had already applied to and been accepted

to several colleges. She had decided to go to an in-state university to pursue a degree in

business. Stacy said she wanted to own her own business someday. All of her grades were

A's and B's. She did make a C in her junior math class. I jokingly inquired about that grade

and she said the teacher was really hard and she did not understand how he taught. All in all,

just like my case study with Ray, Stacy was a very well-adjusted young lady with a firm

grasp on her academic future. Just like with Ray, this was in large part because of her family.

Much like Ray, the cornerstone of Stacy's story is the presence of family and the role

it played in her education. She was very proud of her family and the part they played in her

development as a student. I asked her if education was an important element in her

upbringing and something that was stressed in her house. She indicated that it was the most

important thing in her house and all of her brothers and sisters understood this. The theme of

cultural/home experiences was a part of this discussion. The sub-theme that came into play

really for the first time with regard to the school was *cultural presence*. One of the

underlying elements of the premise of this research has been the importance of culture as a

precursor to the successful acquisition of literacy skills. In all four previous cases, there had

been a complete lack of any acknowledgement of culture at the building level. However, in

the case of Stacy, she was able to speak with some authority as to the element of culture

within her school and also in her classes. I asked if she believed her school valued the

presence of other cultures:

I do think we value other people's cultures in this building, because you don't get to see, if you don't go to this school, you don't get to see any other cultures, like say you go to like Oakbrook or something. You won't see...there's a little chance that you'll see people with a hijab on hanging out with somebody that's white or something like that. You get to experience all the different cultures and you get to learn how they grew up and what different foods they eat and things like that.

I proceeded to ask Stacy if she could give me some specific examples of how culture was present of acknowledged in her school:

Yeah. Because I remember last year we used to do that diversity week or whatever and we used to bring in different foods from different cultures and like everybody loved it because they would explain what you're eating, where it came from, and how they made it, and you get to gain the knowledge of that different culture.

So, I pushed a little harder and asked her if there was an acknowledgement of culture in her classes:

Yeah, okay. I think we do a pretty good job of introducing that stuff and bringing that stuff into our classes and letting people see that in a, how do I say, nonthreatening manner? To where it's just kind of a part of what we do. Yeah, I do. Because depending on what you're reading, if a student didn't understand it from one person's perspective, you can flip whatever we're reading back onto their cultures to make them have a better understanding. Well, for example in one of my classes they talked about all other religions don't have Adam and Eve, and so you could probably flip that back onto Buddhism in a way, to make that person who is Buddhist understand, not like Adam and Eve, but something similar to that.

This was the first time any of the students had indicated there was an active attempt by any of the teachers to make this an element of the class. The one thing I did notice was that this did not seem to be of extreme importance to Stacy. Even though she was coming at this topic from the perspective of a student that was from another culture, she had a very nonchalant attitude about this having any added importance or impact on her learning.

Another theme in Stacy's story that was very prominent is her *personal self-awareness*. Because she had taken her academics so seriously during high school, she was very cognizant of who she was and what she wanted to do. This fell very much in line with

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the sub-themes of *post-secondary aspirations* and *self-esteem.* When I asked her what her

plans were after school, she did not even hesitate for one moment to tell me what they were.

She said:

> When I graduate, I want to go into mass media broadcast, sports broadcasting, and so that means I'm going to have to take a lot of journalism classes and understand how to write and how to kind of talk while being on TV, because there's a specific way you need to talk and like how you need to sound on TV and before that, you have to write out a description of what you need to say, so I think that's gonna benefit me a lot in my big future, and I'm learning how to do that now in high school because I am not the most proper person. I don't talk proper, it's hard. And I'm learning that through writing history papers and ELA papers and things like that.

This was a student that had developed academically and was very sure of herself. She had

strong literacy skills and was on a path that she believed was going to lead to big things. She

was also very sure of her abilities. As we discussed just literacy and reading in general, I

asked her if she still took time to read:

> As going up in high school, I really don't have much time to read at home anymore because of this, I'm in National Honor Society, and that requires a lot of work, so I really don't have the time at night to read anymore and look, I'm involved with sports and athletic activities, so I'm at school for over 12 hours and then having to go home and do homework is like really tiring and I just run out of time. I can handle the workload, but it just never leaves me any time to read anymore.

Stacy was very sure of herself. You could tell just by talking to her that she had a high self-

esteem and was very confident in who she was and what she was capable of accomplishing. I

also believe this had a lot to do with how she attacked obstacles in her life. Even when she

discussed areas that she needed help, she was methodical and driven to find a solution if she

was looking for help with something:

> Yeah, I do. It depends on what you need the help in, because different teachers have different strengths. And so whatever you need help with, you just have to find that teacher that has that strength that can help you. Other students struggle sometimes because they just don't take the time to see who can help you with what.

Stacy was very focused on her future and believed that if she worked hard and was a good student, she would achieve what she wanted. This drive and belief she could accomplish anything also was reflected in her academics and literacy development which may have made it easy for her to create strong relationships at school with staff and students.

I was able to observe Stacy in her English class and also an upper level foreign language class. I was watching these interactions coupled with elements of her personal story that indicated how important the theme of *relationships* was for her. Within this setting and our subsequent conversations, the sub-themes of *Influence and respect* were present as well. I asked her if she even enjoyed reading anymore or if this was now just part of what she was required to do for classes and different subjects:

> Yeah. It's different. It's only different because the teacher doesn't know what you like to read or how your reading style is and they're telling you, "Well, I think you should read this because of this," and like you're not really reading it for enjoyment. You're reading it because it's assigned to you. But what you have to do is just trust that your teachers know what is best for you and want you to do better. It sucks sometimes because I really don't like some of it, but they know what we need

Stacy said more than once she respected her teachers and trusted their judgment as they pointed her in the right directions and built on her literacy skills year after year:

> Yeah, you have to find time looking at your schedule to go to the library, but then again you can pick up reading by like 9th and 10th grade classes. The teachers give you something to read and whether it's interesting or not, you're gonna have to read it and you're gonna have to make it interesting to you. They know why they gave it to you and you just have to know that you will need it at some point.

Stacy trusted her teachers to have her best interests in mind. Their *influence* was very important to the decisions she made and how she grappled with the work she was given to do over the course of her high school career. This was also spurred on by a high level of *respect*

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that she had for those in her educational life. These two elements allowed her to develop a

high level of literacy while trusting the process that had been laid out before her.

Stacy was a grounded and well-rounded student. She was obviously in excellent

shape from an academic and literacy standpoint. This was the second student I had

encountered that was very grounded and driven. Like Ray, the previous student where I

encountered strong literacy development, this anchor seemed to be a result of a cultural belief

in the importance of education. It should be noted too that Stacy would also be considered a

part of a *voluntary* cultural group. As stated previously, this in turn means that her

educational experience is very much the product of circumstances associated with similar

groups. As mentioned earlier, Stacy and her family were fleeing strife in her country when

they came to the United States. Therefore, they were very much seeking out a better life for

their family. This meant that Stacy and her family were open to attempting to assimilate into

the cultural norms of this country. This would include indoctrination of the cultural norms

found in most American schools. In the end, Stacy was going to be accepting of any

instructional pedagogy presented to her by the schools she attended. Since she came from a

cultural background that valued education, these two elements would produce a student that

achieved well and developed the necessary literacy skills to be productive in later life.

However, this was done in an educational setting that had little room for Stacy's cultural

experiences.

