A CASE STUDY OF TEACHER BELIEFS ABOUT STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN A SUBURBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL

By

CHRISTINE A. HUNT

Bachelor of Science in Secondary Education
Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, OK
1982

Master of Education in Counseling Education
Northeastern State University
Tahlequah, OK
1989

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate College of the
Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree of
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION
December, 2012

A CASE STUDY OF TEACHER BELIEFS ABOUT

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN A SUBURBAN

MIDDLE SCHOOL

Dissertation Approved:

Dr. Ken Stern

Dissertation Adviser

Dr. Ed Harris

Dr. Bernita Krumm

Dr. David Yellin

.

Name: CHRISTINE A. HUNT

Date of Degree: DECEMBER 2012

Title of Study: A CASE STUDY OF TEACHER BELIEFS ABOUT STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN A SUBURBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL

Major Field: SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION

ABSTRACT: The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions and beliefs of teachers at a Midwestern suburban middle school about students, student learning, and about teacher's beliefs of their collective abilities to achieve the task of school improvement. Saddleback Middle School (SMS) has experienced low standardized test scores since the implementation of NCLB. Of the school district's five middle schools, SMS consistently had the lowest scores in math and reading. The researcher sought to understand the relationship between teacher beliefs and student academic achievement. Eight volunteer teachers from SMS were interviewed twice and observed twice in their classroom settings. The findings of the interviews, observations, and information from teacher lesson plans and grading procedures were analyzed through the lens of Bandura's theory of collective teacher efficacy (CTE). With knowledge of the collective beliefs of the faculty, the leadership of the school could implement plans to improve faculty CTE and student achievement. Analysis of the data indicated a difference between what teachers thought of their teaching practices and how they actually performed in the classroom. They expressed knowledge of positive instructional practices to improve student learning but did not practice those strategies regularly in their classrooms. Participants tended to have a critical view of poor performing students and of the abilities of some of their colleagues. Findings indicate a need for future research regarding school culture and how it relates to CTE in school improvement and the limitations of case study research alone in investigating CTE beliefs of a faculty.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter Page

LIST OF TABLES

Table Page

LIST OF CHARTS

Chart Page

CHAPTER I

Introduction

Achieving student academic progress as mandated by No Child Left Behind has long been the goal of public schools in the United States. Erbe (2000) found in her study of elementary students in Chicago that student economic status had the greatest effect on student achievement. Low income students scored lower on the math achievement tests than other students. More than half of the explained variance in math scores on the Illinois Goal Assessment Program was accounted for by student background variables. Interestingly, after controlling for socio-economic status (SES) and student ethnicity, Erbe (2000) found that the math scores of Chicago elementary children were also influenced by teacher beliefs about students and parents, accounting for 23.83% of the variance. She posited that "the belief of teachers that students' capability to learn is limited has devastating consequences for student achievement in mathematics" (Erbe, 2000, p. 7). Georgiou and Tourva (2007) studied teacher beliefs about student achievement and found that they believed school achievement is influenced significantly by biologically determined characteristics, such as intelligence. They said that teachers believe student effort is not enough to affect academic improvement and that elementary school teachers identify socio-economic status and biological factors as being primarily responsible for student achievement and teacher influence as minimal.

Bandura's (1993) study suggested that even though a school may have a large population of minority and low SES students, teachers who believe that those students can be taught and can achieve success will have a positive effect on student achievement. Significant to this study was the fact that collective teacher efficacy (CTE) was a greater predictor of academic achievement than was SES. Teacher beliefs about student learning can be powerful predictors of academic improvement. School leadership has little direct effect on student achievement, but may be able to indirectly affect improvement by influencing teacher beliefs about their collective abilities, and facilitating teacher commitment to the school values (Ross & Gray, 2006).Teachers who believe that they work as a team with their colleagues and can positively affect student achievement are more likely to take responsibility for the school outcomes (Ross & Gray, 2006).

Saddleback Middle School (SMS), one of five middle schools in a suburban school district, has experienced fluctuating state math and reading test scores since the implementation of NCLB in 2001. The student demographics of SMS suggest possible assumptions about the potential for academic improvement. SMS's student population averaged approximately 540 in grades six through eight. In the four years, 2005-2009, SMS averaged 20% special education student enrollment while the district average remained steady at 15%. SMS averaged 35% low socio-economic student enrollment while the district's percentage was 31. SMS offered special education classes to students with emotional disturbances, learning disabilities, and severe cognitive disabilities. The Erbe (2000) and Georgiou and Tourva (2007) studies involved elementary teacher beliefs about student learning. Possibly, the beliefs of middle school teachers about student learning influence academic improvement.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the perceptions and beliefs of teachers about their students, student learning, and about teachers' beliefs of their collective abilities to achieve the task of school improvement. With an understanding of the perceptions that teachers have about students and their task of teaching, the administration can make the necessary changes to influence school improvement. If teachers have negative beliefs about their students, their students' abilities to be successful in school, and the abilities of their colleagues to promote academic improvement, programs to facilitate improved faculty commitment to the goal of improved academic achievement could be introduced.

Theoretical Framework

Social Cognitive Theory

Goddard and Goddard (2001) explained that the control people exert over their lives is influenced by their efficacy beliefs. This fundamental belief that people can control the actions of their lives for beneficial outcomes is the core of Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory. "The self-regulatory social, motivational, and affective contributors to cognitive functioning are best addressed within the conceptual framework of the exercise of human agency" (Bandura, 1993, pp. 117-118). Martin (2004) explained agency as the ability of people to make the necessary choices in their lives and act on those choices in ways that best fit their needs. Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory describes people as being motivated by both internal and external factors, where behavior, cognitive abilities, and environmental factors interact with each other to help determine human functioning.

The nature of people can be described in terms of certain capabilities. “Symbolizing capabilities” (Bandura, 1986, p.18) refers to the ability to use symbols to serve as guides when making decisions on future actions. Purposeful action is regulated by the capability of forethought which allows the person to anticipate consequences of actions, set goals for themselves, and establish plans for action. The idea that certain events and behaviors will bring about positive outcomes produces the motivation and inspiration for action.

Through vicarious capability, the ability to learn from the successes and failures of others, people are able to acquire task information from observing others, which “enables people to acquire rules for generating and regulating behavioral patterns without having to form them gradually by tedious trial and error” (Bandura, 1986, p. 19). People have the capability to “self-regulate” (p. 20) their behaviors based on their own personal standards, and are “self-reflective” (p. 21) in their evaluation of the outcomes of their actions (Bandura, 1986). People are able to purposefully direct and evaluate the effectiveness of their actions to accomplish a task.

Collective Teacher Efficacy

Bandura (1997) defined CTE as “a group’s shared belief in its conjoint capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to produce given levels of attainments” (p. 477). CTE represents the level of confidence a group emanates in its ability to organize and implement the tasks necessary to reach a common goal (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2004). Social cognitive theory posits that teachers act collectively within an organization rather than as isolates (Bandura, 1993). Positive CTE in schools refers to the judgment of teachers that the faculty as a whole

can organize and put into operation the necessary actions to achieve a common goal that has the greatest benefit for the students.

This collective belief in the abilities of the faculty as a whole to achieve goals of the school organization is at the heart of the construct of CTE. Teachers with high levels of CTE may be able to influence the actions of other faculty members. A high degree of CTE within a school organization is influential to the degree of effort that teachers put into everyday tasks and goal accomplishment. Collective teacher efficacy properties are reciprocal in that higher student achievement positively influences the feelings of teacher efficacy, which in turn positively influences student achievement. True also then is the adverse effect of low collective efficacy on student achievement. Faculty who believe that students cannot achieve academic excellence set the stage for schools to experience low improvement.

Statement of the Problem

The problem faced by many schools is that academic improvement is more difficult to achieve than to explain. SMS, one of five middle schools serving a large suburban Midwestern community, has experienced minimal academic improvement since the implementation of NCLB. Of the middle schools, SMS has consistently scored lowest on the state's curriculum exams in math and reading. The school not only scored the lowest of the district's middle schools, the 2008-2009 academic performance index (API) scores were the lowest of all the district's 14 elementary schools, two intermediate high schools, and one senior high school. SMS' API score in 2008-2009 was the lowest of any school among four area suburban school districts. The eighth grade math and reading state curriculum-

referenced test scores have been consistently below the district averages. One area of achievement worth mentioning is the 2008 End-Of-Instruction (EOI) algebra 1 proficiency percentage. All students in all five middle schools in the district who took this exam scored proficient or above. The API score for SMS increased 103 points in 2008 only to decrease by 29 in 2009.

All minority and low income students and students with disabilities have made adequate yearly progress (AYP) at SMS since 2002; however, since the school consistently falls below achievement levels of the other four middle schools in the district, as well as other schools in neighboring communities, the administration must look to new and innovative ways to meet the needs of the students to foster academic improvement. Under NCLB, all schools must reach an API score of 1500 by 2014.

Teacher perceptions about students and student learning can have a tremendous effect on school improvement (Erbe, 2000; Georgiou & Tourva, 2007). This purpose of this study was to gain understanding of the beliefs the SMS faculty have about student learning through these questions:

1. What are the faculty beliefs about student learning?
2. What are the faculty beliefs about students at SMS?
3. What are the faculty beliefs about the ability of the school to effect student academic improvement?
4. What other phenomena are not explained by Bandura's theory of collective teacher efficacy?

CTE helps one understand the effect of teacher beliefs at SMS on student academic improvement. Because SMS has experienced little academic improvement since the implementation of NCLB, it is important that school leaders understand all aspects of the school organization, including the attitudes and beliefs of faculty and administration of the school itself.

Researcher

With over 25 years experience in public education, I have been a classroom teacher, guidance counselor, and school administrator. I began my career teaching social studies and science in 1984 at one of two intermediate high schools in the community, and pursued my Master of Counseling Education degree part-time during this period, completing it in 1989.

In 1991, I became a guidance counselor at the intermediate high school where I taught. For the next nine years, I worked closely with the administration of the school developing and planning the master teaching schedule, and collaborating with the teachers to help students achieve success in the classrooms. I acted as liaison between the school and parents, facilitated conferences, provided one-on-one and group counseling with students, and provided guidance to teachers dealing with difficult or challenging students. While in this position, I continued taking coursework to become certified in secondary administration.

In 2000, I was appointed assistant principal at Holbrook Middle School (HMS) in the same school district. I was one of two assistants at this school and specifically worked with the faculty and students on academic and curricular concerns. The position required me to analyze student academic test results from the state criterion referenced tests (CRT), the district benchmarks, and the Explore Tests to find strengths and weaknesses in student

academic performances and then use this knowledge to assist in curriculum planning and implementation. Assistant principals in the district were transferred to different school sites in 2008, and I was placed at Saddleback Middle School. SMS, because of its lower student population, had only one assistant principal. I was aware that SMS had lower state testing scores than HMS, but was not aware that the scores often were the lowest in the school district. SMS students consistently scored below the district average in most of the test results for multiple years. My immediate question was: Why? SMS offered the same core academic courses as the other middle schools and all had similar extra-curricular activities. All faculty members demographically appeared not to be significantly different from the faculty at the other middle schools. In addition to the low comparison within the district, the API scores were among the lowest of the surrounding suburban communities. This qualitative study was conducted in an attempt to understand this phenomenon so that improvement measures could be taken to help the students at SMS achieve academic success.

Definition of Terms

API Scores

The Academic Performance Index (API) is a score assigned to schools based on several factors including academic progress and attendance. API scores for middle schools are determined using results from the state mandated tests in reading and math. Other components used for determining API scores for high schools include attendance, dropout, and graduation rates.

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)

For schools or districts to reach AYP they must consistently improve their API scores not only for the majority population, but also for the marginalized subgroups, including major race/ethnic groups, special education students, and children who qualify for free and reduced lunches. The purpose of determining AYP is to measure school success and initiate growth in student achievement. Every subgroup must meet NCLB expectations yearly for the school to maintain AYP.

Benchmark Exams

District-designed exams, modeled after the state curriculum tests to measure student academic progress in the core subject courses (math, reading, science, social studies), are administered to students every six weeks.

End-Of-Instruction Tests (EOI)

EOI tests are given to students at the end of an instructional year to determine proficiency in the various subjects. For students to graduate from high school with a standard diploma, proficient scores on EOI tests are required in English II, algebra I, and two of the following: English III, algebra II, geometry, biology I, and U. S. history. The algebra I EOI test is the only one offered at the middle school level.

Explore Test

The Explore Test is a practice version of the ACT. All of the district's eighth grade students are required to take this exam that measures proficiency in the core subjects and gives students an indication of how they might score on the ACT. A career portion of this

exam measures the interests of students and provides them an inventory of possible occupations for future reference.

Highly Qualified

According to NCLB, highly qualified teachers in early childhood and elementary education, and secondary teachers of core subjects are those who hold at least a bachelor's degree, possess a license/certificate in the subjects taught, and have at least one of the following options:

1. Pass a state certification test in the level/subject taught.
2. Complete 24 credit hours of university coursework in the subject taught.
3. Complete a graduate degree in the subject taught.
4. Hold certification through the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards in the subject taught.
5. Demonstrate competency in each subject taught through established state standards.

Summary

The mandates of NCLB charge school districts with the responsibility of academic improvement. All schools must meet a 1500 API score by 2014. SMS has experienced continued lagging scores on state mandated student exams. The study seeks to investigate the beliefs of the faculty about SMS students, student learning, and about their beliefs of the collective abilities of the faculty to achieve school improvement.

Chapter II is a review of the literature regarding CTE and the affect it has on student achievement. The constructs of CTE will be examined as they relate to previous research.

CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

This review of literature about successful middle schools includes studies of the characteristics of schools with high student achievement. Collective Teacher Efficacy (CTE) is examined through the review of text about the properties of highly efficacious organizations, characteristics of faculty with high degrees of CTE, and the relationships of school climate, teacher commitment, and responsibility to CTE beliefs.

Successful Middle Schools

Middle schools became prevalent in the 1970's as they began to take on standard characteristics regarding enrollment and curriculum (Wiles, 1995). In a study that investigated middle schools, Petzko (2004) found most middle schools had fewer than 600 students; however, 49% of highly successful schools had enrollments of 800-1400. Most middle schools provide opportunities for children to experience creative activities through enrichment and exploratory programs, such as art, music, and physical education. Although some districts consider sixth grade as part of elementary school and include ninth grade in the middle level, 54% of highly successful middle schools include grade levels 6-8 (Petzko, 2004). According to Georgiadi and Romano (1992), middle

schools should provide opportunities for students to receive help in basic skills, use a variety of instructional materials, and allow students to progress at their own rate, regardless of their ages.

Petzko (2004) found that in 2000, the majority of successful middle schools implemented teaming. Teaming involves a common group of core subject teachers serving the same group of students throughout the school day. Core subjects include literature (or reading), language, social studies, math, and science. When the students attend exploratory classes, their core teachers plan curriculum during a common period and sometimes share common teaching areas as well. Team teaching involves interdisciplinary instruction with teachers developing units of study involving several subjects (Georgiadi & Romano, 1992). In Petzko's (2004) study, the majority of both the highly successful and the national sample of schools provided their teacher teams with common plan periods. Georgiadi and Romano (1992) reported that middle schools often required teachers to teach more than one subject to the same group of students, known as blocking, to reduce the number of teachers a student had. Highly successful middle schools tend to group students into ability groups and are more likely to have a slightly larger teacher-student ratio than the national average (Petzko, 2004).

According to Wiles (1995), middle schools target the curricular areas of academics, learning skills, and personal development. Personal development includes services provided through the guidance department of schools. In Petzko's (2004) study, forty-seven percent of highly successful schools had implemented programs where students were paired with faculty members or adult volunteers for advising and mentoring purposes. Georgiadi and Romano (1992) advised that middle schools provide

students with services including health, counseling (both individual and group), testing, and personal development.

Collective Teacher Efficacy (CTE)

Goddard, Hoy, et al. (2004) concluded that CTE is an "organizational property" and that "teachers have not only self-referent efficacy perceptions but also beliefs about the conjoint capability of a school faculty" (p. 4). Goddard et al. (2000) theorized teachers with high CTE will accept challenging goals and will be persistent in exercising effort to achieve those goals. They studied the relationship between student achievement and CTE and found results showing that CTE is a predictor of student achievement in math and reading.

The constructs that enhance CTE beliefs in a faculty include mastery experience, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and affective states (Bandura, 1997; Parker, Hannah, & Topping, 2006). Mastery experience is the belief that one has been successful at achieving a task. If teachers have had success with raising student achievement in the past, then they will expect to have the same results in the future. The same holds true for teachers who have experienced failures in the classroom. If they have not had success in raising student scores, then they expect to have the same results in the future. "Teachers as a group experience successes and failures. Past school successes build teachers' beliefs in the capability of the faculty, whereas failures tend to undermine a sense of collective efficacy" (Goddard, Hoy, et al, 2004, p. 5). Goddard, LoGerfo and Hoy (2004) found in a study of urban elementary schools that mastery experience was a positive predictor of CTE. The researchers defined mastery experience in terms of previous student

achievement. Goddard, Hoy et al. (2004) were more specific in their definition stating that "mastery experience is the most powerful source of efficacy information. The perception that a performance has been successful tends to raise efficacy beliefs, contributing to the expectation that performance will be proficient in the future" (p. 5). The opposite would also hold true: if a teacher perceived a performance to be a failure, the expectation would be that future performances would fail as well.

The experience one gains after watching another perform a given task is called vicarious experience (Goddard, Hoy et al, 2004). Organizationally, schools that wish to improve student achievement can observe the actions of schools that have experienced higher achievement. The assumption follows that vicarious experience could occur within a school. If a teacher observes the successes of others within the same school, positive classroom practices are reinforced.

Social persuasion involves encouragement or support by colleagues or principals to teachers or "…it may involve discussions in the teacher's lounge, community, or media about the ability of teachers to influence students" (Goddard, Hoy et al, 2004, p. 6). Encouragement and support can come in the form of professional workshops and feedback from the administration about teacher performance. Goddard, Hoy, and Woolfolk Hoy (2000) concluded that the beliefs of a faculty to successfully educate students create normative behavior among teachers. The expectations created by the group's goal setting behaviors tend to be motivation for all teachers to participate in the same fashion. Further, they state that CTE shapes teachers' behaviors and that student achievement can be positively influenced by both CTE and normative behaviors.

New teachers learn from the school's social structure. In a school with high CTE, teachers learn that effort and persistence to educate students are expected behaviors. Goddard and Skrla (2006) found that schools with higher numbers of students enrolled in gifted education programs also had increased CTE. They posited that enrollment in these programs have "the potential to send a strong normative message to faculty regarding the capability of teachers to coordinate their efforts and foster high levels of student learning" (Goddard & Skrla, 2006, p. 230). Goddard, Hoy et al. (2004) said that a strong sense of CTE creates an expectation for teachers to anticipate a positive collective student group performance. Teachers learn what is expected to achieve any given task by observing the actions of others within the school setting.

Goddard et al. (2004) postulated that "the level of arousal, either anxiety or excitement, adds to individual's perceptions of self-capability or incompetence" (p. 6). Pressures and crisis from outside the school can affect school performance. A faculty that has high CTE can withstand negative pressures and can meet the disruptions that arise. Such challenges may come from variables outside the control of the teacher or school, such as low socio-economic level of the students or low parental support.

Poor past academic achievement, student absenteeism, low socio-economic status, and low teacher efficacy all affect the ability of a school to achieve current and future academic success, according to Bandura (1993) who also suggested that "student body characteristics reflecting low racial composition and ethnic diversity are weakly linked to schools' prior achievement but have no direct influence on schools' collective sense of efficacy or on subsequent achievements" (p. 142). Parker et al. (2006) posited that CTE and SES are inseparable constructs. In their study of elementary schools they found that

when SES was controlled for, CTE did not account for a significant variance in student achievement, although it had a larger impact on writing achievement than did SES, and a small independent impact on reading achievement. Together, CTE and SES had the greatest effect on student achievement.

Parker et al. (2006) identified factors contributing to positive teacher beliefs including mutual respect between teachers and students, positive school climate, motivated staff, and administrative support through staff-development opportunities. Factors seen to hinder CTE included discipline problems, lack of support from principals, lack of parent support, stress, low morale, and lack of teacher influence (Parker et al., 2006). These authors surmised that when CTE is high, the effect of SES is reduced, particularly in the area of writing. They found CTE least effective in the area of math.

Academic Optimism

In their mixed methods study, Henderson, Bueler, Stein, Dalton, Robinson, and Anfara (2005) found a positive relationship between academic emphasis and national percentile scores. Schools that maintain high academic standards can expect higher achievement on standardized tests. Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk Hoy (2006) stated that there are "three organizational properties that seem to make a difference in student achievement: the academic emphasis of the school, the collective efficacy of the faculty, and the faculty trust in parents and students" (p. 426). Academic emphasis is the degree to which a school is driven to achieve academic excellence. They further suggested that the three properties are interrelated and form what they refer to as "academic optimism" (p. 430). The properties of academic optimism act together as one construct that affects

student achievement. Additionally, they reported that academic optimism can be learned by schools that formerly did not experience high levels of academic emphasis, collective teacher efficacy, or faculty trust in students or parents. Hoy, Sweetland, and Smith (2002) found that academic press is a characteristic of schools with high CTE and that it is linked to the normative and behavioral environments. Academic press and student achievement have a reciprocal nature in that the improvement in school performance through high academic standards encourages teachers to follow those standards in their teaching practices.

School Climate

Sweetland and Hoy (2000) defined a positive organizational climate as being necessary to achieve higher student achievement. School climate consists of characteristics unique to that organization, and captures the distinctiveness of the school atmosphere. Positive relationships among students, teachers, and administrators are characteristic of a healthy climate (Sweetland & Hoy, 2000). Teachers enjoy their jobs, speak highly of their colleagues, promote high academic goals, and have positive feelings of self-efficacy. Principals provide the necessary resources to their teachers for student instruction. Schools with a healthy climate lack controversy and conflict within the faculty. Sweetland and Hoy (2000) found that higher student achievement was linked to teacher empowerment. Schools with empowered teachers have high academic goals, are able to withstand outside pressures, and are able to provide teachers with necessary resources. Collegial leadership and academic emphasis, or press (Sweetland & Hoy, 2000), were found to be positively related to teacher empowerment. They concluded that an open, collegial, and professional climate focused on student achievement offers an

atmosphere for teaching and learning decisions resulting in productive teacher empowerment (Sweetland & Hoy, 2000). Further, Sweetland and Hoy state that CTE is positively affected by a positive school climate and through the empowerment of teachers.

Weisel and Dror (2006) proposed that self efficacy of teachers and school climate are related to teacher attitudes about the inclusion of special education students in regular classrooms. The belief of an individual teacher about his/her own abilities is influenced by school leaders and colleagues. Self efficacy beliefs, like collective efficacy beliefs, affect how teachers view their students and their school, resulting in becoming the reality of the school. School climate is defined by Weisel and Dror (2006) as the "sum of the opinions and attitudes of the school personnel toward the school" (p. 159). Weisel and Dror found that teachers who believed they could help students achieve academic success had a higher sense of self efficacy. Teachers with positive feelings about their abilities also had positive feelings about special education students in their own classrooms. The variables included in their analysis of school climate were supportive leadership, teacher autonomy, prestige, adoption of new ideas, teacher workload, and the relationships between teachers. All of these variables were shown to account for teacher attitudes about including special education students in regular education classes. Teachers' sense of efficacy amounted to one-fourth of the variance in their attitudes about inclusion. The higher the feelings of positive efficacy, the more positive the teachers felt about inclusion. Teachers with positive self efficacy feelings received training in matters dealing with special education, had supportive leadership, were autonomous in their

teaching task, had common goals with their colleagues, and experienced cooperation with other teachers (Weisel & Dror, 2006).

Teacher Commitment and Responsibility

Chan, Lau, Nie, Lim, and Hogan (2008) stated that teacher self efficacy was related to teacher commitment, and that was needed to build a positive school climate. If teachers commit to the school organization, then common goals can be met more readily. Chan et al. (2008) defined teacher commitment as "a strong belief in and acceptance of the organization's goals and values" and a "willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization" (pp. 598-599). One could conclude then that if an organization's goal is to improve student learning, teachers must exercise a commitment to the task to experience success. Chan et al. (2008) posited that teacher efficacy is a predictor of teacher commitment and found that to improve teacher commitment to the goals of the school organization, teachers need to be able to engage with one another about teaching and learning, a process known as reflective dialogue. This type of communication strengthens self efficacy, commitment, and enhances a sense of belonging among the faculty. These researchers also found that teacher commitment to organizational goals is negatively related to organizational politics. Teachers who feel as though they have no voice in decision-making for their school and see the school organization as politically managed have lower commitment to the goals and norms of the school.

Halverson, Lee, and Adrade (2009) investigated urban early elementary school teachers' attitudes about working in low-income schools and the relationship of those

attitudes to student learning. They focused on the concept of responsibility, or how teachers collectively worked together to support one another, and found that students who had highly responsible teachers scored higher on reading achievement assessments than students with teachers with lower responsibility. Responsible teachers set high goals for their students, are more prepared, attend professional conferences, receive more paid planning time in their schools, and have supportive leadership (Halverson et al., 2009).

Like Chan et al. (2008) who suggested the importance of commitment to the organizational goals, Halverson et al. (2008) proposed that highly responsible teachers commit to influencing the curriculum of their school. The more influence they have over school policy, the more responsible they feel for the completion of goals. Also, similar to results found by Weisel and Dror (2006), Halverson et al. (2009) determined that highly responsible teachers attend professional development workshops, including literacy and leadership training.

Interviews

Patton (2002) described a good interview as one that "lays open thoughts, feelings, knowledge, and experience, not only to the interviewer but also the interviewee" (p. 405), and "an opportunity to investigate feelings, thoughts, and intentions" (p. 341) of research participants. Patton (2002) identified three approaches to interviewing in qualitative research: "the informal conversational interview, the general interview guide approach, and the standardized open-ended interview" (p. 342). The informal conversational approach allows for the researcher to ask spontaneous questions over an extended period of time. The questions are not pre-determined but are focused on an overall purpose and because the information gathered from each participant is different

the questions asked are not the same for every interview. Informal interviews are unstructured and allow for questioning techniques that are flexible according to the emergent information provided in the answers. Patton further suggested that the informal interview could allow for the researcher to ask leading questions of the interviewee and organization and analysis of the data could be difficult.

Using an interview guide creates a framework in which to develop sequenced questions and allows the researcher to determine which responses to pursue in depth. A list of questions would be included along with additional topics of interest that could be explored. The interviewer not only can commit to the established questions for every participant, but also has the flexibility to pursue additional topics as they arise from the responses.

The standardized open-ended interview approach uses pre-determined interview questions and is highly focused. “Collecting the same information from each person poses no credibility problem when each person is understood as a unique informant with a unique perspective” (Patton, 2002, p. 347). Use of this approach allows for standardized data collection; however, it does not permit the researcher to follow other topics that were not anticipated before the interviews were conducted.

Observations

Patton (2002) explained that the purpose of using observational data in qualitative research is to provide an accurate and thorough description of “the setting, the activities that took place, the people who participated, and the meanings of what was observed from the perspectives of those observed” (p. 262). Creswell (2003) and Patton (2002)

identified two types of observations, each defined by the extent to which the researcher is involved in the setting being observed. Participation varies from being totally immersed in the setting, acting as a full participant, to complete separation from the activities, acting only as a spectator. Adler and Adler (1994) and Patton (2002) criticized the use of observational data only in research because of a lack of reliability and validity. Adler and Adler (1994) suggested that the researcher is susceptible to bias when she relies solely on observational data and recommended the use of additional methods of data collection. Crix (2004) pointed out additional criticisms including limited sampling, lack of objectivity, and ungeneralizable results. Creswell (2003) suggested the use of a guide or protocol for recording observational data that allows the researcher to record descriptive data, as well as personal thoughts.

Summary

Successful middle schools likely have larger student enrollments and more students per teacher than most middle schools, and offer students a variety of courses that allows them to explore their creativity (Petzko, 2004). Teachers in successful middle schools often are teamed together with common plan periods to enable them to develop interdisciplinary units of study (Georgiadi & Romano, 1992; Petzko, 2004;). Wiles (1995) reported that these middle schools put as their priorities improving student achievement, teaching academic learning skills, and providing personal development services to students.

Three studies (Henderson et al., 2005; Hoy et al., 2006; Hoy et al., 2002) found that successful schools maintain high academic standards and set demanding educational

goals. In addition, a positive school climate promotes higher academic achievement (Sweetland & Hoy, 2000), with climate described as the beliefs and feelings teachers have about their school (Weisel & Dror, 2006). Chan et al. (2008) said that school climate is related to teacher efficacy. The more efficacious teachers are, the more positive the school climate. Halverson et al. (2009) proposed that responsible teachers commit to and collectively work together to achieve established goals and expectations.

Goddard and Goddard (2001) found that CTE can predict individual teacher efficacy. Teacher perceptions of their own abilities are enhanced when CTE is high. Studies have shown a link between CTE and increased student achievement (Bandura, 1993; Goddard, Hoy et al., 2004; Goddard, LoGerfo et al., 2004; Parker et al., 2006). Schools with high levels of CTE experience higher student achievement.

Chapter III explains the methodology, data collection and evaluation procedures, and a description of the participants in the study.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the perceptions and beliefs of teachers about their students, student learning, and about teachers' beliefs of their collective abilities to achieve the task of school improvement. Investigated was one middle school serving students in grades six through eight in a school district of 14 elementary, five middle, two intermediate high schools, and one high school. Located near a large Midwestern city, this district, its schools, and the faculty were given fictitious names to provide anonymity. This chapter describes the method of inquiry, data collection and evaluation procedures, and provides a description of the participants in the study.

Theoretical Framework

Bandura's (1986, 2001) social cognitive theory has at its core the nature of human agency. Social cognitive theory explains human agency in terms of "direct personal," "proxy," and "collective" (Bandura, 2001, p. 1). Personal agency refers to the individual exercise of control over the events surrounding one's life. People anticipate the consequences of possible behaviors, set goals for themselves, and plan future events according to the outcomes of their past actions.

Proxy agency refers to the ability of people to influence others who may have access to needed resources or who have the power to act on their behalf for their benefit. People are able to recognize they often cannot control their environment alone and need to rely on the help of others to achieve desirable outcomes. Collective agency is the shared belief that people in an organization have the collective power to produce desired results. Bandura (2001) suggested that collective agency functions much like personal efficacy in that there is the belief in the group's ability to function as a whole, a shared drive to achieve a goal, and a belief that the goal is attainable.

A faculty's positive CTE belief has been shown to affect student academic achievement (Bandura, 1993). The most important constructs of CTE beliefs among teachers include mastery experience, vicarious experience, affective states, and social persuasion. In addition, studies have shown other factors related to and affecting CTE beliefs including collegial and collaborative relationships with other teachers, teacher responsibility, academic press, teacher commitment to organizational goals, individual teacher efficacy, teacher effort, teacher persistence, teacher trust in parents and school leadership, and positive attitudes about students and parents.

Limited studies have been conducted using only a qualitative method. I used the factors that affect, and are a result of, a high degree of CTE in a faculty to help develop the interview questions and the observation protocol. I wanted responses from teachers regarding their beliefs about their individual abilities to provide instruction as well as the school as a whole to achieve improved student learning. I also asked questions regarding their abilities to engage and motivate students, and their relationships with students, parents, and their colleagues. I was interested in their beliefs about their experiences in

the classroom and if they had positive beliefs about their colleagues classroom practices. Through the interview process and the observations I hoped to gain an understanding of the level of CTE beliefs the participants had about SMS. By observing their classroom practices I hoped to understand the level of effort, persistence, and commitment to academic improvement held by the participants.

Erbe (2000) and Georgiou and Tourva (2007) found that teachers' beliefs about student achievement influenced achievement. Positive beliefs about students and teacher abilities to influence academic improvement can positively affect academic outcomes. I used interviews and observations of volunteer teachers to gain an understanding of what the teachers at SMS believed about their students, student learning, and the abilities of the faculty to facilitate academic improvement.

Research Questions

This study sought to provide information about the beliefs of the faculty at SMS through the following questions:

1. What are the faculty beliefs about student learning?
2. What are the faculty beliefs about their students?
3. What are the faculty beliefs about the ability of the school to effect student academic improvement?
4. What other phenomena are not explained by Bandura's theory of collective teacher efficacy?

Qualitative Methods

This study was qualitative because "qualitative inquiry is particularly oriented toward exploration, discovery, and inductive logic. Inductive analysis begins with specific observations and builds toward general patterns" (Patton, 2002, p. 56). A qualitative study also, as Patton suggested, attempts to understand a program as a whole.

The study was inductive in nature in that it was immersed "in the details and specifics of the data to discover important patterns, themes, and interrelationships" (Patton, p. 41). Creswell (2003) defined a case study as one in which the researcher examines vigorously a program, organization, activity, or individuals. Data specifically explored in this study included historical records of SMS student achievement in math and reading, demographic descriptors of the student body and faculty, interactions among faculty members, faculty interviews, classroom observations, and various documents that provided a richer description of SMS.

This study could be considered action research because it aims to solve "specific problems within a program, organization, or community" (Patton, 2004, p. 221). Since I was an administrator at SMS, it was my goal to understand the beliefs of the teachers about their students and learning with the ultimate desire to apply what was learned to facilitate programs that improved teacher CTE. According to Patton (2004), "In action research, design and data collection tend to be more informal, the people in the situation are often directly involved in gathering the information and then studying themselves" (p. 221). The problem faced by the leadership at SMS was improving student achievement. Action research typically focuses on specific problems faced by an organization rather than the overall ineffectiveness, however.

Middle school teachers' perceptions of student learning and the collective abilities of their school to achieve student improvement were the focus. Reading and math achievement were two subject areas of particular interest to policy makers and curricular areas where SMS continued to show weaknesses. To obtain a rich description of the beliefs and perceptions of the faculty, I invited teachers from all core curriculum subjects to participate.