Answering the Research Questions: Cross Case Analysis

This section of the research will provide the opportunity to utilize a cross-case

analysis approach to examine the themes developed during the research. I will report on the

findings and attempt to answer the research question and three sub-questions by examining

the information revealed by each case and then looking at all five cases as a whole to see what common threads developed. By attempting to answer the three sub-questions, it is hoped that answering the central question becomes evident: What can the personal narratives and life-long literacy experiences of urban high school students' reveal as to the practices required to effectively improve literacy skills? The following table attempts to capture the findings of the data and demonstrate where certain themes as a whole occurred and the prominence of those themes.

Table 4

Cross-Theme Analysis

Case:	#1 (Hailey)	#2 (Tina)	#3 (Ray)	#4 (Charlie)	#5 (Stacy)
Theme:					
Relationships	**X**	**-**	**X**	**X**	**X**
Disengaged Learner	**-**	**X**	**-**	**X**	**-**
Personal Self-awareness	**X**	**X**	**X**	**X**	**X**
Cultural/Home Influences	**X***	**X***	**X***	**X***	**X***

* denotes the theme that was the most prominent by case when considering the number of occurrences of all the sub-themes

What instructional experiences create productive learning environments for literacy development?

For twenty-three years, I have sought to understand why some students were able to grasp and learn certain concepts and skills while others were not. This has been one of the driving forces that has guided my career. Even in its early stages, I understood that if students could not read and write, it mattered very little what I taught them. Literacy was the foundation

of everything that needed to happen in a child's life. Without it, their options headed into adult life would be dramatically limited. Having been to hundreds of conferences and listened to dozens of "experts" discuss the proper pedagogy of learning "experiences", I was never able to lock in on exactly what it was that could bring about truly authentic learning experiences for all children. This research has shown me that the answer is never the same for all urban learners. One must be willing to vary instruction and possibly the answer has nothing at all to do with pedagogy.

If educators were scientists and we viewed learning as an experiment, there would be certain steps that we would take in order to reproduce desired results. If those results could not be duplicated, we would go back and systematically look at the steps we had taken to determine where the particular experiment was failing. However, as good scientists, one of the first things to be examined should be the initial conditions of the experiment itself. If we failed to recreate the initial conditions that made up the experiment, we might possibly never arrive at a conclusion as to what was really creating the problem and why results could not be duplicated. In essence, this is the problem with instructional practices. When urban students arrive to learn, they all arrive in different states of readiness to learn. Therefore, given all the same parameters of the educational experience, the outcomes are different each time because the conditions were different for each student to begin with. So, the focus cannot shift to instruction until educators can provide some semblance of uniformity for all students as they begin learning. This in turn requires educators and educational institutions to do a better job of first understanding the different cultural experiences and expectations that each student brings to school. Then these same groups must determine the most productive path to providing a solid

educational experience for all students and not just the ones that can assimilate to the White-Middle Class America.

In all five cases, it was outside factors that provided the most influential elements of the learning experience. In some cases, the influence was negative. In others, it was positive. However, after examining all five cases and considering the current literature, it was clear to see that the students who came from varying cultural backgrounds all experienced some degree of cultural confusion. This confusion was created by an educational system that existed for White students and required those non-white students to conform or regress (Brown, 2007). Signithia Fordham (1985), as a result of her research related to the academic achievement of African American students, presented a paper entitled, "Coping with the Burden of Acting White" at a symposium on school values, perceptions, and identity. The research allowed for questions posed to African American students regarding what it meant to be White. Some of the answers they gave included,

> speaking standard English; listening to white music and white radio stations; going to the opera or ballet; spending a lot of time in the library studying; working hard to get good grades in school; getting good grades in school, i.e., being known as a "brainiac"; doing volunteer work; going camping, hiking, or mountain climbing; having cocktails or a cocktail party; going to symphony orchestra or concerts; having a party with no music; listening to classical music; being on time; reading and writing poetry. (p. 4)

Fordham's research stemmed from Ogbu's Cultural-Ecological Theory which posed the theory of acting White in contrast to the school personal acceptable by their peers as an explanation for underachievement of African American students (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). More recently, such conceptualization has been criticized for its failure to consider the multiplicities of factors that contribute to the underachievement of African American students.

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When considering the idea of cultural confusion, the theme of *personal self-awareness* is at the forefront of valuing cultural diversity of students. *Personal self-awareness* was present in all five of the cases. Students of color and poor students are often forced to partake in educational experiences that do not consider the cultural experiences of all its participants (Foley, 2010). Therefore, in urban schools a large portion of the student body is neither accounted for nor represented in the curriculum and instruction of most classrooms. Gay (2000) notes that one of the central features of American schooling is the systematic alignment of student values with those of main stream America. Said another way, the educational experience in American schools reflects the values of White, middle-class America. It is not a stretch to see that in the cases of Charlie and Tina this is potentially the reason for the predominance of the theme *Disengaged Learner*. In order to produce an educational experience that all learners can flourish and experience success, pedagogy must begin to change to reflect the needs of all students, not just the White middle-class values of students.

For decades, the low academic achievement rates of certain cultural groups have been the focus of multiple research studies. As a result of the *Brown* case and the Civil Rights movement, African American and Latinx students have been studied more than any other culturally diverse group (Erankenberg, Lee, & Orfield, 2003; Levin & Hawley, 2018; Moll & González, 1994; Rios, & Galicia, 2014). *Brown* and the Civil Rights movement have also impacted education in other ways as well. Schools now represent the place where this country has seen the most dramatic demographic shift in the past twenty to thirty years (Brown, 2007). This shift has caused the research to attempt to narrow in on the elements of culture and language within the classroom, as well as, teachers' perceptions of different students' culture as potential learning hurdles (Gay, 2010; Muhammad, 2018; Tierney & Lanford, 2017;

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Troutman, 2010). The problem is schools have not adjusted their practices to meet the needs of a demographically changing student body. There is now a vast amount of research that identifies the needs of students in culturally diverse settings.

Ladson-Billings (2011) identified three propositions relevant to culturally responsive teachers. They include a focus on individual students' academic achievement (e.g., clear goals, multiple forms of assessment); attain cultural competence and help in developing students' cultural competence; and develop a sense of sociopolitical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 2011). Gay (2009) further recommended five elements of culturally responsive teaching. These elements included develop a cultural diversity knowledge base, design culturally relevant curricula, demonstrate cultural caring, and build a learning community. Harriott and Martin (2004) noted the importance of establishing cross-cultural communications and congruity in classroom instruction. A combination of all these components are essential to insuring a successful educational experience. However, the experiences of these five students was lacking any significant presence of these components. There was no evidence of culturally responsive teaching practices during any of my conversations with the students or during my observations. A tendency exists among educators to view the underachievement of certain groups of students as a sociocultural problem. Such deficit thinking is linked to elements of "poverty, ethnicity, low-level of parental education, weak-family support systems, and students' reactions to discrimination and stereotyping" (Nieto, 2010, p. 47). The two students who achieved success in the classroom actually did so in spite of the lack of culturally relevant pedagogy that would have made their educational experiences more fruitful had curriculum and instructional practices included elements of their own backgrounds. In the cases of Hailey, Tina and Charlie, the

inclusion of these types of components might have enhanced their experiences and led to more instructional success in the classroom.

What is the relationship between cultural expectations and experiences and literacy development?