Participants

Teachers may have felt inhibited in their responses if I was their evaluating administrator; therefore the participants were not directly evaluated by me as part of their employment. This type of purposeful sampling "focuses on selecting information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study" (Patton, 2002, p. 230). Each participant was given a consent form outlining the purpose of the study; how the data would be collected, analyzed and reported; and how confidentiality would be protected. Names of participants, as well as names of locations, were changed to maintain confidentiality. All transcriptions and interview recordings were kept in a secure location at my personal residence and within one year of the completion of the study all recordings and transcriptions will be destroyed.

Eight faculty members (Ann, Barbara, Carol, Darla, Eve, Faye, Gail, and Hannah) participated in the study and represented the core subject areas (language arts, math, science, social studies). Participants varied in teaching experience from fewer than three years to more than 10 years.

Initial Interviews

Participants were interviewed face-to-face at a time and place of their choosing. In addition to gathering demographic information, I asked a series of 10 open-ended questions with the interview lasting approximately one hour. The questions were designed to elicit rich descriptions from the teachers regarding their beliefs of student learning and the abilities of their school's faculty to improve student learning. Each semi-structured interview was taped and later transcribed verbatim. Each written transcription was given to the appropriate participant to check for accuracy.

Observations

In addition to interviews, I observed all eight teachers' classrooms twice, each observation lasting approximately 45 minutes. Patton (2002) suggested that "the duration of observations will depend to a considerable extent on the time and resources available in relation to the information needs and decision deadlines of primary users" (p. 274), and that the observations will be built "around activities that have a kind of unity about them: a beginning, some middle point, and a closure point . . ." (p. 285). Since each period at SMS was 45 minutes I was able to see every class in its entirety. The focus of the observations was to gather information about how teachers behaved towards their students and the characteristics they displayed during instructional activities.

Observations of each participant followed the first interview. Specifically I looked for consistency between what was said in the interview and how the teacher behaved in the classroom. Patton (2002) identified this form of data triangulation as a means of

"comparing and cross-checking the consistency of information derived at different times and by different means within qualitative methods" (p. 559).

I took notes that described the setting, the activities, and the participants of those activities. I also observed the ways the teachers interacted and communicated with the students. I wrote field notes during each observation and recorded the information immediately afterward to capture details that might otherwise be forgotten. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) stated that "description calls for concrete details rather than abstract generalizations, for sensory imagery rather than evaluative labels, and for immediacy through details presented at close range" (p. 69). I later transferred the notes to a narrative document that was analyzed for emergent themes.

Patton (2002) identified advantages of using observations to study a phenomenon. First, the researcher is able to observe the phenomena in the context of real life situations where people interact with one another. By being discovery-oriented, the researcher does not need to rely on prior knowledge to conceptualize the setting. Direct observations allow the researcher to observe things that might otherwise go unnoticed and allow for the discovery of things that people may not have included in the interviews (Patton, 2002). During the observations I participated in no activity or discussion; I was simply an observer and attended to what I saw and heard within the classroom setting. For the observations to be accurate and reliable, I needed to be unbiased and open-minded as I took notes (Patton, 2002).

Follow-Up Interviews

Eight follow-up interviews of approximately one hour in duration were conducted within one month of the observations to clarify participant answers and to gather additional information that unfolded as the study progressed. The questions asked during these interviews were unique to each participant and were more conversational in nature. I did not tape or transcribe the sessions because they were meant for clarification purposes; rather, I relied on hand-written notes for recording the content of the interviews. Notes were then written in narrative form and analyzed for focus topics. I looked for consistency between what the teachers said in the first and second interviews. Participants selected the time and location of the interviews.

Documents

In addition to the initial interviews, follow-up interviews, and observations, I gathered relevant documents (e.g., lesson plans, activity outlines, and course syllabi) to get a more detailed and rich description of the teachers' classes and their teaching styles and beliefs. "Records, documents, artifacts, and archives-what has traditionally been called 'material culture' in anthropology-constitute a particularly rich source of information about many organizations and programs" (Patton, 2002, p. 293). I stressed to the participants that their confidentiality was honored and that what they told me in the interviews and anything that I saw in the observations would not be shared with any other staff member. Although I tried to disguise the identity of the teacher participants, some SMS faculty members may be able to identify the participants based on the criteria for participation.

Triangulation

To establish validity and trustworthiness in this study, I used several different data sources including interviews, observations, and teacher lesson and activity plans (Creswell, 1993). Adding to the reliability, I asked pre-determined questions during the initial interviews and an observation guide followed to help me examine classroom phenomena. Being an administrator in a public middle school, I attempted not to allow my observations and assessments of instruction or others' perceptions of instruction cloud the emergent nature of the data.

Data Analysis

I transcribed the tapes from the initial interviews and placed in narrative written form the notes from the follow-up interviews and classroom observations. Relevant statements from the written documents were placed on note cards and then the note cards were organized into categories that emerged through their review. First, I coded the data to identify main ideas and elements and then categorized them in a logical, analytical way. This "open coding" (p.143) allows the researcher to identify themes or ideas revealed by the data (Emerson et al., 1995). Second, I coded the data using a more focused purpose that allowed me to analyze data according to topics of specific interest (Emerson et al., 1995). Importantly, I reviewed and coded the data as to how it related to Bandura's (1993) CTE construct. "Qualitative coding is a way of opening up avenues of inquiry: the researcher identifies and develops concepts and analytic insights through close examination of and reflection on field note data" (Emerson et al., p. 151). By linking key data bits through categorization, I was able to more fully understand the

phenomenon being studied. Patton (2002) recommended that data gathered from observations, field notes, and other sources be organized using a manageable coding system. “Content analysis, then, involves identifying, coding, categorizing, classifying, and labeling the primary patterns in the data” (Patton, 2002, p. 463). Data regularities and differences emerged during the coding stage of analysis. The following categories emerged from the analysis of the data: teacher attitudes about students, parents, and colleagues; teacher work ethic; qualities of effective teaching; student achievement and assessment; academic press.

Findings from the data are written in narrative form with the intent of describing in rich detail teacher beliefs about student learning and the collective abilities of the faculty to positively influence student academic achievement. Special care was given when interpreting emerging themes that resonated across all data sources. “Interpretation means attaching significance to what was found, making sense of findings, offering explanations, drawing conclusions, extrapolating lessons, making inferences, considering meanings, and otherwise imposing order on an unruly but surely patterned world” (Patton, 2002, p. 480).

Summary

This qualitative study investigated the perceptions and beliefs of teachers about their students, student learning, and about teachers’ beliefs of their collective abilities to achieve the task of school improvement. Information regarding factors that influence CTE and that are evident in schools with high degrees of CTE were used to guide the interview questions and observations. Eight teachers were interviewed, twice observed in

the classroom setting, and interviewed once more. Data collected were analyzed and reported to provide a view into the beliefs and perceptions of the faculty at SMS that will be helpful to the leadership at SMS in facilitating school improvement.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

Saddleback Middle School (SMS) is one of five schools serving 6, 7, and 8th grade students in a suburban Midwestern community. SMS, situated about mid-town on one of the main streets of the city, serves approximately 500 students with 42 certified faculty members, 38 being teachers. The facility includes a gymnasium, cafeteria, and classrooms all of which have been assigned to teachers. Most of the facility is single story with one exception of a wing with two stories. On the property east of the main building is an eight room modular building used primarily for the storage of furniture and equipment; however, two rooms are designated as classrooms.

School begins at 8:00 a.m. each weekday and ends at 2:40 p.m. Students are served breakfast from 7:30 until 7:50 a.m., with lunch served between 11:30 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. A five minute passing period is allotted between each 45 minute class, and 25 minutes for lunch. Students store their belongings and school supplies in lockers located along the hallways.

Most students are bused to and from school; however, some live near enough to walk or ride their bikes. Some parents choose to provide their child's transportation.

The purpose of this study was to investigate teacher beliefs about students, student learning, and the collective abilities of the faculty to achieve school improvement. While teacher beliefs about students and learning can positively affect the academic success of schools (Erbe, 2000; Georgiou & Tourva, 2007), stereotyping students because of their family background can negatively affect the way teachers treat students. If a student is perceived by teachers to be unable or unwilling to learn, that student is already at a disadvantage academically. When teachers have preconceived attitudes about their students, their effort to positively affect student learning is diminished. Because SMS has not experienced academic improvement according to the mandates of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the following questions were investigated:

1. What are the faculty beliefs about the student learning?
2. What are the faculty beliefs about the students at SMS?
3. What are the faculty beliefs about the ability of the school to effect student academic improvement?

Descriptive information about SMS begins this chapter. Important to understanding the needs of the school and students is the understanding of the significance of test scores, socio-economic status (SES) and special education enrollment, student body ethnicity, and faculty statistics.

I studied eight core subject teacher participants through interviews and observations of classroom instruction. I gathered documents from the participants (e.g., sample classroom assignments and lesson plans) and obtained data from their experiences with peer observations. Data from the initial and follow-up interviews are presented using the original research questions as a lens for understanding.

Descriptive Data

Descriptive data about SMS were collected and described by me to help understand the distinctiveness of the school's student achievement, student body characteristics, and faculty characteristics. The academic data shows the achievement of SMS in comparison to the other four middle schools in the district. Data over several years show a consistent pattern of low student achievement at SMS. I collected 8th grade proficiency scores in reading and math, End of Instruction (EOI) proficiency scores in algebra I, Academic Performance Index (API) scores, SES percentages, special education enrollment, and faculty statistics. I included the descriptive charts throughout this chapter with the tables presented in the appendix.

Chart 1 and Table 1 (see Appendix) display 8th grade Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test (OCCT) proficiency scores in math from 2001-2009 for the district's five middle schools: Saddleback (SMS), Holbrook (HMS), Continental (CNMS), Oscar (OMS), and Clearwater (CMS). (A minimum score of 70% is required for proficiency.) The table's numbers represent the percentage of students who scored proficient or above with SMS having the lowest percentage of proficient scores in seven of the eight years. In the 2002-2003 school year, two schools (HMS and CNMS) had lower percentages of proficient students than did SMS. In 2003-2004, both SMS and HMS had 79% of eighth graders score at the proficient level or above; however, this was still the lowest among the middle schools. In five of the seven years when SMS had the lowest proficiency percentages, SMS had at least a 10 percentage point difference between it and the highest scoring school. The greatest difference came in the 2008-2009 school year when 65% of the SMS students scored proficient or above, while CNMS had 87% in this category. All middle

schools during this year experienced a drop in proficiency percentages. In all but one year, SMS was below the district average. Changes were made to the scoring of the test in 2008-2009 which likely resulted in the drop in proficient percentages for all five middle schools.

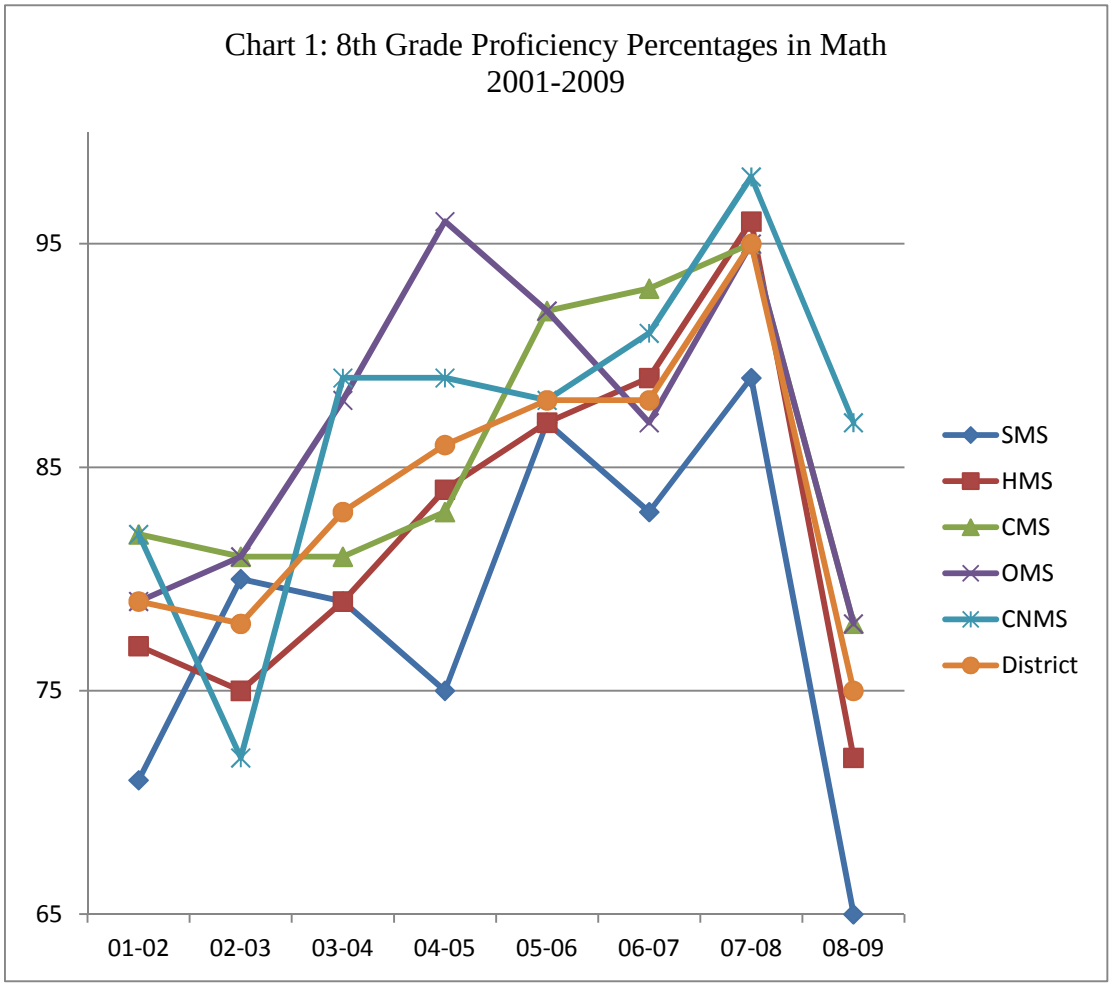


Chart 2 and Table 2 (see Appendix C) represent 8th grade OCCT proficiency percentages in reading for all five middle schools from 2001-2009. In three of these years (03-04, 06-07, and 08-09), SMS scored the lowest percentage of proficient students and five years scored lower than the district average. In two school years (01-02 and 04-05),

SMS' percentages were one point higher than the district average. CMS had the highest percentages in six of the school years, and tied in one year with OMS with the highest percentage of proficient students. HMS scored the lowest in proficiency percentages in four of the eight years. CNMS had the lowest percentage of proficient students in only one school year.

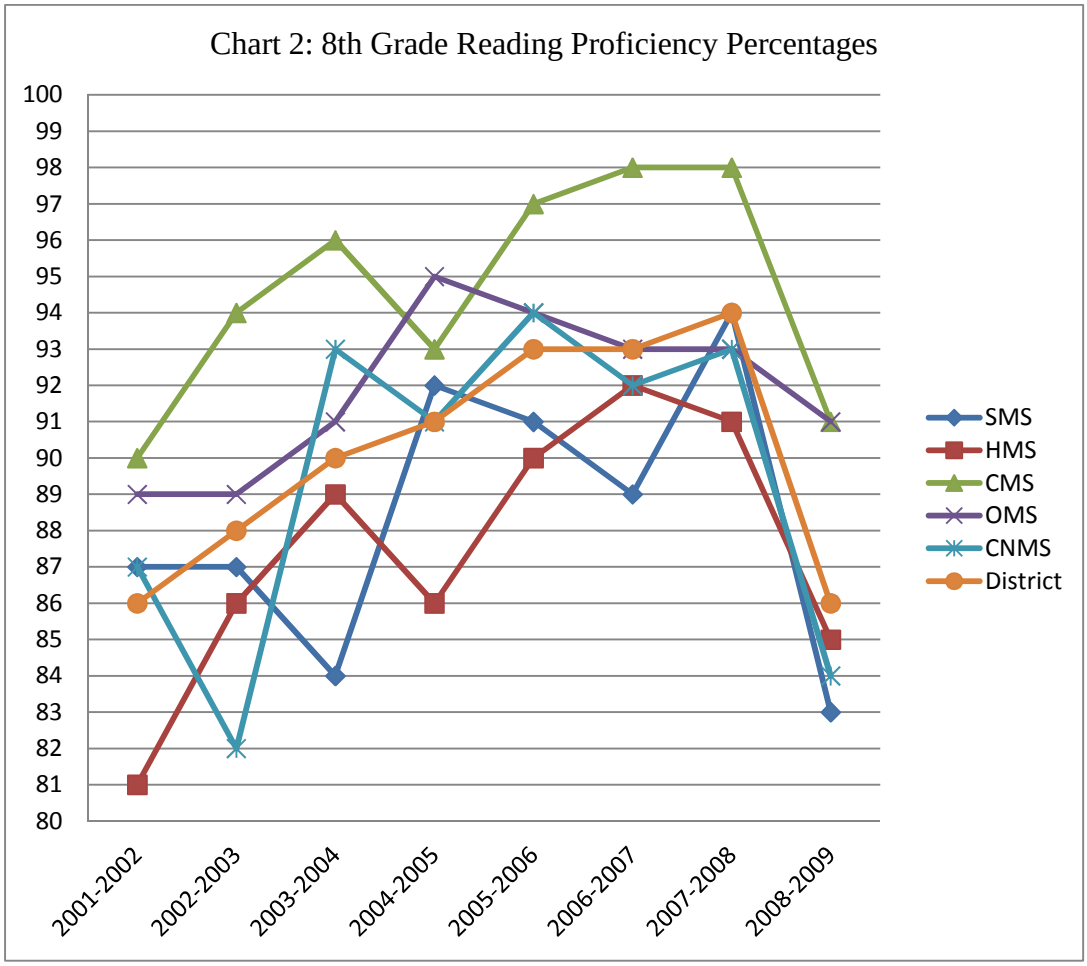
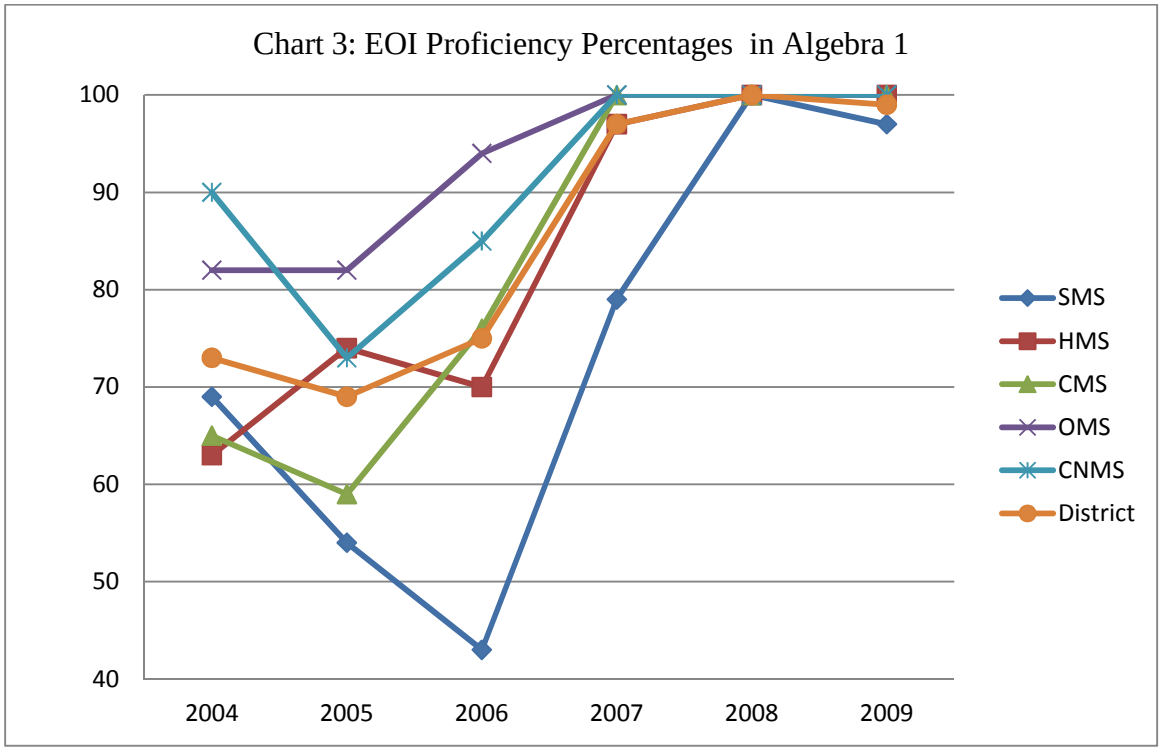


Chart 3, and Tables 3 and 4 (see Appendix C) represent proficiency percentages from the Oklahoma EOI in algebra 1. Of the six school years represented, beginning in 2004, SMS scored the lowest in proficiency percentages in four of those years. In only

one year, 2008, did all of the middle schools' students test at 100% proficiency. The data in Tables 3 and 4 (Appendix) also identify the number of students who participated in the EOI algebra I exam. From 2004 to 2007, HMS tested the most students while CMS tested the fewest. SMS has had the lowest percentage of proficient scores in four of the six years. In all years except 2008, SMS's percentage of proficient students was below that of the district.



The API is a score given to schools and districts as a measure of their performance and progress in a given year. The score given is meant to measure academic improvement with schools being held accountable for adequate yearly progress (AYP). For middle school accountability, API scores are figured using results from the state

mandated tests in reading and math, the EOI exam in algebra 1, and attendance rates. Chart 4 and Table 5 (see Appendix C) exhibit the API scores for all five middle schools from 2000 to 2009. The highest possible score is 1500, with all schools in the state expected to reach this number by 2014. SMS had the lowest API score in seven of the nine years, six of which were consecutive since 2003. In one year only, 2003, SMS scored above the district average. CMS had the highest API scores in five of the years, in one tying with CNMS.

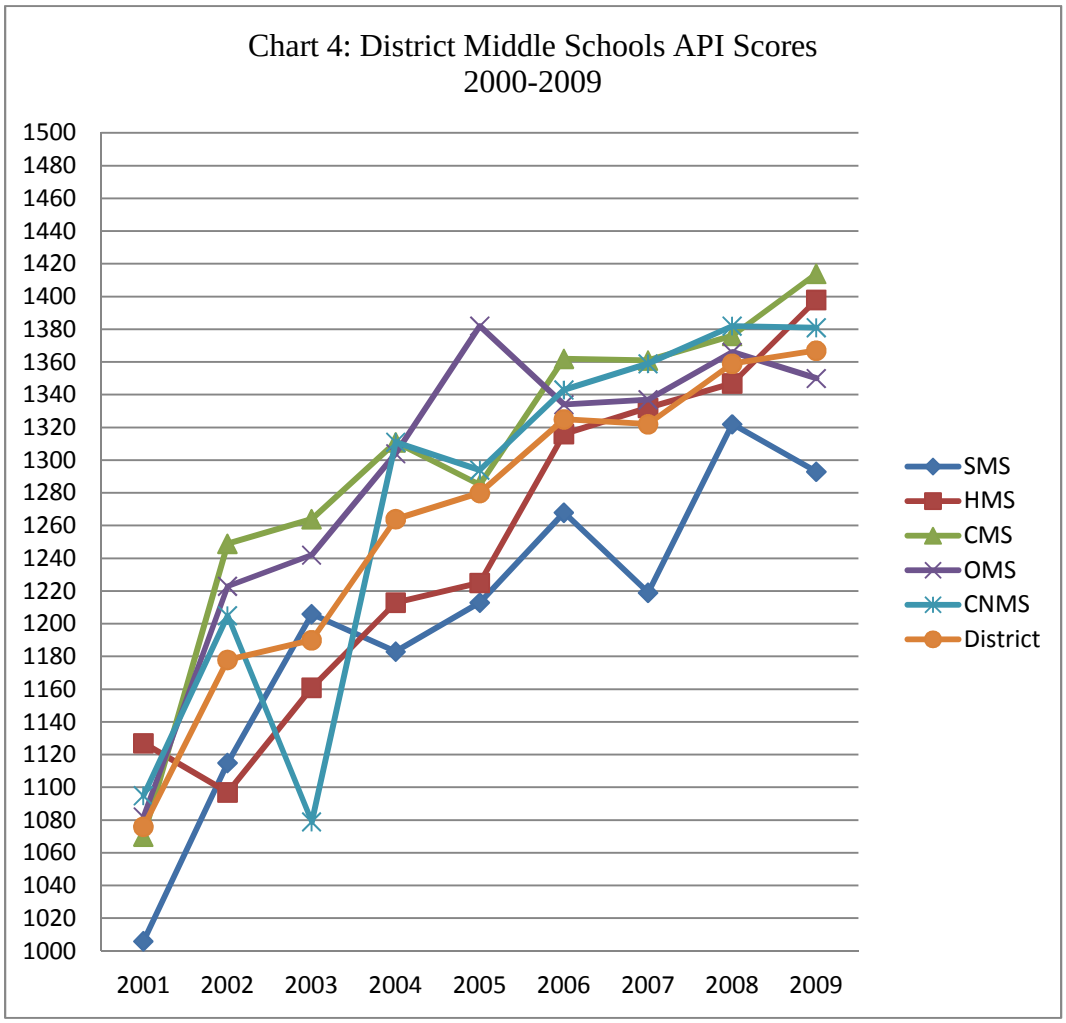


Chart 5 and Table 6 (see Appendix C) represent the district's middle school low SES population. Seven years are displayed beginning in 2002. The numbers represent

percentages of students who qualify for free or reduced-priced meals at school. SMS had the greatest percentage of low SES students in four of the seven years while HMS had the greatest percentage in two of the years and CNMS in one of the years. OMS had the lowest percentage in four of the seven years.

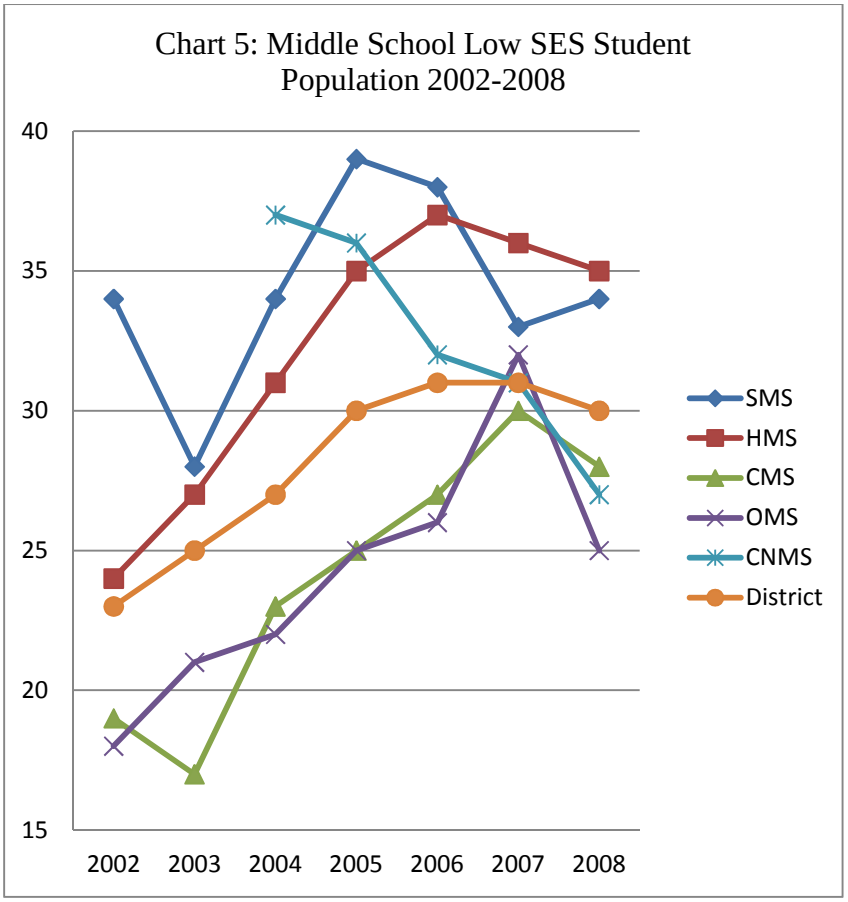


Chart 6 and Table 7 (see Appendix C) profile the district's middle school enrollment percentages in special education programs from 2005-2008. Four years, SMS had the highest percentage of students enrolled in special education programs. In all four of these years HMS had the second greatest percentage of students.

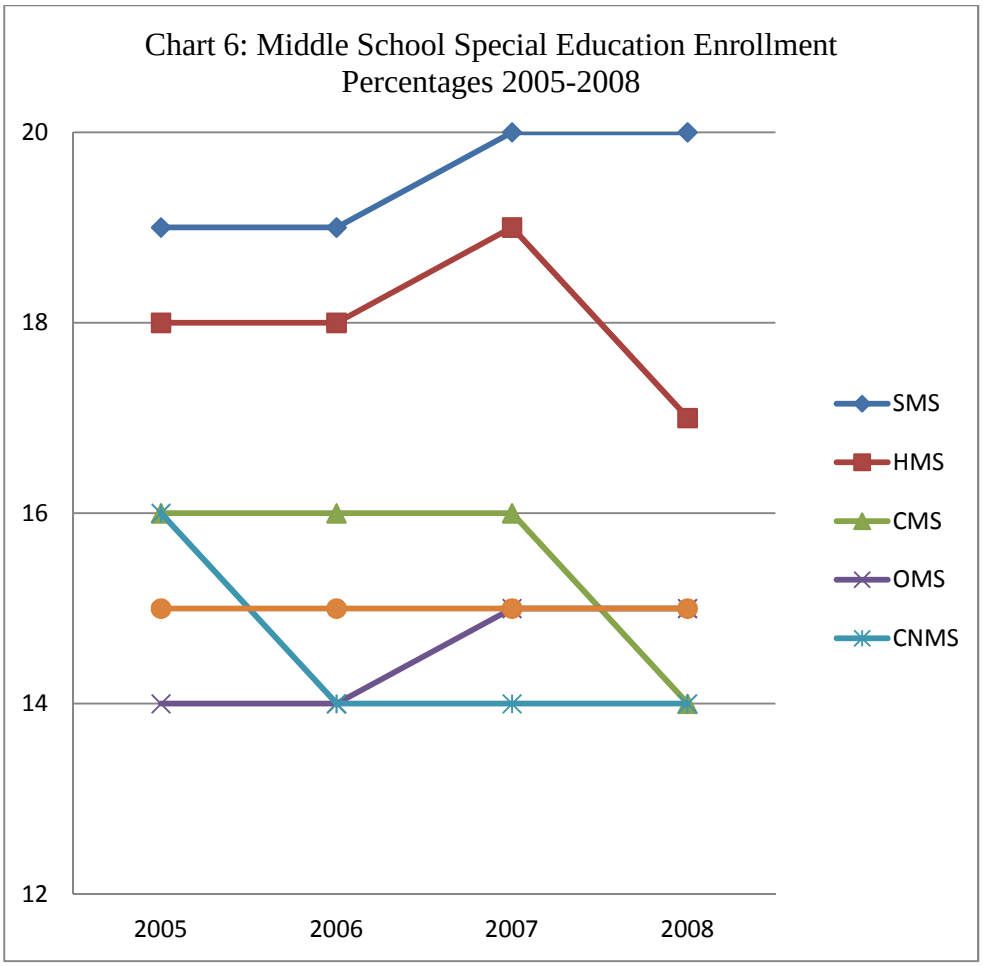


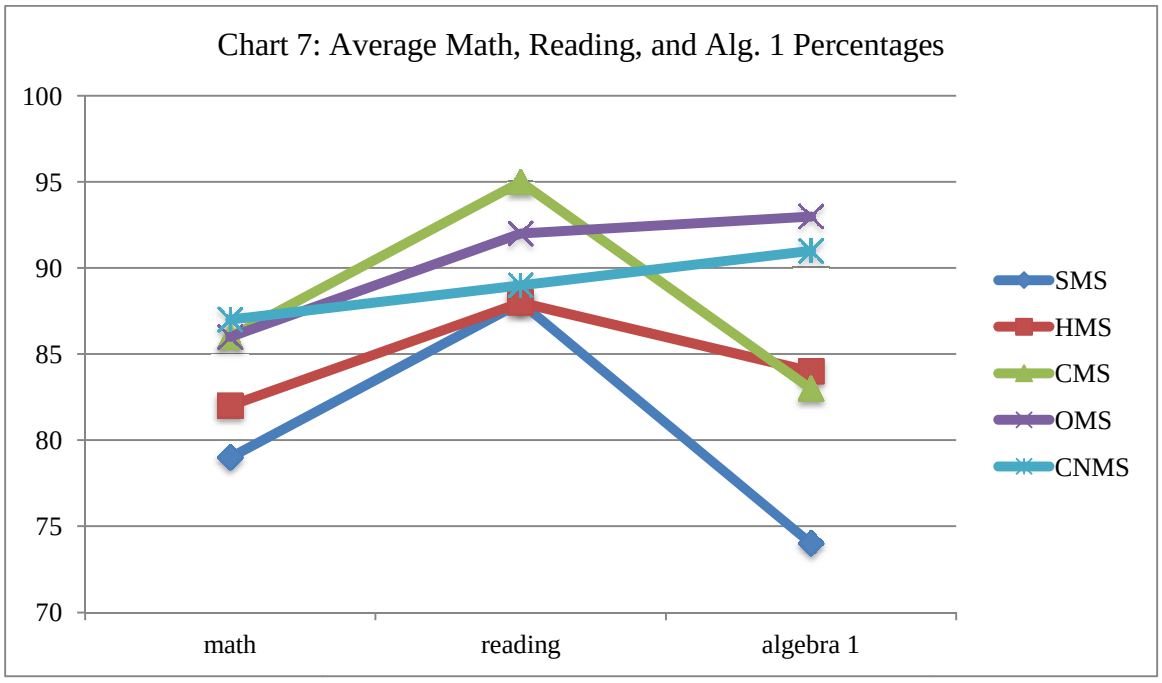
Table 8 (see Appendix C) displays the faculty demographics for these five departments: language arts, math, science, social studies, and special education. The category of "other" consists of elective teachers, counselors, media specialist, school nurse, and administrators. At seven teachers each, the language arts and special education departments are the largest. All language arts department members are female and only one has a graduate degree. Five hold elementary certification. The special education department consists of six females and one male with three of them elementary certified and two with graduate degrees. Five members each are in the math and social studies departments. Of the math department's two males and three females, two are elementary

certified. None of the math department members have graduate degrees. The social studies department consists of two males and two females. None have elementary certification and only one has a graduate degree. Of the science department teachers, all four are males and hold graduate degrees. None are elementary certified. The special education department consists of seven members, five female and two male. Three are elementary certified and two have graduate degrees.