Over the years, the visual fabric of the public-school classroom has been changed dramatically. Classrooms have become the new global community, representing cultures from all over the world. It has been challenging for many educators and those in charge to try and provide culturally relevant experiences that are inclusive of the voices of different cultures to be heard in a single setting. This is certainly apparent in the experiences of the research cases as evident in the limited attention to cultural milieu in student interviews and observations of classrooms. The theme of *Culture/home influences* by far had the most impact on the learning outcomes of the students and were connected to their levels of *personal* self-awareness, viewed through the lens of culture as experience. While Hilary's culture as a White student was somewhat reflected in the dominant culture of the school, as a student of poverty, she certainly had a less developed literacy experience when compared to the White middle-class students of the school. The other four ethnic groups represented by the remaining cases provided examples of the vastly different cultural interactions students, in contrast to their White counterparts, have with education.

Three of the participants in this study were first generation in this country. As noted previously, Stacy and Ray are examples of Ogbu and Simons's (1998) depiction of *voluntary* cultures. They represent individuals that migrate to this country in search of prosperity and tend to have a positive outlook on their "American Experience" and view education as a means to an end. Charlie represents a second group known as *refugee* or *migrant* cultures. Several

refugee or migrant cultures tend not to settle in this country. Charlie mentioned several times that his intention was to move back to Mexico. While they share some similarities with *voluntary* groups, individuals representing refugee or migrant cultures are likely to view their existence as a tourist as opposed to one who intends to settle in this country permanently (Ogbu & Simons). Charlie's struggles with school were much more attributed to the strife his sexual identity played in various parts of his life. Tina represents the third cultural group identified by Ogbu's (1981) theory of Cultural-Ecological, *involuntary* cultures. The third group is often defined by the struggles and complications African Americans and Native Americans experience with assimilation.

In a Memo to the Faculty of University of Colorado at Boulder, Steele (1992) explained the conundrum this way:

> Yet non-immigrant minorities like blacks and Native Americans have always been here, and thus are entitled; more than new immigrants, to participate in the defining images of the society projected in school. More important, their exclusion from these images denies their contributive history and presence in society. Thus, whereas immigrants can tilt toward assimilation in pursuit of the opportunities for which they came, American blacks may find it harder to assimilate. For them, the offer of acceptance in return for assimilation carries a primal insult: it asks them to join in something that has made them invisible.…The fact is that blacks are not outside the American mainstream, but in Ellison's words have always been "one of its major tributaries." Yet if one relied on what is taught in American schools, one would never know this. (p. 6)

As noted, many times throughout this research, the modern-day education system is constructed around the belief structures of Middle-Class White America. Curriculum, instruction, and assessment are often intended to indoctrinate those individuals whose cultures match the school's culture and alienate those who do not. This is nowhere more evident than with the involuntary group classification (Ogbu, 1981) of individuals who were either conquered, colonized, or enslaved. The most defining characteristics of this group is a belief

that they were forced against their will to become a part of the United States. Furthermore, they see themselves as having been required to stay in this country. The difference between the experiences of *voluntary* and *involuntary* groups may continue to be related to the social construct of race in our country. How individuals respond to their conditions is often entangled with the history of racial and ethnic groups and how that group views its existence in this country (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). As generations evolve, these experiences become the cornerstone of the culture.

Through the decades *involuntary* group members have faced discrimination in almost every aspect of life, which, in turn has led to a low socioeconomic status for many (Foster, 2004). This in turn may foster a sense of mistrust between students of color and the dominant culture. This mistrust may also be apparent in the schooling experiences of those in the voluntary group, who are also likely to not see themselves reflected in the school's curriculum. This can potentially lead to students actively resisting the learning process. Resistance to a dominant ideology can go as far as students revolting against all things having to do with a "White" educational experience that excludes them. As I consider Tina's case, most of these elements were illustrated by her story. Tina's home life and the circumstances that were a product of decisions and choices made by her mother ultimately played a significant role in her disconnect with the entire educational process. By the time Tina reached high school, she was no longer an active participant in an education that offered her no hope for a better future. Any hope of success for Tina academically was dismissed by her schools' failure to recognize and embraces the needs created by her background and life experiences. Those who had been entrusted with her educational future had failed her.

The five cases presented very different pictures of how home culture impacted the educational outcomes of each student. It is important to note that when speaking of culture, as I consider the cross-case analysis and the research question, there are actually two components that must be considered which often become confused. First, there is the presence of a student's culture away from school. This home culture includes all the elements that have been discussed previously as I attempted to define culture. Second, there is another type of "culture" when we discuss a student's educational experiences. This is the school culture. This speaks to the elements that define an institution including what it values and believes regarding the learning process. In the end, the institutional culture of the educational system found at Suburban High School had very little impact on any of these students' instructional outcomes. The school that was the location of this research showed no real desire to embrace the elements of culturally relevant pedagogy. Students were not allowed to connect their own experiences with those of others in an attempt to validate their own lives, thereby increasing their chances of academic success. In the absence of any real meaningful school pedagogy, it was the student's home culture and cultural status that ultimately had the biggest influence on their learning outcomes. The presence of any type of culturally responsive teaching was completely absent within the walls of the school and had little to do with how students in these cases grasped literacy or became more or less literate. Does this negate the power of culturally responsive pedagogy to make a difference in the lives of students within our schools? I contend that if all students are to be allowed a shot at their own version of the "American Dream", education must take significant steps to become more inclusive of the unique elements that make this country great as opposed to constantly defining inclusion utilizing a set of outdated principles and norms that

no longer apply in the country we call home. Learning must be linked to a deeper understanding of culture for all students if literacy attainment for everyone is to ever progress forward.

What role does school leadership play in developing and supporting the literacy practices found in urban high schools?

The research provided no direct narrative as to specific means by which leaders were directly impacting literacy outcomes within the school. However, by closely examining the life experiences of each student within the research cases, there a clear picture of the needs of these students emerged as they walked out the doors and into their educational futures. The role of a school leader is to identify the ways in which support is required to enhance the educational experience for all students. This could mean support for teachers, resources to aide in learning outcomes, or even facility management. Regardless of the task, school leaders must be able to identity deficiencies and seek to remedy the situation. As the case studies were examined, certain areas of need became glaring obvious requiring the attention of those in charge.

School leaders must be prepared to address the needs of the whole child and not just the instructional needs of the students in their buildings. Today's urban student brings to his or her educational experience a much different set of circumstances than students of the past or their suburban counter parts. In the past, a school administrator was required to be an expert at facility management. They also needed to be able to understand and identify pedagogical strategies that could benefit the learning of their students. As noted previously, this pedagogy was essentially an indoctrination into White-Middle class cultural norms. In most cases, this meant the pedagogy was intended to enhance the White-Middle class of America (Tyler, Boykin, & Walton, 2006). Therefore, urban schools and students continued to suffer because school leaders fail to understand the needs each learner brings to the table. School leaders must

shift their focus to be more cultural inclusive and relevant. This means giving voice to a student's home culture within the instructional process, as well as, gaining an understanding as to the effects of poverty on learning outcomes. Milner (2013) in his review of the literature related to working with students of poverty explains what it means for a teacher to be culturally competent. He identifies certain practices building personal must acknowledge and embrace:

- learn about students' outside-of-school situations and realities;

- learn to recognize and name the assets that students and their families possess;

- connect outside-of-school experiences to the "real," expected curriculum in school;

- build meaningful and sustainable relationships with students and their families;

- use real-world examples and situations about poverty in instructional practices;

- help students recognize injustice;

- empower students to change inequitable, unfair policies and practices as they encounter them; and

- develop what I am calling radical classroom reform pedagogy as an instructional framework for teaching, not an add on to what and how they should be teaching. (p. 41)

While careful not to communicate that there is a culture of poverty, Milner asserts that to establish a radical classroom pedagogy, "students are knowers and teachers construct the

learning environment in a way that showcases and honors what students know" (p. 41). They help students question the existence of poverty and learn that it affects all of us.