In addition to core subjects, SMS provides elective classes to students. The "other" category consists of eight teachers and six non-teaching faculty. In this category are three males and 11 females, three are elementary certified and five hold advanced degrees. All teachers must be "highly qualified" to teach in the public schools. They are considered highly qualified if they have passed a state curriculum exam in their teaching field or if they have an appropriate combination of teaching experience and college credits in their teaching area. All teachers at SMS are considered highly qualified in their teaching field. One faculty member, the school nurse, does not have a teaching certificate and is not considered highly qualified. The certification areas noted in Table 8 refer to the number of curricular subjects identified on their teaching certificates they could possibly teach.

Table 9 (see Appendix C) contains averaged data from the previous tables to provide a better understanding of SMS's continued lack of academic performance compared to the other middle schools in the district. In all academic areas (math, reading, algebra 1), SMS has the lowest overall average of proficiency scores of all five middle schools. The only exception is in the reading proficiency average where SMS tied with HMS for the lowest average. SMS also has the lowest average API score. In addition,

SMS has the highest average percentage of special education students and of low SES students. Chart 7 displays the average percentages of students scoring proficient or above in math, reading, and algebra 1.



Interviews

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of what teachers at SMS believed about students, student learning, and about the ability of the school to promote student academic improvement. I invited all core subject teachers at SMS to participate in this study, with eight volunteering. Through the interview process the participants verbalized their beliefs about their students and learning as well as about their collective ability to facilitate improved student achievement.

Each participant was interviewed twice. The initial interviews, conducted before the classroom observations, lasted approximately one hour. Although given the opportunity to choose the time and location of the interview, all the teachers chose to remain on the school campus and interview in my office immediately following the school day. For descriptive purposes, teachers were identified as Ann, Barbara, Carol, Darla, Eve, Faye, Gail, and Hannah. I asked the teachers ten open ended questions to gain understanding of their beliefs about students, student learning, and the abilities of the faculty at SMS to achieve academic improvement. Interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim by me, and then each teacher received a copy of the transcription. I asked the participants to read through the transcript and to verify the information was accurately reported. None of the participants made any corrections or clarifications to the content of the interview transcripts. Five of the eight teachers returned the transcripts to me identifying grammar and spelling corrections.

The follow up interviews occurred after the classroom observations at a time and date convenient to the teachers. The interview questions emerged from the data collected from the first interview and the observations. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. Following are the descriptions that emerged from the teachers' comments from both interviews.

Beliefs About Students

All teachers expressed enjoyment being around children and a belief that teaching is a calling as opposed to being a career. They believed students at SMS need to be shown love and kindness and should feel that they belong and are important. All

participants indicated that many students at SMS suffer from poor quality home environments and, consequently, carry with them emotional baggage. The problems students have at home cause them to do poorly at school, and many students come to school hungry and poorly clothed.

All respondents mentioned the importance of parent support. Parents should impress on their children the importance of school and should be academic resources for them. Gail said "They don't have that snob factor, but they have lower expectations for themselves and I think part of that is environment. Not the teachers, but their (students') backgrounds and the kind of families that they do come from." According to several participants, parents of SMS students do not emphasize the importance of academics at home. This is particularly true of students who are doing poorly at school. Parents who do not put school as a priority in the home tend to have children who are unmotivated. Students are unmotivated to learn and do not put forth much effort to do their homework or class work. Many parents are divorced and work in low paying jobs. Their efforts are directed at putting food on the table at home, and students often feel burdened emotionally by the situations their parents must deal with. Referring to student home environments, Darla said, "I think there are a lot of single parents that are doing the best they can. Their kids are unsupervised . . . they're bringing themselves up. It's just really tough even with two parents, but when you are constantly thinking about am I going to have enough money to pay the rent and all the bills this month…it's really hard to overcome that driving force to remember oh, I've got to check all the kids' homework." In addition, she said, "I think some of them come to school hungry. I think some of them

come to school thirsty. I think that some of them come to school with situations that learning's the last thing on their mind."

It is commonly believed that students at SMS come from lower SES households and, because of that, do not know the efforts needed to succeed. Gail, in particular, indicated that SMS had "the basic poor kids" who come from families whose parents do not have the intellectual ability to get higher paying jobs, who do not emphasize education, and who often cannot help their children at home with their work because they themselves may have not finished high school. Further, she explained that, "The teachers, we've all been trained the same. There's not any difference in the teachers. I mean, you've got good teachers and bad teachers and some that are burned out and some that aren't, but there's no difference in the teachers, it's the kids." Those students who do poorly in school come from families who do not emphasize education. Gail also suggested the school's state test scores confirm the lower SES level of the students.

Carol and Hannah believed that students were often unsupervised at home and were left to raise themselves and single parents, especially, may not have the time or energy to help with homework in the evenings. Carol and Gail said that low achieving students often have lower expectations set for them by their parents. When I asked Gail to describe a typical SMS student, she said, "Our kids are basically lower income. I'm sure we have middle income but we don't have that really high income that sets off the difference."

Eve said, "I think we have a very unique demographic. I think we have blue collar worker type kids, we have middle management kids, and unfortunately we have some that just don't have work at all. When they started changing the boundaries around we

lost the affluence and we were left with the transient people, who were renters, not home owners. We got a larger and larger percentage of our school population became those people." Darla added that students with blue collar working parents are harder to teach, but also said that students at SMS are no different than students at the other middle schools in the district.

Gail said that some students are "just downright not smart, I mean, you know we've got some kids in our classes that are borderline mentally retarded and we're expecting them to do this higher level math." In addition she said, "Even kids with average to above average intelligence struggle, or don't always get it, and we're expecting a lot of these kids who don't think, they see black and white, they don't see any deeper." Those students she suggested would never achieve to a higher level of learning and generally hold other students back in the classroom. Teachers must accommodate low achieving students so much that the rest of the students are not sufficiently challenged. Referring to special education students she said, "If they didn't have a calculator they'd be clueless."

I asked Ann about the academic challenges students at SMS faced. She replied, "I think there is less expectations on those students who, we always know are special ed…and I say that as…that's kind of the idea, well, they're already special ed…so I can't bring them up here, it's almost an impossible dream to bring that academic student up there, so how are we as teachers really going to get into that nitty gritty and really do what that student really needs me to do. Do I really have time to do what you need me to do? Because I've got all these other kids in here. And sometimes I've got these kids who

have learned how to fail and are good at it, and I really don't know how to motivate them."

She said that she had heard other teachers complain about having certain students in their classrooms because they would likely not do well academically. They did not want that to reflect on their teaching practices. She heard one teacher say that special education students cannot learn and that classes would be better off without them. Ann said, "The premise behind inclusion was let's not stereotype, let's not point out…I don't think that's a reality. I think that's the intention but I don't see that as reality. I don't see that as a reality anywhere."

"So you still see, maybe some faculty members at this building who still have stereotypical attitudes towards special education students? What would some of those stereotypes be?" I asked.

"Yes….most definitely. I've heard the regular ed teachers say things like well, my test scores would be better if I didn't have all the special ed kids in that class. There's an implication in the word co-teaching that says, maybe it's an impression that I hear, in how I'm listening. But to me it's like, well, that's my co-teaching class. And so that's supposed to be the explanation for why these test scores are low, or why there's discipline issues in that classroom." Ann spoke about comments she had heard other teachers make, "Sometimes there is the reference about the economically disadvantaged… we can't expect as much of economically disadvantaged students. The economically disadvantaged students are the reason we can't get our scores up." She had heard similar comments being made about Hispanic students as well. Teachers, Ann

suggested, feel frustrated because they do not know how to teach students with special needs. Gail also spoke about the negative effects special education students had on academic achievement, suggesting that low achieving special education students should not be placed in the regular classroom because they could not meet the same expectations as regular education students.

Hannah complained that students did not have good work ethics, lacked empathy for other people, and did not have a spark for learning. Barbara and Eve added that SMS students had not learned to respect other people.

Beliefs About Student Learning

I asked teachers about student learning, specifically, what the teachers believed about how students learn and the responsibility teachers have in the learning process. Probing questions were asked about teacher assessment of student learning.

Eve said, "I would think at some level you would have to say that the teacher's success is tied to the student success, or at least their understanding of the basic concepts and I'm not sure that testing them may fully test whether or not they fully understand the concepts." When probed, most teachers said if students did not perform well in class, then the way their achievement was measured should be changed. Eve went on to explain that students do not prove their understanding of a subject or concept simply by answering questions on a test. She said, "My personal definition of student achievement would be if a student can grasp, throughout the course of a semester of a year, four or five basic concepts in the subject matter and really understand what they are and how to apply them to different situations." Most respondents mentioned that student learning must be

measured in multiple ways using a variety of activities to get a real indication of their abilities.

Darla emphasized that teachers sometimes used formal evaluations, such as chapter exams, too frequently and, to get a more realistic idea of academic abilities, teachers must use less formal means. She said, “Not every assessment has got to be a summative assessment, it can be a formative one. We can make them successful in that way, and I think that we need to.” When I asked her for examples, she suggested teachers assign more hands-on activities and projects, and “just because they can’t put it down on paper doesn’t mean they’re not learning.”

Ann also commented on student achievement by saying, “For me an assessment of student achievement is…can they really communicate to me that they know, what they are supposed to know? Can they verbally and can they in writing express intelligently, and maybe that’s a wrong word to use, can they express how they feel, what they think, can they let me know what they know and how they understand something? I don’t think a test score is a good assessment of whether or not a student knows something.”

I asked the teachers about the role they played in their students’ learning. They provided information about the characteristics of a good teacher and the behaviors teachers need to exhibit to help improve student learning. Eve said that an effective teacher should be “positive and happy and enjoy life in general. I’m willing to bet that if they have any skills, any ability to teach at all then they’re going to be effective. If they’re a good people person I think they could be an effective teacher without seeing them in the classroom.”

Faye said, “Teachers should be enthusiastic and caring. If you don’t like children you don’t need to be here. A teacher needs to be organized, and knowledgeable of the curriculum and the policies and procedures. She should be consistent in everything.”

Hannah indicated that “to be effective you have to show kids you have empathy for them. That you care for them as a person not as just a student. To be effective you have to know your subject, whatever it is you’re teaching, you have to have a background, an adequate background for it, and that’s where experience comes in.” Gail added that effective teachers were “flexible, not real rigid. Teachers need to be willing to go outside the box.” Most teachers believed it is important to be prepared for class and to provide students with a variety of activities to help with motivation. They said that students are more likely to be motivated if they have a variety of stimulating activities in which to participate. When probed, they said classroom activities and assignments needed to be applicable to the students’ lives. Hannah added that reading assignments should be about things students like to do and that students would not engage if the reading assignments were not interesting to them.

All interviewees saw student motivation as the major obstacle to academic success. Although they believed that it is the teachers’ job to motivate students, they said they were often unable to do it. Barbara indicated that she often allowed students to work in groups together and that they responded well to that. She regularly liked to try new techniques in the classroom to entice her students and believed that all teachers would benefit from having additional training in classroom instruction.

Darla indicated that teacher effort was important to student learning. “I think part of the problem with teachers is they are overwhelmed. I think the other part is that it takes effort and some don’t want to make the effort. I think sometimes we don’t try because it would mean more effort and if you put forth the effort then you might care about the students,” she said. She admitted that it was difficult sometimes for teachers to develop new activities and lesson plans, and often teachers do not want to put forth that effort. She suggested that teachers at SMS do not consider the importance of student learning and achievement when developing their teaching lessons.

All participants said that teachers should be knowledgeable in their content areas. Eve added that teachers needed to teach life skills as well, such as time management and cooperation with others. Ann, Barbara, and Darla indicated the importance of remediating students when they do not understand subject content. Carol admitted that she struggled with remediating students during the day because she did not have the time to do it in class. “Students who do not understand concepts should attempt to get help before or after school with their teacher, or their parent should provide tutoring at home. It is difficult to move forward with objectives for the subject and remediate students at the same time.”

According to most of the interviewees, the state-required core curriculum tests (CRT) did not assess students’ knowledge adequately. Most teachers did not think these exams indicated what the students knew. They believed teachers no longer had the freedom to be creative because they were required to teach only test related information. I asked Gail what she thought about the required state exams. She replied, “I think we need to teach to the test, and I hate saying that but if there’s not spelling on there it’s not quite

as important as it used to be. One of the big things we don't pass is research. Research has nothing to do with the way they ask the test questions. We need to forget about teaching them research and teach them how to pass that test."

Gail went on to say that the students at SMS had learned how to be unsuccessful, through years of practice at the elementary school level. Students who did poorly at the elementary level would likely do poorly at the middle school level as well.

Beliefs About SMS

I asked participants about their beliefs concerning the ability of SMS to improve student learning. Every teacher said that SMS had the ability to improve academic achievement; however, most indicated they were doing everything they could and did not understand why the students still lagged behind the other middle schools in the district. All but Barbara indicated that the faculty faced many obstacles to academic improvement, including student ability and family characteristics.

Ann and Hannah added that SMS had teachers needing to retire because they put little effort into their teaching. Ann said, "it is so blooming hard to fire a bad teacher that all of us are paying the price; if a teacher is confronted and has to make changes, there is such a rig marrow, that a principal or an administrator has to go through. There are people in classrooms who are not teaching." Hannah indicated for students to experience real improvement in achievement, faculty would have to be replaced. She said, "I can tell you that I really felt out of place my first year here. Teachers don't really do things together. There doesn't seem to be a lot of general cohesiveness. It just seems everyone kind of stays in their own room and don't have a lot of interaction with other people."

She went on to say that, “I’ve voiced several of my opinions what I thought we could or couldn’t do and it was not well received so I think that if you truly want to see if it’s the staff that makes the difference then I think the staff needs to be dispersed and other people need to be brought in.” Darla said that some teachers at SMS were lazy and content with the status quo. They saw no reason to change what they did in the classroom and were not encouraged to change by the administration of the school. Those teachers had no fear of losing their jobs and thus did not put forth any effort to improve.

All participants spoke about the importance of teacher collaboration. They said that spending time talking and sharing ideas with other teachers was important to improving their teaching skills. When I asked what they considered to be collaboration, Faye said that it meant sharing things such as student work sheets and classroom supplies. Ann, Barbara, Carol, Darla, Eve, and Hannah said that collaboration was sharing ideas about how to teach certain concepts to students. All respondents said they did not have time to meet and collaborate with other teachers outside of the school day. In particular, Barbara, Carol, and Eve mentioned they had other work and family obligations that kept them from spending more time collaborating with others outside of the school day.

I asked the teachers what they thought about professional learning communities and how collaborating with other teachers helped them. Eve said, “I think in theory it’s probably a good thing, but theories are always those pie in the sky kind of things. When you get down to actually implementing it, you’ve got to convince them that it’s going to work.” Ann answered my question by saying, “Collaboration is one of those things that is expected of us right now….it’s going to have to become a new habit. And I think some of

the reasons it's not embraced readily is because every year there's something new that's coming down from the ivory towers, you know? There's a lot of time where there's lack of trust with what comes down from the powers that be."

Darla said that most teachers wanted to be in their own classrooms and not be bothered by anyone. They did not want to spend time collaborating with other teachers. She went on to say that collaboration took effort, most teachers did not want to put forth effort, and they would not collaborate with others unless they were forced. Eve said, "It's hard for us to find time. I guess we could sit down and we could say we're going to do it, but with my kids' stuff on the weekends and them getting more involved with high school stuff, it's just difficult." She went on to say, "We share stuff back and forth all the time…worksheets or notes. We've discussed the possibility of trading off teaching particular parts of the subject matter because one of us might be better at it. It's fun to plan that kind of stuff." I asked Eve if they had ever traded classes, as she had suggested. They had not.

Gail added that although collaboration was good, she did not think her input would matter to her colleagues who, she said, were set in their ways and not willing to change. She said, "PLC's (professional learning communities) could be a lot better. The stuff discussed is not practical for my classroom. The department teachers get together every Friday, but I'm too busy to go. Mainly, they already know what they're going to do because they've done it for 30 something years. They don't change their plans one year to the next, so I thought, I don't have time to just sit there."

Barbara answered by saying, “I collaborated with other teachers if I came across a good website or things that would work well in the classroom; we’d email each other just so we could all use it. We didn’t necessarily have a meeting.” She added, “I think with our professional learning groups, that’s where we’re making some changes. I think coming together as a department and being able to ask different ones how are you teaching this because you’re having more success…what are you doing that I’m not doing?”

Faye indicated that she was not pleased with the district’s PLC initiative, “I’m not sure if the formality that they’re attacking it with now is all that necessary. You know, it just is a real pain. I just don’t like it.”

In addition to PLC’s and collaboration, I asked the teachers about the importance of professional development (PD) to effective teaching. Most teachers indicated in their responses that most PD was not valuable to them. Barbara said, “You want the time that you spend doing professional development to be productive and applicable to what you’re doing. We want to be able to learn something and take it back to our own classrooms.”

Darla responded by saying, “I think there’s always room for improvement and I think sometimes I’m not willing to go above and beyond, and I need to. I sat in a summer class at TU for one week; it was free. I was there with one other teacher.”

“Did any of your department members go as well?” I asked.

“No, I think part of our problem is that we think that we’ve gotten as much education as we need,” Darla replied.

I asked Eve what she thought about professional development. She said, “The district stuff…rarely does that have an impact on what I do in the classroom. I take one or two little snippets and I might try to work those in somehow, but overall, I think it’s probably true of most teachers, we go and we do it because we’re supposed to, but we’d all rather be in our classroom and work.”

Ann responded to my question by saying, “Professional development activities need to be applicable to what we are doing in the classroom. If I have to hear one more time about brain based learning, I’m going to go crazy! I know kids have brains and they think differently, give me some real activities to use!”

I asked the teachers what the school could do differently to affect student learning positively. Most indicated that the school was doing everything it could. Hannah said, “We will do whatever it is, but you’ve got to tell us. You’ve got to show us. You can’t just say you’ve got to change. You have to give us relevant information. You want us to change, tell us the script, tell us exactly what you want us to do.”

Observations

Classroom observations occurred after the initial interviews. I observed each of the eight teachers two times, each observation lasting 45 minutes. The teachers were asked to choose the class period and date for each observation. Only one teacher, Barbara, expressed a preference, and that was for a class she did not want me to observe. All other teachers said they had no time or date preference. Arrangements were made prior to each observation and none of the observations were spontaneous.

The observation guide identified specific teacher behaviors: teacher actions before class began, routine activities performed by the teacher, lesson objective, classroom activity/assignment, methods of presentation, and teacher response to student behavioral concerns. Other CTE behaviors observed were teacher perseverance, preparation, effort, and attitude.

Behaviors Before Class

All of the teachers stood in the hallway outside of their classrooms during the intervals between classes. I stood nearby and many of the teachers were drawn to speak to me instead of to the students entering the room or passing by. Three teachers spoke to their students as they entered the classroom, usually welcoming them to class or reminding them to bring their books to class. When Ann tried to speak to her former students in the hallway, they seemed pleased she acknowledged them and replied to her. Those teachers not speaking to students spoke to me instead, almost ignoring students as they entered the room or passed by. None of the teachers spoke to other faculty members in the hallway.

Routine Activities

All of the teachers checked attendance within the first seven minutes of class. Ann, Barbara, and Faye required students to engage in an academic assignment, known as bell work, during the time they completed routine procedural responsibilities at the beginning of the class period. Bell work is meant to get the students on task immediately at the beginning of class, and the assignment is usually related to the previous day's

lesson. It is meant to take only a few minutes to complete and is usually an assessed activity.

Six of the eight teachers wrote the assignments or activities for the students for the week on a chalk or white board at the front of the room. Only one of the eight, Barbara, included the academic objective with the activity/assignment.

I observed Barbara and Eve once each during their second period, a period five minutes longer than the others because the announcements were read by the principal over the intercom each day at the beginning of class. The announcement time included a moment of silence, the Pledge of Allegiance, and general school information. Barbara modeled the expected behavior during the moment of silence and the pledge; however, Eve spoke to students during each of these, discussing with students missing assignments or make-up work. Students in Eve's classroom also spoke to each other during the moment of silence and Pledge.

During the first few minutes of each class, all participants allowed students to borrow pencils or pens and paper from other students if they needed to and to prepare their materials for the daily activity. The teachers typically began with the daily lesson or activity immediately following taking attendance. Approximately seven to eight minutes were needed to take care of the routine activities before classes formally began.

Lesson Objectives, Activities, and Assignments

Darla and Hannah began their classes by briefly explaining to the students what the activities would be. Darla explained to her students that they needed to copy the information displayed on the whiteboard. Hannah advised her students that they would be

adding to their notes they had begun the previous day. None of the teachers began class or at any time during class advised the students what the objective of the lesson was or explained what activities were planned for the entirety of the period. In most of the classrooms I observed, I needed several minutes to determine the lesson's objective. Once the teacher spoke for a while I was able to ascertain what the objective was, but was unable to determine what was done the day before or how the day's lesson applied to future lessons.

Of the 16 classroom sessions, 10 included a teacher-made worksheet or an assignment from a workbook or textbook. In only five class periods did the teachers lecture or lead a class discussion. Two class periods were dedicated solely to grading homework papers. In one class each, Carol and Gail used the entire period to review the homework from the previous day. Students were asked to check their own papers while the teacher presented the answers. Students were allowed to ask questions with the teachers providing explanations. Students then passed their assignments to the front of the rows and then to the teachers.

Both lessons I observed in Darla's classroom included the use of hands-on manipulatives to support the objective, with the teacher modeling the expected student behavior. All students participated in these activities and seemed excited about the opportunity to work with their hands. Darla provided all materials to the students requisite for the project and demonstrated the activity as she gave verbal directions to the students.

Eve, during one class period, attempted to implement a student Socratic Circle. The objective was to allow students to question each other about the current text chapter and take notes on the information discussed. Students were arranged in two concentric circles, with approximately 10 in each circle. Each student in the inner circle was to ask questions, one student at a time, to another student within that circle to offer an answer to that question. Students in the outer circle were to take notes based on the student discussions. After about 10 minutes, the students switched circles to repeat the procedures. Eve acted as a moderator to keep the students on task. She later told me that was the only time she had used a Socratic Circle and that she wished she had spent more time explaining to the students the procedures and allowing them to prepare. The students seemed confused about the activity and appeared to not know the subject well as their questions posed to each other were very simplistic.

Faye, during one period, put students into groups of five and six and gave them a review sheet to work on together in preparation for an upcoming test. Many students were not engaged in the activity and did not appear to be participating within their groups. During the final 10 minutes of class, she allowed the students to play a game that was not related to the subject. It appeared to be a time filler until the end of the period. During her second observed class period, students used colored pencils to decorate a map of Asia, identifying specific geographical locations. They were allowed to use their textbooks as resources and to work in pairs. Faye occasionally walked around the room speaking to students and checking their progress. She sat behind her desk for the majority of the class period and appeared to be checking email on her computer and grading papers.

The assignments given to students out of the textbooks included guided reading questions at the end of each section of the chapter being read, review questions at the end of the chapters, and vocabulary terms to be defined. Some assignments provided to the students included both teacher made and publisher made worksheets and maps. Occasionally a few of the teachers allowed students to play subject related games on computers. Graded assignments typically included daily bell work, textbook assignments, worksheets, quizzes, and exams. One teacher (Carol) assigned grades for what she referred to as "school work" which included book assignments, classroom behavior, and class preparedness. Part of the students' grades came from whether or not they brought their notebooks, paper, books, and writing utensils to class.

Occasionally, a few teachers assigned group projects requiring students to work together to complete tasks. Typically, though, the groups were given the same type of assignments individual students were given, such as chapter work or review worksheets. Only Barbara required students to work together on a regular, almost daily basis. At the end of the class periods, none of the teachers reviewed the day's activities or lessons, or previewed the next day's activities. Faye and Hannah finished the lessons before the end of the period and had an average of five to seven minutes left. Students were allowed to read their library books in Hannah's classes, or have free time in Faye's classes.

Presentation Methods

A variety of teaching methods was observed. Most of the teachers gave verbal instructions and explanations to students during the first half of class, with the second half being dedicated to student independent practice. During the verbal instructions,

teachers typically walked at the front of the room, and occasionally down the aisles between the rows of students. Assignments usually included a book assignment or a worksheet. When students had questions about the independent work, they either raised their hands or simply called out to the teacher. Normally, the teacher went directly to the student's desk to help. On one occasion, Eve sat behind a podium and lectured, with students filling out a teacher made outline-style worksheet. As she lectured she verbally cued the students to fill in a particular part of the outline. She would say things like, "This is important to know," or "This will probably be on your test," to identify to the students when they should include something in their outline.

Carol led a review game during one class period with the use of the Smart Board. Review questions were written on the Smart Board with multiple choice answers. Students were equipped with signs indicating choice A, B, or C. Students raised the sign of the answer they thought was correct. A couple of students in the back of the room paused briefly before raising their signs to see what other students answered. When they saw what the majority of students indicated, they too raised that particular letter sign. Students received extra credit points for correctly answering the review questions. Carol did not address the students who occasionally did not raise a sign indicating an answer. I was not sure if they simply did not have enough time to answer the question or if they did not know the answer at all.

Teacher Responses

Most teachers appeared to be quite courteous to students when speaking with them, saying "please" and "thank you" often. When students answered verbal questions

in class, the teachers used phrases such as “good job,” and “that’s right.” The students who did not answer correctly were not scolded or treated poorly, but they were rarely given the opportunity or encouraged to figure out the correct answer. Typically, the teacher went to another student for the correct answer.

When a student was not able to verbally answer a question in class posed by Gail, she asked him if he was feeling all right, insinuating that because he did not know the answer he must be sick. She asked the same student a few minutes later if he was awake because he appeared to be not paying attention. To another, who appeared to be confused about a procedure, the teacher said, “Every day is a new day for you” and then laughed.

At one point, Gayle offered extra credit to any student who could answer a specific question that another student had asked about an off subject topic. The teacher went on with the lesson, while one boy feverishly looked in his textbook for the answer to the extra credit question. The off-task student was never re-directed and later scolded for not being focused on her instruction.

Most teachers replied to student questions immediately and asked for student input during the class periods observed. On one occasion, though, Carol appeared to ignore one student’s emphatic plea for help on the assignment. Specifically, the class was reviewing the previous day’s assignment. After allowing one student to use the Smart Board to explain the problem, another student exclaimed that he did not understand at all. Carol quickly went over the problem again. As she attempted to move on in the lesson, the student again said he did not understand. At that point, Carol told him to read the text, and went on with the lesson.

There were no major behavioral disruptions during the observed class periods. The only behavioral issues addressed by the teachers involved students not doing their work, not being attentive, or talking to other students when they had an assignment on which to work. Most teachers verbally corrected these students. Students who were off-task but not disruptive were ignored by the teachers because they were quiet and did not draw attention to themselves. All teachers had students in their classes who sat quietly at their desks, but did not participate in the activity or engaged verbally with classroom discussions. Barbara and Darla spoke to students who were not engaged in the lesson to try to gain their attention. When identified, the teachers would verbally direct specific questions to them about the lesson or would be more direct and ask them to be attentive to what the class was doing.

During one observation, Hannah had numerous students who finished their assignments before the end of the class period. As the students became restless, she told them to get out something to read, referring to their library books. She directed a couple of students to borrow books from her collection in the bookshelves at the back of the room. After a few minutes she seemed to get frustrated with those students who were not reading. She verbally corrected them several times by saying “I’ve been nice, but you haven’t done your part,” or “You need to get reading.”

Collective Teacher Efficacy Behaviors

Four teacher behaviors associated with CTE were included in the classroom observation guide: perseverance, preparation, effort, and attitude. Most teachers, when faced with adversity in the classroom, were able to refocus and continue with classroom

activities. Minor student disruptions were verbally corrected by the teachers quickly. Carol and Faye completely ignored some negative student behaviors. They each had several students off-task, not engaged in the activity, or talking to other students and not attentive. These behaviors went on without any acknowledgement from the teacher. Gayle and Hannah corrected the same students several times during the same class period. The students were talking to each other when they were supposed to be working on a worksheet or reading assignment. They were reminded repeatedly to not talk or to work on their assignment.

Darla, during one observation, was unable to get her Smart Board to work properly. After only a couple of minutes of failed attempts, she continued with the lesson using the white board at the front of the room. During the second observation, she mentioned that she was not an expert with the Smart Board yet and asked the students to help her with it. One student volunteered to help her with the Smart Board and was able to get it to function properly.

All teachers appeared to be well prepared for the lessons taught during the observed class periods. One exception, however, was Eve when introducing the Socratic Circle to her students. She admitted that she had not spent enough time introducing the concept to her students. All of the teachers were asked to provide me with copies of their lesson plans for a two week period of time. Five of the eight teachers did so. Only one, Carol, had detailed plans that included copies of the notes she provided to her students via the Smart Board. The other four teachers, Barbara, Darla, Gail, and Hannah, included in their plans the topic or objectives of the lessons and the activities for the class periods. For instance, Barbara indicated one day that the topic of the lesson was solving equations

using addition and subtraction with the activity being an assignment from the textbook. Most of the daily entries in the lesson plans for the four teachers followed that format.

All of the teachers appeared to put effort into teaching during the observed periods. They completed routine procedures within five to seven minutes and were prepared with the required materials for the student activities. They used the majority of the class periods for lecture, classroom discussion, and student activities.

Faye did not present any new subject related information to the students in either observed classes. One class worked on a map, identifying cities, countries, and geographical sites. The other class period students worked in groups to answer questions from a review worksheet. In the latter, students had about 15 extra minutes at the end of the period without anything to do. During this time student talking increased and some students got out of their seats and walked around the room.

Gail, during both class periods, reviewed with the students the assignment from the previous day. After the reviews, students were given an additional assignment out of the book. The teacher was often distracted and, at one point, asked the students if they knew what time the class period ended.

Hannah, during one class, led discussions with the students about short stories they had read from hand outs she had given them the previous day. When they finished reviewing those stories, about 10 minutes remained in the period during which they were directed to read their library books. The other observed class activity consisted of the students grading a worksheet assigned the previous day. After grading their own papers and submitting them, they were given an additional worksheet to complete. Most of the

activities for students in all of the classes I observed involved some sort of worksheet or book assignment.

Only three teachers, Ann, Barbara, and Darla, presented material to the students for a majority of each observed period, with any independent student activity assigned in the last few minutes of class. Completion of these assignments was expected to be done at home and returned the next day. The teachers were not clear as to whether or not students would have time the next day to work on the assignment in class.

Classroom Environment

All but one of the observed teachers had decorated the walls of their classrooms with samples of student work and with subject related posters and bulletin boards. Only Faye's classroom had completely barren walls with no decorations of any kind. The only item on the wall in addition to a white board was a small one foot by two chalkboard used for writing the weekly student activities. The items written on the chalkboard were not visible from my seat in the back of the room. Instead of using the whiteboard, Faye preferred using an overhead projector and a pull down wall screen on which to put student notes and routine student bell work questions.

Teachers from the language arts department had a selection of books on book shelves that they would allow students to check out, similar to a small library. Also, these teachers posted a book completion form on their walls every time a student read a book from the library. One teacher had a majority of one wall covered with these small, pink slips of paper identifying the student's name and the title of the book read.

Most of the classrooms had similarly arranged furniture. The teacher desks were either at the front or back of the room with the student desks arranged in five or six rows with five to six desks per row. The number of desks in any room was no more than 34. The teachers' area usually consisted of a desk with an additional table arranged with the desk in an L shape.

Barbara and Darla were the only exceptions to the student desk design. Barbara's students were arranged in clusters of four to six desks and Darla's were arranged in a large square with the student's facing each other. Faye, on one occasion, allowed students to work in groups, but this was not the regular arrangement of the room. Usually, Faye's student desks were also arranged in rows.

Eve's classroom was the only one with a noticeably low temperature. Most students wore jackets or sweatshirts to keep warm. The teacher later told me that the thermostat was in another classroom used as a computer lab. This lab had tended to be warmer than a normal classroom so the thermostat was set lower, thus causing the inequity in Eve's room.

All of the classrooms were painted blue, yellow, or beige. Three of the eight had Smart Boards. All others had white boards at the front of the room. All rooms had two windows with mini blinds covering them.

CHAPTER V

Analysis

The purpose of this study was to examine the beliefs teachers at SMS held about their students, student learning, and about teachers' beliefs of their collective abilities to achieve the task of school improvement. Eight core subject teachers were interviewed twice and observed teaching in two class periods. Information gathered from the interviews and observations was presented in Chapter 4. The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the data according to emergent themes: beliefs about students, academic expectations and assessment, and belief about teachers at SMS.

Belief About Students

Some participants suggested that students who did not do well academically were often from low SES families whose parents did not emphasize the importance of education. The teachers understood that SMS had the highest percentage of low SES students of the five middle schools in the district; however, none of the teachers had access to SES identifying information. Other than through conversation with students would teachers know the economic circumstances of their families. It was not likely these type of conversations occurred with every student. Possibly some students share

information about their families with their teachers, but not to the degree that would allow the teacher to generalize this information to all poor performing students.

The overall opinion of the participants was that the student body at SMS came from blue collar working parents who may not be educated beyond high school. These types of parents, they suggested, do not make education a priority in the home, and this is why students do not make it a priority either. Also, the teachers' believed the low performing students were the ones who were discipline problems in the classroom, who had little motivation to participate in classroom activities, and were often special education students. Teachers with high levels of CTE will be persistent in their efforts to meet organizational goals and will believe in the capabilities of the faculty as a whole to achieve those goals, despite the challenges that arise outside the control of the school (Bandura, 1993; Goddard et al., 2004).