Summary

The purpose of this heuristic case study was to better understand the practices required to effectively improve literacy skills in urban high school students. As the study unfolded before my eyes, I could not help but feel a certain level of anxiety. For twenty-three years, I have dedicated my entire existence by trying to provide students with the opportunity to become better students. I have sought the magic formula for decades. However, the answer was there, the entire time, right in front of my face and I just did not look closely enough. Many of the theories of underachievement are labelled as sociocultural problems or deficits as Nieto (2010) suggested. Factors of "poverty, ethnicity, low-level of parental education, weak-family support systems, and students' reactions to discrimination and stereotyping" (p. 47) have received more attention with less focus given to low expectations, which is a school-related factor that pertains to the academic success of all students, especially poor students and students of color. I contend that if we flip the switch to having high expectations for all students, we as educators will do more to meet the needs of all students, including those who come from different cultures and speak a different language. We must embrace all differences within our schools based on a myriad of differences; including race, ethnicity, language, gender, special education needs, and students with disabling conditions. Yes, this is a tall order and requires a different type of leadership and collaboration with the broader community. The subsequent chapter focuses on the implications of findings related to leadership for transformation, recommendations for change, and future research. I concluded with my reflections related to my experiences with these five young people.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this heuristic case study was to examine the central question and sub-questions in an attempt to better understand the literacy experiences of high school students in an urban high school. The process has allowed me to become an emerging researcher as I was able to utilize qualitative methods to construct this information. By the end of this project, I had a much better understanding of some of the factors that hinder student learning on a daily basis. This process also strengthened many of my previously held beliefs about the impact educational institutions have on the growth of its students not only as learners, but also as young adults. Findings of the study indicated that the role of the school must change in several ways. To begin with, there must be an increased focus on the whole child. No longer can educational institutions focus solely on instruction. School leaders and teachers must identify ways to better engage all students in the learning process. Disengaged learners are more prevalent in urban schools and more likely to be under achieving learners. Finally, schools and districts must continue to find ways to expose students to culturally relevant teaching. Most schools still lack the ability to offer students from varied backgrounds instruction that incorporates the values and experiences of all groups of learners in a classroom. To accomplish these goals and needed adjustments, schools must employ strong leaders to accomplish these tasks. The importance of school leadership was confirmed not only by the research, but also what the literature revealed regarding areas that require transformation.

School leaders must begin to change the manner in which they approach the majority of the elements of their job. Within urban education, the time has come for leaders to demand

a dramatic shift in how education functions. As noted in the previous chapter, Anyon (2014) suggested a massive social movement similar to those in earlier decades is required that lay the foundations for "legislative, judicial, and regulatory decisions" (p. 12). These decisions are the type that altered the lives of people. These movements included the elimination of child labor, the vote for women, civil rights for African Americans, and even rights for the disabled. These policies were intended to promote equality and social justice for all people. Social movements to eliminate macroeconomic injustices will not only improve the lives of racially and ethnically diverse groups but also millions of Whites living in poverty (Anyon, 2014). However, such changes will first require school leaders to acknowledge the need for a change within our urban schools. Leaders must step up and finally promote informed actions of leadership for transformation.

Leadership for Transformation

The role of building administration continues to transform and evolve as the educational experiences of students change within the walls of the school. Coupled with this transformation, must be a shift in how one views not only the role of the teacher and administration, but also the elements that define a successful school. Too many times, the focus is on the acquisition of content knowledge. However, the findings from this study revealed significant affective elements such as relationships and understanding the culture and backgrounds of students to meet their learning needs. There must be a shift in what we value in an urban classroom.

Over the past decade, there has developed a body of research focused on the difference between "effective" schools and "successful" schools. In schools that are "successful" there are two key factors. First, there is a focus on the whole child. The

emphasis is on promoting positive values and social capabilities. Second, these schools are led by school leaders who can create a type of synergy to meet these challenges amongst the entire staff (Day et al., 2016). In many of these successful schools, the entire building, not just classroom teachers take on this challenge. However, to truly get an entire building moving forward, requires the work of a transformational leader.

As discussed in Chapter 2, Kenneth Leithwood is credited with bringing the principles of transformational leadership into the realm of education. His work served as a bridge between the concepts of Burns (1978) and Bass (1996) that were common place in the business world (Stewart, 2006). Transformational Leadership Theory identified three types of leaders; Transformational, Transactional, and Laissez-Faire leadership. Each type of leadership was defined by specific characteristics. However, transformational leaders, as shown by Leithwood, had the most positive impact on schools and student achievement. Leithwood and Jantzi (1998) would conduct some of the first wide-scale empirical research that clarified the true impact of transformational leaders on determining student achievement and the elements that made them successful. They would also identify exactly what transformational leaders did to become change agents.

Transformational leaders believe in a shared vision offering intellectual simulation and individualized support to produce a school culture of high expectations fostered through shared leadership (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). As transformational leadership theory became an engrained part of educational leadership, there was a further shift. Shields (2004) and other scholars began to refer to Transformational leadership as Transformative leadership. In the Transformative model there is a key additional element. The actions of the leader are rooted in moral and ethical values framed in a social context (Astin & Astin, 2000). This type

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of change creates new levels of accountability that school leaders must begin to take seriously and implement in order to realize sustained gains in instructional achievement. Such measures also bring into focus the need for teachers and leaders to reexamine the values they place on the whole child and not just instructional outcomes, which calls for empathy.

Leadership for Relationships

Empathy might be one of the hardest personal characteristics to gauge in the interview process. How does one tell if a potential candidate has the ability to connect with their students by having the capacity to understand and appreciate all the experiences a student will bring with them into a classroom on a daily basis? In 1986, Noddings began to push for a pedagogy that centered on the relationships between all the adults in a building (Shields, 2004). This pedagogy of caring was built around the idea that relationships are the cornerstone of human existence. Margonis Sidorkin (2002) said this about the importance of relationships in schools:

> an underlying reality of human relations constitutes the crucial context of education. What teachers, administrators, and students do and say could only have meaning and be understood against this invisible but very real matrix of intersecting relations. These relationships form the essence of how schooling should and can unfold. (p. 2)

The seminal work of Margaret Wheatley (1992) and Madeleine Grumet (1995) further emphasized the importance of school leaders needing to focus on providing a framework to allow for meaningful relationships to blossom in the school setting. This type of environment becomes both socially just and democratic. Wheatley (1992) further states "stop teaching facts—the 'things' of knowledge—and focus, instead, on relationships as the basis for all definitions" (p. 34). Leaders must begin to understand that simply teaching students the "facts" of something in isolation will not create meaningful learning. Students will only

construct true meaning by seeing these "facts" in the context of deeply formed relationships (Grumet, 1995). This research helped to establish that relationships provide a crucial element in the learning process for student participants.