Academic Expectations and Assessment

There was an overall belief that academic expectations at home were lower for students at SMS and this was why they did not experience academic improvement. Gail verbalized this by saying the teachers were not the cause of low academic achievement. She said that lower achieving students, particularly special education students, should not be expected to meet the same academic goals as other students. Weisel and Dror (2006) found that teachers with positive efficacious beliefs tended to be more positive about inclusion of special education students in the regular classroom. Ann also mentioned that it was very difficult to teach in an integrated classroom because the needs of the regular students were often overlooked because of the needs of the special education students.

Some teachers identified poor quality home environments as the cause for low student motivation in school. They also indicated that, to motivate students, teachers must create lessons that are interesting and applicable to the students' lives. The lesson plans gathered from the teachers identified typically three student activities: worksheets, independent practice, and tests or quizzes. Of the observations, very few were student centered or involved activities other than completion of worksheets or work book pages. Exceptions to this were the student activities in Darla's classroom. Both included projects created by the students with the teacher modeling the expected student behaviors.

A school with high levels of CTE will have teachers who put forth extra effort to motivate their students and will provide instruction that has strong academic press (Goddard, Hoy, et al, 2004). Very little was done to motivate or encourage students who did not participate in class discussions or students not engaged in the activities. There were students in every teacher's classroom that did not participate and were allowed no to by the teachers. In the interviews, teachers indicated the importance of motivating students to learn and to participate; however, during class I did not observe any teachers attempt to motivate those disinterested students. Hannah, in particular, said that it was important to provide reading material that was interesting and applicable to their students' lives. She encouraged her students to read independently by allowing them time in class to read library books or books they borrowed from her personal collection. During these times, there were several students who did not read and the teacher repeatedly told them to get busy. Although most students appeared quite content reading, some chose to talk with other students in the class, even with the teacher redirecting

them. It seemed that the students ignored the teachers' directions and the teachers, in turn, took no additional measures to encourage those students to comply.

Most of the participants, when giving direct instruction to students, did so from the front of the classroom. Most participants walked up and down the aisles checking student engagement in the activity; however, they generally returned to the front of the room to stand, or in the case of Eve, Faye, and Gail, to sit at the front of the room or behind their desks. There did not appear to be much communication between the students and the teachers when the teacher was stationed at the front of the room. It was only while the teacher was moving up and down the aisles that the students asked questions about the assignments. There was never an occasion when any participant spent the majority of the class time moving around the room to check individual student work.

Ann and Gail mentioned concerns about having special education students in the regular education classrooms. Neither thought the special needs students could meet the expectations of the regular curriculum. All participants spoke of the importance of teaching to the needs of individual students and assessing student learning in multiple ways. In none of the lesson plans analyzed or in classrooms observed did I see any effort to individualize instruction or student assessment. The lesson plans provided by the participants typically included a very brief description of the topic being covered each day and an equally brief identification of the student activity. On one hand, teachers believed that learning must be measured in multiple ways to get an accurate assessment of learning. On the other hand, they stated that it was difficult and often impossible to accommodate different learning styles and abilities, particularly those of special needs students. Participants said that students are more motivated to learn if the lessons and

activities were stimulating. Stimulating activities were described as those applicable to students' lives. Of the observed classes, the majority did not have activities other than work sheets and book work. Other than Darla's activities, none appeared to be particularly interesting or motivating.

Student learning was assessed in generally the same way in all of the participants' classes, even though teachers indicated the importance of individualized assessments. Students completed worksheets, book work, quizzes, and tests, most of which were graded by the teacher and used to assess student learning. Only Carol gave daily points for student preparedness and participation. No participant assessed student knowledge in any other way, although all teachers expressed the importance of varied methods to accurately assess student learning. Although not all assessments of learning have to be graded activities, only the graded activities were recorded in the grade books and used to establish success or failure in the class. Students ultimately could learn about and understand the subject, only to fail the class based on incomplete or neglected assignments. Ann and Faye specifically mentioned in their initial interviews that they could assess student knowledge through discussions and conversations with students. If this were the case, these could be used to help establish success or failure in the course as well.

Lesson plans provided by the teachers did not indicate specific remediation activities. Although most participants indicated the need to identify and address students requiring extra help, none identified ways they personally addressed it with their own students. Carol, in particular, indicated she did not have time to remediate during the school day and it was the students' responsibility to come in for extra help. Teachers felt

pressured, according to Carol, to remain aligned with the districts' subject pacing guides, even at the expense of remediation. Barbara, Carol, and Eve expressed the lack of time they had to provide tutoring services to their students before or after school. It was commonly believed that those students who did poorly lacked motivation to improve. If that was the case then, those students would also not be motivated to come in for help outside the school day.

Beliefs About Teachers

None of the teachers spoke about their own responsibility to the low achieving students in the classroom. Darla was the only one who stated that she could put forth more effort to teach her lower performing students. Carol indicated her desire to keep pace with the district curriculum goals, sometimes at the expense of remediating students who lagged behind. Gail was the most outspoken participant about the responsibility of the teachers, indicating that the teachers at SMS were doing everything they could, and that it was the students who were the cause of SMS's academic problems.

Most teachers expressed that good teachers were caring, well-prepared, and enthusiastic. They also said that good teachers were flexible and able to provide instruction in a variety of ways to ensure all students understood the material. None of the classes I observed included a variety of instructional strategies. Lesson plans generally included only the assignment the students were to complete or the topic being covered if there was no student assignment. There was no indication of multiple teaching techniques or student assessments, although these were mentioned as being very important to student learning.

Darla, Gail, and Hannah mentioned that many teachers at SMS did not put forth much effort in teaching. Darla went on to explain that teachers should continue their own education by attending additional professional development activities. Most of the participants spoke negatively about the district's professional development offerings. Other than the mandatory programs provided to the teachers, most participants did not pursue additional training. Most participants mentioned in their interviews that effective teachers were knowledgeable in their subject areas. None mentioned anything about the need to be knowledgeable about adolescent development or new trends in education, such as the use of technology in the classroom. Although effort was reported to be important, it did not appear that the teachers regularly sought outside opportunities to improve their own skills, other than the mandatory activities provided by the district.

Teachers commonly believed that collaboration involved sharing ideas and teaching activities with other teachers. They were able to do this rather informally through email and at lunch. They also shared ideas about teaching at departmental meetings. They did not express commitment to the common goals of the school for academic improvement or to the initiatives of the district. Most participants spoke negatively about the district's plan to implement Professional Learning Communities in the schools. PLC's were meant to facilitate collaboration among teachers. There did not seem to be an understanding of how teacher collaboration could be helpful to teachers, and although they believed collaboration was important, they did not think they should be required to do it. Two teachers (Ann and Eve) said they preferred to be left alone and not forced to collaborate with other teachers, and admitted that they would not seek advice from others if they were not required to do so.

None of the participants mentioned anything about the influence of the physical environment on student learning. Each classroom was nearly identical in the layout with student desks arranged in rows with the teacher desk being at the front or rear of the room. Although decorated in subject specific posters, nothing was unique or necessarily inspiring. Faye's room had no posters or subject specific materials adorning the walls. Teachers spoke about the importance of motivating students to engage in learning; however, the physical environments of the classrooms did little to inspire student imagination.

Conclusion

The participant teachers spoke highly of the abilities of the school to facilitate student academic improvement. However, they also indicated that the main obstacle to improvement was the students' lack of motivation and support at home. If students came from more affluent backgrounds, they would likely perform better at school. Instead, many students required remediation, of which the teachers believed they have little time to provide. The teachers stated that they were doing everything they could to meet the needs of the students and that there was little more they could do to influence student achievement. All of the teachers wanted students at SMS to improve academically, but no teachers mentioned what they personally needed to do to facilitate such change.

None of the participants mentioned in the interviews anything about the use of technology in the classroom as being important to student learning. Although they mentioned the need to make lessons applicable to students, the only technology used in

the classroom was the Smart Board, and it was used mainly for projection purposes. Only twice did I see students use it, and that was for a very brief amount of time.

From analyzing the interviews and observations of the participants, it was evident they had some preconceived ideas about the students and student learning. They had strong beliefs about the influence of parents on student motivation, and saw that as a greater detriment to achievement than the influence they had in the classroom. Although most of the participants typically spoke positively about their own efforts, a few criticized the efforts of the other teachers. This was an indication that they do not have a full belief in the abilities of the school to achieve academic improvement.

The overall belief of the participants was that students at SMS were different than students at the other middle schools, and that the school faced obstacles that the other schools did not. The participants lacked insight to their personal responsibility to student learning and rarely indicated their own need to improve instruction. Only one participant, Darla, said anything about improving her own teaching practice.

CHAPTER VI

Summary, Recommendations, and Final Thoughts

Since 2001, SMS, one of five middle schools in a Midwestern suburban community, has experienced lower student achievement in math and reading than the other middle schools in the district. With a student population of over 500, it offers the same curriculum and extra-curricular activities as the other four middle schools but has experienced higher enrollments of low SES and special education students. Questions arise regarding reasons for the lack of academic growth and how the leadership of the school can facilitate school improvement.

This study's purpose was to understand SMS teachers' beliefs about students, student learning, and the collective abilities of the faculty to achieve school improvement. Through understanding what teachers believed about student learning and the collective ability of the school, leaders could implement plans for academic improvement.

Review

SMS had a faculty of 42 teachers, counselors, and administrators. Volunteers were recruited by the researcher from the core subject areas. All eight teachers who

volunteered to participate in this study were twice interviewed and observed teaching in their classrooms. The first interview lasted approximately one hour and was audio-taped. Each audio-tape was transcribed by me and given to the teacher to check for accuracy. Ten specific questions were asked every participant, with additional questions emerging during each interview. After the initial interviews, two 45 minute classroom observations occurred, with the scheduling at the convenience of the teacher. I took notes during each observation with the information organized according to emergent themes.

The second interviews followed the observations and were one hour in length. I took notes and later organized the data also according to common themes. Questions asked at the second interviews emerged from the data acquired from the initial interviews and observations.

Data were also gathered from additional materials. I asked participants to provide two weeks of lesson plans, examples of items they might provide students during any given lesson (work sheets, informational hand-outs), and descriptions of their student grading policies. The information gathered was organized into these themes: belief about students, academic expectations and student assessment, and belief about teachers.

Conclusions

Teachers had a strong sense of self accomplishment and believed that they were teaching to the best of their abilities. However, observations of their classroom performances indicated a distinct separation between how they thought they were teaching students and what was actually occurring. In the interviews, both before and after the observations, teachers held to certain beliefs about what good teaching involved

and looked like. They were specific about what teaching techniques should be used to motivate students; however, I saw few of these techniques being used during the observations. Participants also expressed the need for differentiated evaluation methods to access student achievement. However, there was no evidence that any teacher was actually using the methods they described. Since the teachers selected the classes to observe, I assumed they would have tried to perform to the best of their abilities. Teacher perceptions of their own abilities in the classroom were not congruent with their actual performances. Student achievement at SMS will not improve until teachers change their instructional practices to consistently include good teaching strategies.

The participants were firm in their beliefs about student demographic information, such as socio-economic status and parent occupations. Typically, participants generalized a few students' statements about their backgrounds to all SMS students. The reported demographic information does not support the teachers' beliefs. Further, the general belief about parents' blue collar occupations could not be substantiated. It was clear the teachers were not accurately informed about the students or their parents. Because of this lack of understanding of the student body, participants made inaccurate assumptions about their students and based many expressed beliefs about them on those assumptions.

Pressures and crises outside the school environment can affect CTE. Teachers who meet challenges in a positive way will persevere regardless of the pressures. Many of the obstacles faced by educators cannot be controlled, such as student SES and parental support and involvement. Teachers with high levels of CTE will meet challenges with persistence and determination.

Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk Hoy (2006) suggested that CTE along with the academic emphasis of the school and the trust of parents and students affect student achievement. These three constructs, known as academic optimism, are interrelated. Sweetland and Hoy (2000) proposed that the organizational climate of a school affected student achievement. A school with a positive climate would have teachers that promoted high academic goals, had positive feelings about their students and colleagues, and were empowered by their administrators. A positive school climate can promote positive feelings of CTE.

Most participants spoke positively about the abilities of SMS to initiate student academic improvement; however, they assumed little responsibility for the actual lack of improvement. Instead, blame was placed on student lack of motivation and the lack of parent involvement. Although they indicated that the teachers at SMS had the collective ability to improve student learning, the lack of improvement was caused by outside factors rather than the abilities of the teachers. Student learning at SMS will not improve unless the teachers' perceptions and attitudes about their role in student achievement changes and their skills improve in the classroom.

Bandura (1997) defined CTE as a group's shared belief that it has the capacity to influence a common goal. For schools, the norms of the faculty regarding student academic achievement guide individual teacher's actions to execute the common goals of the organization.

The theory of CTE suggests that a school's teachers' positive feelings and beliefs about the capabilities of the faculty as a whole influence student achievement. Goddard,

Hoy, and Woolfolk Hoy (2000) suggested that teachers with a high degree of CTE help to establish a culture of high academic expectations and thus help to facilitate these expectations among the faculty of a school. A faculty with positive CTE beliefs will overcome obstacles to teaching, seek to learn from others in a collaborative way, have positive feelings about their students and colleagues, and will be highly motivated.

The participants expressed positive beliefs about the abilities of the school, but also expressed concerns about ineffective teachers, and about those teachers being allowed to remain on staff. When asked about the school as a whole, they said SMS had the capacity to improve student achievement; however, they expressed reservations about teachers in their own curricular departments. The teachers did not know how they could initiate improved academic achievement as they believed they were doing everything they could with little success. A high level of collective efficacy is possible only when all teachers believe in the capacity of the school to achieve a common goal.

CTE is strengthened through mastery and vicarious experiences. Teachers who experience success in improving student achievement and who observe others experiencing like successes will exert efforts to encourage similar results in the future. Teachers at SMS have not experienced significant student academic improvement and are hesitant to observe other teachers' classrooms as a tool for the improvement of teaching skills. They believed that SMS has the ability to affect student achievement positively; however, they were unable to express how they or their colleagues would facilitate such improvement. Unless participants put forth the levels of teaching effort needed to improve student achievement and exhibit the qualities of high CTE, student academic achievement will not improve. In a study of teacher beliefs about special education

students in the regular classroom, Weisel and Dror (2006) found that teachers who had positive feelings about their abilities in the classroom were in turn more positive about their influence on teaching special education students. These attitudes and beliefs about their own abilities helped to create a positive school climate that emphasized academic improvement.

Chan, Lau, Nie, Lim, and Hogan (2008) suggested that school climate was influenced by teacher efficacy and commitment. To have a positive climate, a school must have teachers committed to the organizational goals and willing to exert effort in achieving those goals. Teachers who have higher levels of self-efficacy are more likely to be committed to the organization.

CTE is affected by the level of effort on a task and commitment to the organization exerted by the faculty. Positive climate is characterized by positive teacher beliefs about students, colleagues, and the goals of the organization. The participant teachers expressed compassion and caring for their students and a desire to improve student learning. They also expressed their dissatisfaction with the abilities of some teachers at SMS and the aptitude of some students enrolled there, and the abilities of the administration to initiate change. They were particularly critical of the practice of enrolling special education students in regular education classes and about the abilities of those students to achieve the academic goals set forth for other students. In addition, the observations revealed a lack of academic rigor in the classrooms. For CTE to improve at SMS, teachers must commit to the goal of improving student achievement and must put forth the effort to improve the academic expectations for the students.

Although I was an administrator in the building; none of the participants were directly evaluated by me to help encourage open, honest dialog about the school. Nothing revealed by them in the interviews or observed by me in the classroom was to be shared with the evaluating administrator. Teachers were not consistent with what they said about their own teaching techniques and what I actually observed. As the researcher and an administrator at the school, I found it very difficult in the second interview to confront teachers whose teaching practices were not aligned with what they said in the interviews for fear of appearing evaluative rather than unbiased. My position as an administrator affected the types of questions I asked during the second interview, and thus, sacrificed some potentially insightful dialog. How teachers perceived me as the researcher might account for the discrepancy between what they said in the interviews and what was observed in the classrooms. Comprehensive dialog with study participants was limited because of my supervisory responsibilities in the organization.

Recommendations

The data indicate a need for further research on the subject of CTE and case study investigations. Teachers with high levels of CTE will behave in certain ways to help improve student learning. Observations of teachers modeling these behaviors can be made in case study investigations; however, it is difficult to ascertain the level of CTE. In addition to recommendations for future research, recommendations for practice at the school level are also made that may add to the ability of school leaders to address academic performance.

Recommendations for Research

Much revealing information was gathered to help explain the beliefs teachers held about students, learning, and the collective abilities of SMS to achieve academic improvement; however, to determine the actual level of CTE would require a quantitative approach. The teachers expressed a belief in the abilities of SMS to achieve the goal of student academic improvement and stated that they used techniques in the classroom that would promote positive student learning; however, observations of their classroom practice did not support what they said. To better explain the collective efficacy of the school, I would recommend a quantitative analysis that included a CTE rating scale completed by all the teaching staff. Both a quantitative and qualitative analysis would provide a broader understanding of the connection between teacher beliefs and academic achievement.

The test scores comparing SMS to the other four middle schools in the district concerned me because my school typically showed lower achievement levels since 2001. There is no way to know if the differences in the scores were statistically significant unless a quantitative study were conducted. Although the differences I believe were important, future researches may want to include a quantitative component to their study to determine the significance of the achievement differences.