In order to form good relationships with students, teachers must first have some comprehension and exposure to what students lived experiences truly look like. There must be a willingness to embrace cultural differences. These same teachers must also understand how these differences translate into learning in the classroom, which can only happen one of two ways. First the classroom teacher may not share the background experiences of all their students; it has been established in the literature that most teachers in urban schools come from White European middle- class backgrounds (Sleeter, 2017; Warren, 2014). Connecting to and understanding the backgrounds of students of color, of poverty, and other differences will only happen through teachers reflecting on their background experiences, listening to the voices of students, dialoguing about their experiences, and taking actions to establish relationships. After listening to students, reflecting, and dialoguing about their experiences, educators and other staff may begin to do as Kohn (2004) suggests, reimagine schools through incorporating new ways of teaching and bringing student voice to the center of their thinking. Listening to students and teachers' efforts to understand the hegemonic discourses connected to the intersection of race, ethnicity, and poverty, as well as, action agendas for equitable outcomes contribute to more powerful renewal initiatives within schools (Cook-Sather, 2006; Fletcher, 2005; Mitra, 2005; Robinson, & Taylor, 2013).

The second way would be through some type of exposure as a teacher or a constructed learning experience. Most of the time, this unfolds as either a part of teacher preparation programs or professional development experiences within schools followed by

implementation and reflective practices. In a perfect world, teachers who had not had these lived experiences would be exposed to cultural differences all throughout their teacher preparation programs. This would allow teachers just entering the classroom for the very first time to have a solid base for creating strong relationships with their students, anchored in mutual understanding and the value of listening to the voices of students. Moreover, an absence of culturally responsive teaching in preparatory programs may contribute to teachers and principals who are less aware of the connection between culture and student learning (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006), which contributes to the teacher preparation gap for establishing positive relationships that meet the academic needs of all children. Conner, Zaino, and Scarola (2013) point to preparation and training being essential for adults to unlearn values and behaviors that are barriers to a strengths-based orientation toward students:

> So entrenched are adults' low expectations and paternalistic views of youth that to change their perspectives and encourage them to partner productively with youth requires adults to engage in substantial "unlearning." Adults must be prepared, even trained, to be able to listen to youth voice. (p. 564)

Unfortunately, this is not what is taking places in many of teacher training programs or professional development efforts in schools.

In 2012, 74% of the students enrolled in teacher preparation programs were White (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). This was at a time when students of color represented an excess of 50% of the student population in many schools (Phelps et al, 2017). While current institutions of higher learning purport to be inclusive of culturally relevant pedagogies that are designed to expose pre-service teachers to cultural differences, in many instances, this is in fact not the case. In 2007, the teacher education faculty, including adjunct

positions, was 78% white (Milner, 2013). In 2009, Gorski analyzed the syllabi content of several teacher preparation programs and found that only 29% of the time did the program explore the issues of oppression, racism, and systemic power relationships. In most programs, there is still a focus on the social - emotional needs of White students and a failure to address the social - emotional needs of students of Color (Matias, 2016). Hence, in many of these preparation programs a disproportionate emphasis persists on Eurocentric teaching. The dire outcomes of a traditional pedagogy, business as usual, often causes the disengagement of students' teachers hired to teach and the continued cycle of low achievement for some students of color. I contend the time has come for school leaders to demand that universities and colleges alter their preparation programs. They need to include more real-world experiences and also begin to include more practical knowledge to better prepare future teachers.

As shown in the case studies, the ability to connect with a teacher and form good relationships seems to have an important impact on establishing the conditions that allow for learning to take place on any type of a regular basis. In my professional experience, I have hired dozens of teachers. I can say without hesitation, the ability to connect with students makes good teachers great. Conversely, the lack of this quality makes marginal teachers less than desirable to have in a classroom with students. Therefore, it is incumbent on transformative leaders to insure they are hiring the right kind of teachers to be successful in urban classroom settings. Good relationships with students are key to learning and one of the crucial factors to keeping students engaged in the educational process. In other words, educators at all levels must acknowledge connections between culture and learning (Gay,

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2010; Hollins, 2008). "Even without our being consciously aware of it, culture determines how we teach and learn" (Gay, 2010, p. 9

Leadership for Disengaged Learners and Self-awareness

Education has been through many changes over the decades including movements to revamp pedagogical practices. This has included pressure to change the instructional methodology utilized in everyday classrooms. Additionally, educational leaders have sought to transform the facilities in which students learn on a daily basis. The desire has been for the classroom to become a place for engaged interactions. No longer are desks in straight rows considered an acceptable layout for a classroom. Teachers must be more creative with how they engage students. Even with these attempted shifts in practice, the last decade has witnessed a continued increased in the number of disengaged learners. A study of 10th and 11th grade high school students saw 45% of those students questioned identified themselves as disengaged learners with less than 20% identifying as disengaged only a decade earlier (Ross, 2009). A student's disengagement can lead to disruptive behavior, truancy, and even a sense of feeling marginalized (Ross). In the end, disengagement can have a dramatic effect on educational outcomes. Self-reflecting schools and building leaders are now trying to better understand the causes of disengaged students and attempting to identify ways to re-engage them.

Many times, disengagement is due to an imbalance of power related to the taught curriculum and methods of instruction utilized within the school. Students often do not see themselves reflected in the academic and social climate of the school (Watson & Russell, 2016). A lack of culturally relevant instruction alienates students (Jupp et al, 2019). They, in turn, act out in an attempt to reestablish a type of educational counter-culture. This

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disengagement leads to a counter-culture of resistance due to the lack of relevant pedagogy and the integration of the interests and lives of students with the curriculum (Allen et al, 2015; McLaren, 2007). "Students resist the 'dead time' of school where interpersonal relations are reduced to the imperatives of market ideology," explained McLaren (2007, p. 125) and they find ways to resist the mundaneness of "efficiency and productivity" (p. 125) in place of creativity and to gain a sense of power. Engaged students exhibit curiosity about learning, enthusiasm and excitement for content, and satisfaction with the tasks at hand (Harcourt & Keen, 2012) that lead to the desire for both teachers and students to establish reciprocity in the learning process. Finally, as students exist in a state of imbalance caused by disengagement, year after year, in our schools, students' existence becomes problematized and creates a continued state of mental unrest (Thompson et al, 2011). This will eventually give rise to a population of students that have become so disengaged, the school institution will cease to function in any type of effective manner. Nowhere is this more prevalent than in urban schools. Caruthers and Friend (2016) suggest:

> Students attending urban schools possess rich cultural traditions and backgrounds that often are unseen by educators who are trained to focus instead on their subgroup labels. Students share a common deficit approach that pathologizes students of color and students from poverty backgrounds, and that casts urban schools as failing organizations. (2016, p. 23)

As Conner, et al. (2013) assert, educators must work to eradicate barriers to a strengths-based orientation toward students.

In urban schools, students often come from many different home life experiences, characterized by varied socio-economic statuses. Students today are also much more prone to varying degrees of emotional turmoil and distress. Many of the theories of underachievement, purported by some educators, are labelled as sociocultural problems or

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deficits such as "poverty, ethnicity, low-level of parental education, weak-family support systems, and students' reactions to discrimination and stereotyping" (Nieto, 2010, p. 47). These factors have received much attention from academic research and represent a deficit mind set. Far less focus has been given to low expectations or the marginalizing of certain segments of the student population. These are school-related factors that pertain to the academic success of all students, especially poor students and students of color, and are not deficit elements by nature. Too many times, the focus on deficit thinking keeps school leaders from addressing the real issues that can create an oppressive environment for minoritized students (Kumashiro, 2002). Recent research suggests school leaders may blame parents and students of color for students' academic struggles (Flessa, 2009; Garcia & Guerra, 2004). Deficit constructions about students of color and economically disadvantaged students create barriers for achieving any type of equitable learning environment for all students (Ford et al, 2001; Garcia & Guerra, 2004). When taken as a whole, urban school leadership must begin to break down the barriers that are creating disengagement for many students by establishing culturally responsive and inclusive school environments.

In her work on social justice and school leadership, Shield's (2004) discussed the pathologies of silence, particularly pertaining to race and other inequalities in schools. Silence may be related to the weak attempts by administrators to act justly and promote a school culture and atmosphere that is democratic and offers varied educational opportunities for all students. However, many administrators are not capable of having the types of hard conversations about race, language, and other cultural differences with building staffs. They are often afraid of offending staff or feel the need to be politically correct. Sometimes, they even proport to deny the presence of color in their buildings or what these leaders call being

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"color blind". Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997) clarified this designation of color blindness to educators known as multi-culturalists who contend there is only one race – the human race. This type of stance, in fact, is more damaging to students because it further marginalizes their existence and fails to give merit to who they are. For leaders to overcome these types of barriers and truly reengage students, they must give attention to cultural elements that make up the climate of a building. School culture involves the extent to which the school acknowledges the diversity of student cultures within the school as practiced through curriculum and instructional efforts (Gay, 2010; Nieto, 2010) and supports the physical and emotional safety of students (Kidger, Araya, Donovan, & Gunnell, 2012). "Climate entails the total environmental quality of the organization, and is, as such, broader than culture" (Van Houtte, 2005, p. 84).

Hence, the overall climate of the building reinforces students' engagement in the overall schools' program including academics, leadership programs, and extra-curricular activities. Student engagement is accomplished by making sure that teachers utilize culturally relevant teaching methods to encourage all students to become active learners in the educational process (Brown, 2007). The days of school as a means for cultural indoctrination of a single idea should be long gone. Leaders must now be able to create environments that allow for instructional relationships to blossom that, in turn, develops literacy potential and outcomes for all learners. These relationships are built on the idea that everyone's voice is important and the experiences they bring to the learning process have value. Adults also bring cultural experiences in the form of mental models and patterns of beliefs about the world formed from experiences that must be acknowledged and examined in order for transformation to occur within schools. Caruthers and Friend (2016) note that these mental

models "may include their beliefs about cultural differences, their levels of expectations for cultural diverse students, and paradigms such as deficit thinking" (p. 80); changing these hold the potential to alter academic outcomes for students. Further, this can be an uncomfortable process for all within the school. The leader must help teachers understand how the culture reflected in the home and community experiences of students can no longer be viewed as a single mental model of a dominant White European culture.

Leadership for Cultural Transformation within Schools

For decades, the role of the school was to educate. This was done in a certain manner and very rarely did the school system deviate from those values. This process was centered on White, Eurocentric values and beliefs (Gay, 2001). Everyone involved in the system had a role to play. The intended goal was to continue to reinforce this engrained doctrine and produce citizens that would proliferate its ideals. However, as documented since the 1960's, there has been a racial achievement gap that continues to exist from the implementation of this type of instructional structure in our schools. Love (2011) reported the results of a 2009 study conducted by Harvard's Kennedy School Government. The study compared how many students were well-advanced in math and reading. In math, the percentage of Black students advanced was 11% and Latinx was 15%. The percentage of White students who were advanced was 42% and Asian students were 50%. When looking at reading, only 13% of Black students and 4% of Latinx students were advanced. White students scored advanced 41% of the time and 40% of Asians did the same. This study reinforces what has been known for a long time. Our current educational system still fails to address the achievement gap between groups of students that has existed for far too long.

For decades, the majority of students who entered schools came from similar backgrounds. Students mostly belonged to the same social classes with similar cultural backgrounds and came with certain expectations of the school. Teachers, for the most part, catered to a homogeneous population of students and did not have to think about the myriad of cultures in the classroom. Administrators were rarely faced with difficult decisions when contemplating the types of learning experiences to provide for this population of students. Most of these decisions were based on the societal wants and needs of the surrounding community. This community, like the children in the school, led a very homogeneous existence (Allen et al, 2015). Students of color attended segregated schools that remained so long after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (Frankenberg & Lee, 2002). However, the past several decades have seen that change dramatically. In 2014, children of color made up the majority of public education students for the first time in American History (Spikes & Gooden, 2015); however, most still attend rapidly re-segregating schools (Tatum, 2007) where silence about race is pervasive. School leaders are now forced to examine how to address a changing culture of schools due to a more culturally diverse society.

Today's school leaders, now more than ever, must be aware of the vast array of experiences children bring with them to school. School populations are now made up of a conglomerate of students coming from varied cultures, socio-economic status, family make-up, and other dynamics. Leaders must begin to understand and insure their staff members comprehend the implications of this reality and its impact on achievement. T. C. Howard (2010) states that a "more comprehensive understanding of race and culture can play an important role in helping to close the achievement gap" (p. 1). Nowhere is this more

important than in urban schools. Sleeter (2017) contends that the continued pattern of

predominantly Eurocentric instruction is not without consequences and a by-product of a

larger issue. She suggested that a better understanding of the elements of Critical Race

Theory are the cornerstone for building quality teacher preparation programs.

> A core premise of CRT is that racism is endemic, institutional, and systematic; racism is not an aberration but rather a fundamental way of organizing society. This means that the continued production of teachers, large proportions of whom are not well equipped to teach racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students well, is not an aberration. Rather, it is a product of racist systems designed to meet White needs. (p 157)

As Paris and Alim (2017) noted, the racial and ethnic makeup of our nation has shifted;

however, educators have failed to shift the instructional pedagogy. The traditional and

mainstream practices that take place in a classroom on a daily basis are no longer adequate.

Such changes require relating to students in different ways and incorporating culturally

responsive teaching in our classrooms (Gay, 2010, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris &

Alim, 2014, 2017).

Urban school leaders must change their thinking and begin to acknowledge the

institutional racism that has plagued schools for decades. No longer can multicultural schools

exist in a state of colored blindness. Teachers must become aware of their own cultural biases

and better understand their impact on the daily instruction they deliver. Only then can

educators who are involved in the instruction of all students start to become culturally

competent (Garrick et al, 2017). School leaders must expose teachers to these types of

discussions so they can start to build cultural competency in their classrooms and buildings.

Jones and Nichols (2013) define cultural competency as

> the acceptance of the significance of sociopolitical, economic and historical experience of different racial, ethnic, and gender subgroups as legitimate experiences

that have a profound influence on how people learn and achieve inside and outside of formal and informal education settings. (p. 8)

These varied cultural experiences, that make up today's urban schools, offer leaders a very unique opportunity to provide students with a more fulfilling school existence by exposing all students to the meanings of being a part of this unique tapestry of human interactions. Teachers can no longer view instruction and practices as culturally neutral. To become culturally competent institutions, school leadership must provide teachers with the foundational knowledge that students of color may experience schooling and society differently than their White counterparts. Students of color define these schooling experiences based on their own sociopolitical identities and they are not culturally neutral (Jones & Nichols, 2013). Additionally, school leaders must be open to changing existing educational paradigms in order to be accepting of all the viewpoints that they might encounter in a multi-cultural educational system. The voices of students in this heuristic case study imply several recommendations related to literacy acquisition that meet their varied needs.

Recommendations

The findings of this heuristic case study present the opportunity to potentially have an impact on student learning based on several recommendations. These recommendations are intended for both building and district level leadership. They are presented as an attempt to provide a path of better understanding for literacy acquisition. However, when expanded upon, they are also intended to provide a different lens through which we must start viewing education in order to better prepare learners in the twenty-first century.

Create More Non-Instructional Support Systems for Students

Three decades ago, schools were solely responsible for educating students. This was their primary job. However, as society has changed, that role has changed too. Schools have been forced to make decisions regarding their responsibilities in addressing the needs of the whole child. Today's students come to school in need of much more support than ever before. Most students, especially those from high poverty backgrounds, need supports to perform academically on a regular basis. Therefore, the responsibility has fallen to educational institutions to fill those gaps and do more for their students.

In addition to academic roles, schools are now required to support the physical and emotional needs of students as ways to prevent them from dropping out. Lee and Breen (2007) interviewed seven students regarding the reasons they left school. Findings were compared with existing literature and include family needs, pregnancy, and connecting to adults at schools. There is not one single element that has created the need for a wholistic support of students within our schools, but it has reached such high levels that schools can no longer ignore these complex issues. As these needs are addressed, they can be grouped into two different groups, physical and emotional needs.

Students cannot come to school and learn on a consistent basis if they have needs that are not being met. For decades, schools assumed that it was the family unit that was fulfilling the physical needs of students. However, we now know that is not often times the case. Schools are having to do things as simple as provide three meals a day for students, as well as, providing other basic necessities. If you are in a school that has a high proportion of free and reduced lunch students, your school will likely need to collaborate with community outreach groups to offer multiple services to students and their families. There will be a need

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for students to have access to medical and healthcare services as well as dental and vision services. As mentioned, these students will also be served free breakfast and lunch. Now days, many schools are offering students meals at the end of the school day, a grab and go meal they can take home with them. Most schools have their own clothing closets. They also have access to outside clothing closets to support students in need of help with clothing, especially helpful during the winter months. Many high schools now offer daycare services for the students in school who already have children. Some schools have established funds within their general budgets that allow them to help students with utility bill payments and other emergency needs. These types of critical need areas are paramount to helping stabilize the physical surroundings of students. This in turn allows them a better chance to be successful while in school. However, this is only one area of need. The past decade has seen the creation of other significant areas of need that also impact students from every walk of life (Tian et al, 2016), most of these are related to the emotional well-being of students.

Mental health issues have become the new focus within schools. This need has leapt to the forefront of priorities schools must address in order to maintain an adequate learning environment for students. Listenbee et al. (2012) tracked the number of students in the United States that have experienced psychological trauma; the figures were as high as 46 million children that encounter some sort of trauma. These traumatic experiences are associated with negative academic functioning including special education placement, high retention rates, and poor student attendance (Perfect, Turley, Carlson, Yohanna, & Saint Gilles, 2016. Schools now employ more counselors than ever before. They have also turned to employing community health professionals and social workers to help navigate this ever-expanding area of need (Dowdy et al., 2015). Mental health facilities in most areas are over

run with needs and can barely do enough to adequately deal with students in crisis. Across most cities, facilities that offer in-house services for patients find all their available spaces occupied almost 100% of the time. Schools are now being required to fill many of these gaps by providing an increasing number of these services to their students (Cowan, Vaillancourt, Rossen, & Pollitt, 2013). Outside of offering in-patient services to students, schools have been forced to provide the majority of mental health services required by students to stay engaged in the learning process.

In short, as the economic, political, and cultural dynamics of the society changes so does the needs of students, requiring schools to do more to address their physical and social-emotional needs. As the trends in the 21st century continue, providing learning opportunities for students might possibly only be half of what schools do at some point. There is no way of knowing, but for now, schools must expand their support systems to offer students the best opportunities possible to learn.

Expand the Paths of Acceptable Learning Opportunities for Students

Too many times students fail to become literate because educators fail to engage them. Teachers can bemoan the current educational levels of students as they walk through our high school doors. We might be inclined to close our eyes and long for a time when the students were different and seemed more engaged in their learning – hoping somehow, they might revert back to those times. However, that is unrealistic, and every good educator knows that our common truth is we teach everyone – even those we think cannot be taught. There are barriers to this task, just as there have always been, but the time has arrived to move our thinking beyond what is commonly complained about in our classrooms.

Are we going to fix the items that many believe currently hold students back? There are those who attribute the demise of the educational system on the breakdown of the family unit. Others attribute lack of education for many students to a failed class system that continually perpetuates a cycle of poverty. Finally, there are educators who wish to expound the virtues of an instructional system that was not designed for a globally complex society that also requires massive amounts of individualization. All of these problems are societal problems. They require extreme systemic changes that often times take a generation to ameliorate. Unfortunately, the problem is here, and it is now. We cannot afford to sacrifice another generation of students while the adults try to figure out the solutions. To start down the path of instructional attainment for all, we must now begin to expand on the learning opportunities offered students.

Today's educational institutions are designed for a society that no longer exists. Students are faced with endless opportunities as they no longer live in a community determined by geography. Today's students are global citizens and need to be afforded experiences within the educational setting that allow for the creation of global citizens. This means course offerings that expand well beyond what is considered a "Common Core" education. Students must have the opportunity to be exposed to career pathways that expand well beyond the scope of "college" bound. Voogt and Roblin (2012) in their synthesis of literature related to 21st century competencies identified communication, collaboration, information and communications technology, and social and/or cultural awareness. Additionally, creativity, critical thinking, problem solving, and the capacity to develop relevant and high-quality products were also important competencies.

Students must have access to vocational programs, job shadowing opportunities, and work experiences that schools never considered implementing before. Students' interests are no longer kept simply by providing basic reading, writing, and math. They must be exposed to all the potential areas of interest one might encounter over the course of their young lives. Students' wants, and needs are much more sophisticated because of all the outside influences of a global technological world. Schools must adapt to these changes in order to offer students a chance at a sustainable future.

Suggestions for Future Research

Literacy is the cornerstone for all learning. This skill establishes the foundation for student success and failures well beyond a student's high school years. However, educators continue to grapple with ways in which they can properly prepare students for life beyond high school. This study examined the literacy developmental stories of five students from diverse backgrounds and varied learning experiences. They all have achieved varying degrees of success and failure. From the elements gleaned through this work, I have developed a better understanding of the problem and potential solutions. This in turn has led me to contemplate potential areas of future research. These areas could include:

LGBT educational experiences in the modern school – the proliferation of more and more LGBT students in the high school has created areas for potential research. As the stigma of being openly LGBT in high school continues to fall away, educators must determine how to best create a pedagogy that allows for their voices to be heard in their instruction. These different approaches will not only impact educational attainment, but most certainly be a factor in determining the social-emotional well-being of these students in the school setting.

Voluntary and Involuntary educational experiences – as presented in the research on Cultural-Ecological Theory, there is still much to be learned about how different circumstances impact the learning of different cultures. The idea of voluntary and involuntary cultures adds another layer to culturally relevant pedagogy that must be considered and better understood.

Single parent homes and educational success – since more than half the students today are being raised in single parent homes, this provides an area of research that must be addressed from a different view point. Too many times, this is perceived to be a deficit condition. However, plenty of successful students come from single parent homes. There is a need to determine what the common factors are that allow this condition to exist.

High school social welfare programs and academic performance – as schools are thrust into the role of providing for the social-emotional welfare of all its students, commonalities will arise. Every day, schools continue to add to their profile of supports for students in distress. Some schools will undoubtedly do this better than others and see better academic achievement as a return. We must look at these schools and determine what is working and what is not working to better support students in distress.

Factors causing student disengagement – student disengagement continues to be an issue at all grade levels. Again, deficit approaches are often applied as solutions for the academic achievement of students of color and high poverty students. However, there are factors that crisscross many domains of student development that must be considered. Disengagement goes well beyond the cultural experiences of students.

For many years we have continued to use outdated practices that give us poor academic and social outcomes. The time has arrived for researchers to examine the skill acquirement of students at all ages in a brand-new light. Educators must cast off the practices that have been in place for centuries. We need to seek out individual teachers, schools and even districts that are taking revolutionary approaches to education We must try to better understand how we can teach the students of today that come to our buildings from all types of cultures with different types of lived experiences. The citizens of this country no longer live in the same type of society we encountered even fifty years ago. Researchers must now seek out those who are attempting to adapt to these changes in society and have encountered successful ways of addressing literacy. As long as students continue to struggle, there will be a need to understand why they struggle and what means can be utilized to better help their learning outcomes.

Final Thoughts

This research process was one that was very personal to me and allowed me to utilize the heuristic aspect of the design to include twenty-three years of insight. In a sense, my career has been a form of action research since the very first day I set foot in a classroom. Every student and every encounter I have had throughout my career has in some way shaped my educational philosophy and helped determine how I approached my job. All of these moments led me to the conclusion that for every single student who spends one minute in a classroom, literacy is the most important skill we can teach a student and insure when they leave high school, they are prepared for their next endeavor.

As an educator, I think high school teachers and administrators are afforded a much different perspective of the learning process than those who come before us in the

educational continuum and those who come after. The end of high school marks a pivotal point in every single person's life. This time can serve as the beginning of a life full of promise and inclusion or can be the starting point of a journey filled with disdain and rejection. High school teachers get to watch this pivotal moment unfold over a four-year period. There is a certain amount of anxious energy that goes into this process. As adults in these students' lives, we can see the finality of so many of the decision's students make. We can also see the implications of poor pedagogy, underfunded facilities, and the overall inability to educate in a manner required to produce productive citizens. This research was intended to help shed some light on why we continue to fail so many students and send them into the world unprepared. We must reach a point as a profession where it is no longer acceptable to allow students to leave the walls of our institution without the proper literacy skills. If we allow even one student to fail, we should question who we are and why we do this job in the first place.

Most urban students have a hole in their heart and soul. This condition can potentially be caused by more things than one dissertation could ever come close to explaining. What this study revealed to me was that there must be certain conditions present before a student is able to begin learning. However, deficit thinking can no longer be the norm with regards to urban education. A student's home life, socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, gender, or even sexuality are not the factors that will ultimately determine the educational outcomes for urban students. The work of researchers, such as Gay, Ladson-Billings, and Howard, revealed that educational institutions should be responsible for providing a better foundation for all students and consider the cultural experiences of all students - not just White students. By doing so, students would have the ability to reach their full potential by finding value in

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their lived experiences. Unfortunately, not every teacher is prepared to make the type of commitment required to reach these students who are distressed and hurting. Most administrators are not prepared to create the conditions to allow the system to support all types of students and allow the inclusion of all cultures. Therefore, students continue to walk the halls of urban schools in distress and never reach a state of readiness to become learners allowing them to develop strong literacy skills. Four years later, they leave those same halls unprepared to function in a society that expects its citizens to produce at a certain level. This study revealed that a revolutionary, systemic change is needed in urban schools or we will continue to fail our students and send them out into a world they are not prepared to be a part of now or in the future.

APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol

Thank you for your participation in this interview process. I will be asking you a number of questions in an attempt to gain a deeper understand of your literacy experiences. As you are discussing your answers to the questions, I will be scripting many of the things you say. I will also be recording the dialogue in order to make sure I have an accurate record of our conversation.

There might be times I will stop you to ask a clarifying question. This is done in an effort to better understand the implications of what we are discussing. The goal of this process is to construct an accurate account of your literacy experiences and discover the impact your schooling and home life had on them.

Questions:

5. Discuss the value of reading and writing in your everyday life.

    a. Where does your enjoyment/dislike of reading come from?

6. Discuss the importance of reading and writing in your house/classroom.

    a. Discuss some of the ways in which you are able to either read or write in your classes/home on a daily basis.

        i. What types of texts do you read?

        ii. Discuss the manner by which you learn best

        iii. What types of writing do you do?

7. Do you think your culture is valued when determining the reading and writing experiences assigned to you in school?

8. How important do you think reading and writing is in your school?

    a. What are some specific things I would see in your school that indicate the importance (lack of importance)?

b. If you needed help or more support reading and/or writing, where could you

find that help?

APPENDIX B

Observation Protocol

TIME:	DATE:
DATE:	PARTICIPANT'S NAME:
SITE:	TIME IN CLASS:
Descriptive Notes	**Reflective Notes**
Classroom Layout:	
Classroom Decorum (behaviors):	
Classroom Decorum (instructional)	
Teacher/Student Interaction:	
Student/Student Interactions:	

Significant Teacher Comments:	
Significant Student Comments:	
Nonverbal Classroom Activity:	
Misc. Items:	
Final Thoughts:	

District Consent Form

Request to Conduct Research
2017-2018

Name of Applicant: *Chad Ryerson*

Employee of North Kansas City Schools? Yes _X_ No __

If yes, location and position *NKCHS - Administrator*

Is the research in fulfillment of graduate program requirements and/or in partnership with an external organization (e.g., university, college, business, industry, agency, etc.)? Yes _X_ No __

If yes, name of external organization and lead contact person:
External organization: *UMKC - Loyce Caruthers*

Lead Contact Person and Position: *Loyce Caruters / Professor*

Purpose of research: *Examine literacy deficits in H.S. Seniors*

Submission Requirements

1. A copy of the complete application submitted for formal approval by a human subjects review board. This application should include, at a minimum:

   a. A brief summary of the purpose and scope of the research including:
   ___ The extent to which the research addresses and/or aligns with the goals of the school district
   ___ Potential benefit of the research to positively impact district, building, or classroom practice

   b. A brief summary of the research methods including:
   ___ Participants
   ___ Selection process
   ___ Remuneration procedures (if applicable)
   ___ Assurance of confidentiality of participant identification
   ___ Consent and assent procedures and documents
   ___ Activities related to the research, including proposed survey, interview, and/or assessment questions/instruments
   ___ Extent of intrusiveness/disruption regarding classroom instruction
   ___ Time/effort requirements of participants

2. ___ Evidence to demonstrate that the proposed research has been formally approved through a human subjects review process.

3. ___ Assurance from the researcher that building principals, teachers, students and/or their parents may opt out of participation without consequence even with approval by the district team.

4. ___ Assurance from the researcher that results will be communicated back to the district upon completion of study. (**Anticipated date of completion:** _____)

Signature of Executive Director of Data and Accountability: _____

Team Review Date: _5/14/2018_   Approved: _X_   Not Approved: _____

Signature of Deputy Superintendent: _____

Signature of Principal(s) of building(s) impacted by research study   Date

A copy of this form must be returned to NKCS Executive Director of Data and Accountability with all necessary signatures before approval can be granted to conduct research.

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VITA

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