Data came from eight volunteer teachers, thus I could not assume their beliefs were the same as other teachers at SMS. Although data were collected from multiple sources to get a thick description of the beliefs of teachers, more participants in the study could have provided additional data to help understand the dynamics of the school.

Teachers from curricular departments in addition to the core subjects may have given a more robust description of the overall beliefs of the teachers.

The teachers responded to me not only as the researcher but also as an administrator of the school. I believe their responses to the interview questions may have been biased. In addition, my bias as the researcher may have affected the type of questions asked in the follow-up interviews since they were based partly on observations of the classrooms. I recommend that researchers with positions of authority in a school conduct only quantitative studies in that organization to help ensure an unbiased study.

Further, it might benefit a school's leadership to investigate school culture and the effects of that on academic achievement as well, since there is a relationship between positive CTE and positive school climate. CTE alone does not explain how a positive culture is established and fostered in an organization. A qualitative study involving the students and their parents to gain an understanding of their beliefs about school and student learning may be a useful tool in implementing positive change. CTE helps to explain the effect teachers' beliefs and behaviors have on student learning, but it does not explain the effect of positive parental involvement in school improvement.

CTE also does not explain the discrepancy between what teachers said they believed about effective teaching and their practice. Many of the factors attributed to positive CTE were verbally expressed as important by the teachers at SMS. Most expressed that they were effective teachers; however, they failed to exhibit behaviors in the classroom that were attributed to instructional effectiveness. Argyris and Schon (1974) postulated that people's actions are guided by two types of theories: espoused

theory and theory-in-use. “Espoused theory refers to the worldview and values that people believe guide their behaviors” whereas “theory-in-use refers to the worldview and values reflected in the behaviors that actually drive their actions,” (Savaya & Gardner, 2012, p. 145). The teachers in my study may not have a full understanding of the differences between what they express as important educational practices and their own actions in the classroom. If they are not aware of the differences then they will not be able to improve their classroom instructional practices. Savaya and Gardner (2012) suggested the potential of “critical reflection (CR)” (p.145) to raise workers’ awareness of the discrepancies between their expressed, or espoused, values and their actual actions in the work place. CR allows workers to identify the assumptions that guide behaviors, question them, and then develop alternative behaviors (Savaya & Gardner, 2012). For future researchers, I recommend studying the effects of CR as a tool for addressing the differences between espoused theories and theories-in-use of a faculty.

Recommendations for Practice

Participants had limited prior knowledge about SMS student backgrounds and yet held specific beliefs about their students and tended to generalize information given to them by individual students to all students at the school. If school leaders provide student demographic information to the faculty to familiarize them with their students, attempts to build a culture of understanding could result in instruction designed to meet students’ needs.

Teachers at SMS lacked understanding of motivational techniques that encourage student engagement at school. Specific activities and research based methods that help

engage and motivate students need to be available to the teachers. For teachers to perform better they need to know teaching methods and techniques suitable for this generation of students, and be able to use them.

Because the teachers need assistance to improve their methods of instruction and to match their perceptions of themselves and their performances in the classrooms, they will need the school administration to enable them to evaluate their own performance in the classroom thoroughly and to provide them with tools such as videotaping technology and extensive feedback.

Participant teachers expressed concerns about the support they received from the parents of students who were not academically engaged. They believed that many parents did not support the school nor encourage their children academically. Greater effort by the leaders at SMS should be placed on parent outreach programs to develop stronger teacher/parent relationships.

Final Thoughts

The teachers at SMS are caring and compassionate not only for the students but also each other. They all expressed a love for their profession and disappointment that student achievement remained low, despite their efforts. Although they believed they were doing everything possible, they are not. They do very little to collaborate effectively with their colleagues and do not seek to learn vicariously from other teachers. They make assumptions about the student demographics, do not implement the teaching strategies they identified as effective, and have little motivation to improve their teaching skills. They are critical of, and have become resistant to, changes implemented by the district

administration. They have not shown the effort needed to address poor student achievement. It appears that they have not experienced individual successes in the classroom that would encourage the kind of academic press needed to improve student learning. In addition, their limited knowledge and support of collaborative efforts with their colleagues has negatively affected their feeling of CTE.

The teachers at SMS should not be alone in this struggle to improve. It is the responsibility of the school's leadership, both at the building and district levels, to encourage teachers and insist upon improvement. They should provide the opportunities necessary for teacher improvement and have the courage to address the problem areas of the school, specifically, teachers who consistently perform below expectations, who are not committed to the organizational goals, and who are resistant to implementing research based teaching strategies.

More emphasis at the building level should be placed on developing a teacher mentorship program. New teachers to the profession would benefit from being assigned a mentor teacher throughout their three year probationary period. Resources should be provided to recruit and train potential mentor teachers who will be committed to academic improvement and to the long term goals of the school and district. This would help to create a positive culture at the school level and establish expected behavioral norms.

I believe that as long as teachers are permitted to remain unmotivated to improve, they will remain that way. The leadership is the catalyst for change. One of the most difficult tasks a principal has is to understand the culture and climate of the school

organization and to implement strategies that encourage teacher commitment to the established district academic goals. These types of changes to the organization require more effort and time than simply replacing teachers or initiating academic programs.

As an administrator and researcher, I encountered several problems during this study that I had not anticipated that may have affected the type of data collected and how it was collected. Even though I tried to guarantee the participants' anonymity, there was no way to be certain a future reader will not be able to identify the sources. The interviews at times seemed to be opportunities for the teachers to "unload" all of their concerns about the school and the district. It is possible that many of the negative impressions I had about the CTE of the faculty were based on those opportunistic occasions. I question if the interviews were conducted by a person not in a supervisory role, would the information gathered have been different?

The purpose of this study was to investigate teacher beliefs. Action research would indicate that building and district leaders would use the results to implement programs to improve teacher CTE with the ultimate goal of student academic improvement. Action research is directed at specific programs within an organization, rather than the organization as a whole. It would be beneficial for the school's leadership to concentrate on one initiative at a time, and to evaluate that program regularly to determine if it is accomplishing the established goals. Teacher input is imperative to creating commitment to the goals of the school.

I had concerns about being a researcher in the same building where I was an administrator. Besides the concern over bias, I had not anticipated the difficulties of

conducting the interviews and observations. On two occasions I had to cancel the scheduled observations because of issues that arose that required me to be an assistant principal rather than a researcher. I was also concerned about what I would do in an observation if the teacher did something that required me to take on a supervisory role. There were occasions when I wanted to point out to a teacher during the observation that students were not engaged in the activity. It was difficult to separate the administrator from the researcher and to be strictly an observer in the classroom. I had the same reaction during a couple of interviews when the teachers expressed a belief that was a contradiction to what I believed as an administrator. An example was when Gail expressed that teachers were not the reason student achievement was low, it was the kids who were to be blamed. I wanted to remain unbiased, but it was difficult to not say something to her about her statement.

Since this study was conducted, Oklahoma applied for and received a waiver from the mandates of NCLB. All students now are to be college or career ready by the year 2020. Included in the NCLB compromise, school districts must implement comprehensive teacher evaluation systems by which they can identify and address teachers who perform below expectations. In another year, teacher evaluations will include student achievement quantitative data as a measure of effectiveness. For SMS, the leadership now has a tool that, if used properly, can work to encourage and improve teacher classroom performance to affect student achievement positively. What will be the effect, if any, of the new evaluation system on teacher morale and school culture? Potentially, administrators will be able to accurately identify teachers who use good teaching strategies effectively in the classrooms. They also will be expected to provide

guidance and feedback to those teachers who are identified as ineffective. If teachers know they may lose their jobs if they are identified as ineffective, they may become more motivated to improve their classroom practices.

One of the concerns that participants at SMS had was that poor teachers continued to be in the classrooms with little done to address their ineffectiveness. As for teacher morale, perhaps if teachers see ineffective teaching addressed by the administration and everyone held to the expectation of high teaching standards, they will more likely become committed to the organizational goal of academic improvement.

REFERENCES

Adler, P. A. & Adler, P. (1994). *Observational techniques.* In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research (pp.377-392).* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Argyris, C., & Schon, D. (1974). *Theory in practice: Increasing professional effectiveness.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory.* Engelwood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc.

Bandura, A. (1993). Perceived self-efficacy in cognitive development and functioning. *Educational Psychologist, 28*(2), 117-148.

Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control.* New York: W. H. Freeman and Company.

Bandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology, 52,* 1-26.

Chan, W., Lau, S., Nie, Y., Lim, S., & Hogan, D. (2008). Organizational and personal predictors of teacher commitment: The mediating role of teacher efficacy and identification with school. *American Educational Research Journal, 45,* 597-630.

Creswell, J. W. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Crix, J. (2004). *The foundations of research.* New York: Palgrave MacMillen.

Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (1995). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. The University of Chicago Press.

Erbe, B. (2000). Correlates of school achievement in Chicago elementary schools. Paper presented at the 2000 annual AERA meeting, New Orleans, LA.

Georgiadi, N. & Romano, L. (1992). Focus on: Successful characteristics of a middle school. (Report No. PS023-179). East Lansing, MI: Michigan Association of Middle School Educators. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED382347)

Georgiou, S. & Tourva, A. (2007). Teacher attributions of achievement: Stereotypes in the classroom. *Education and Society, 25*, 73-86.

Goddard, R. & Goddard, Y. (2001). A multilevel analysis of the relationship between teacher and collective efficacy in urban schools. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 17*, 807-818,

Goddard, R. D., Hoy, W. K., & Woolfolk Hoy, A. (2000). Collective teacher efficacy: Its meaning, measure, and impact on student achievement. *American Educational Research Journal, 37*, 479-507.

Goddard, R. D., Hoy, W. K., & Woolfolk Hoy, A. (2004). Collective efficacy beliefs: Theoretical developments, empirical evidence, and future directions. *Educational Researcher, 33*(3), 3-13.

Goddard, R. D., LoGerfo, L., & Hoy, W. K. (2004). High school accountability: The role of perceived collective efficacy. *Educational Policy, 18*, 403-425.

Halvorsen, A., Lee, V., & Andrade, F. (2009). A mixed-method study of teachers' attitudes about teaching in urban and low-income schools. *Urban Education, 44*, 181-224.

Henderson, C., Buehler, A., Stein, W., Dalton, J., Robinson, T., & Anfara, Jr., V. (2005). Organizational health and student achievement in Tennessee middle level schools. *NASSP Bulletin, 89* (644), 54-75.

Hoy, W., Sweetland, S., Smith, P. (2002). Toward an organizational model of achievement in high schools: The significance of collective efficacy. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 38* (1), 77-93.

Hoy, W., Tarter, C., Woolfolk Hoy, A. (2006). Academic optimism of schools: A force for student achievement. *American Educational Research Journal, 43*, 425-446.

Lee, J. & Wong, K. (2004). The impact of accountability on racial and socioeconomic equity: considering both school resources and achievement outcomes. *American Educational Research Journal, 41*, 797-832.

Martin, J. (2004). Self-regulated learning, social cognitive theory, and agency. *Educational Psychologist, 39*(2), 135-145.

Parker, K., Hannah, E., & Topping, K. (2006). Collective teacher efficacy, pupil attainment and socio-economic status in primary school. *Improving Schools, 9* (2), 111-129.

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Petzko, V. (2004). Findings and implications of the NASSP national study of leadership in middle level schools, volumes I and II: Teachers in middle level schools. *NASSP Bulletin, 88* (638), 69-88.

Ross, J. & Gray, P. (2006). School leadership and student achievement: The mediating effects of teacher beliefs. *Canadian Journal of Education, 29,* 798-822.

Savaya, R. & Gardner, F. (2012). Critical reflection to identify gaps between espoused theory and theory-in-use. *National Association of Social Workers,* 57, 145-154.

Sweetland, S., Hoy, W. (2000). School characteristics and educational outcomes: Toward an organizational model of student achievement in middle schools. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 36,* 703-729.

Weisel, A., & Dror, O. (2006). School climate, sense of efficacy and Israeli teachers' attitudes toward inclusion of students with special needs. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice, 1*(2), 157-174.

Wiles, J. (1995). Middle level education in rural America. Charleston, WV: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED385426)

APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol

1. What is your favorite aspect of being a teacher?
2. What influenced you in your decision to become a teacher?
3. What things do you think are important to do to prepare for a typical school day?
4. What do you think affects student motivation in the classroom?
5. We've talked about student motivation, how does that influence you when preparing your lessons for the students?
6. How do you think teachers influence one another?
7. In what ways do you collaborate with other teachers?
8. To what do you contribute the increase in this school's CRT reading/math scores last year?
9. What do you need from your school administration to help you do your job effectively?
10. In addition to being in the classroom with the students, what other ways do you think teachers influence students to achieve academically?

APPENDIX B

Classroom Observation Protocol

1. Describe the teacher's behaviors prior to the beginning of the class:
2. Describe the routine activities performed by the teacher during the class period:
3. Lesson taught:
    A. Objective of lesson
    B. Lesson activity/assignment for students
    C. Describe the variety of presentation methods
4. Teacher responses:
    A. To student questions/comments about the lesson or activity
    B. To students about behavioral concerns
5. CTE behaviors with description:
    A. Perseverance
    B. Preparation
    C. Effort
    D. Teacher attitude
6. Description of the classroom environment:

APPENDIX C

Tables

Table 1: 8th Grade Proficiency Percentages in Math 2001-2009

School	2001-2002	2002-2003	2003-2004	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009
SMS	71	80	79	75	87	83	89	65
HMS	77	75	79	84	87	89	96	72
CMS	82	81	81	83	92	93	95	78
OMS	79	81	88	96	92	87	95	72
CNMS	82	72	89	89	88	91	98	87
District	79	78	83	86	88	88	95	75

Scores represent percentage of students who scored at or above the proficient score of 700.

Table 2: 8th Grade Proficiency Percentages in Reading 2001-2009

School	2001-2002	2002-2003	2003-2004	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009
SMS	87	87	84	92	91	89	94	83
HMS	81	86	89	86	90	92	91	85
CMS	90	94	96	93	97	98	98	91
OMS	89	89	91	95	94	93	93	91
CNMS	87	82	93	91	94	92	93	84
District	86	88	90	91	93	93	94	86

Numbers represent percentage of students scoring at or above proficient score of 700.

Table 3: EOI Trend: % Regular Education 8th Grade Students Scoring Satisfactorily or Above in Algebra 1 2004-2006

SITE	2004		2005		2006	
	#tested/#prof	%	#tested/#prof	%	#tested/#prof	%
SMS	45/31	69	46/25	54	30/13	43
HMS	81/51	63	58/43	74	81/57	70
CMS	37/24	65	34/20	59	21/16	76
OMS	49/40	82	38/31	82	48/45	94
CNMS	48/43	90	52/38	73	52/44	85
DISTRICT	260/189	73	228/157	69	232/175	75

Table 4: EOI Trend: % Regular Education 8th Grade Students Scoring Satisfactorily or Above in Algebra 1 2007-2009

SITE	2007		2008		2009	
	#tested/#prof	%	#tested/#prof	%	#tested/#prof	%
SMS	34/27	79	28/28	100	38/37	97
HMS	88/86	97	45/45	100	45/45	100
CMS	29/29	100	31/31	100	37/37	100
OMS	50/50	100	40/40	100	66/66	100
CNMS	62/62	100	60/60	100	63/63	100
DISTRICT	263/254	97	204/204	100	249/248	99

Table 5: District Middle School API Scores 2000-2009

School	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
SMS	1006	1115	1206	1183	1213	1268	1219	1322	1293
HMS	1127	1097	1161	1213	1225	1316	1332	1347	1398
CMS	1070	1249	1264	1311	1285	1362	1361	1376	1414
OMS	1082	1223	1242	1304	1382	1334	1337	1366	1350
CNMS	1095	1205	1079	1311	1294	1343	1359	1382	1381
District	1076	1178	1190	1264	1280	1325	1322	1359	1367

Highest possible score: 1500

Table 6: Middle School Low SES Student Population 2002-2008

School	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
SMS	34	28	34	39	38	33	34
HMS	24	27	31	35	37	36	35
CMS	19	17	23	25	27	30	28
OMS	18	21	22	25	26	32	25
CNMS	N/A	N/A	37	36	32	31	27
District	23	25	27	30	31	31	30

Numbers indicate percentage of student population enrolled at each site.

Table 7: Middle School Special Education Percentages 2005-2008

School	2005	2006	2007	2008
SMS	19	19	20	20
HMS	18	18	19	17
CMS	16	16	16	14
OMS	14	14	15	15
CNMS	16	14	14	14
District	15	15	15	15

Numbers indicate percentage of students enrolled at each site.

Table 8: Faculty Statistics

Depart.	# of Teach.	Gender	Elem Certif.	Certif. Areas 1-3	Certif. Areas 4-6	Certif. Areas 7+	Highly Qual.	Grad. Degree
Lang. Arts	7	7 F	5	2	3	2	7	1
Math	5	2 M, 3 F	2	1	4	0	5	0
Science	4	4 M	0	1	1	2	4	2
Social Studies	5	3 M, 2 F	0	2	3	0	5	1
Special Educ.	7	2 M, 5 F	3	3	2	2	7	2
Other	14	3 M, 11 F	3	9	0	4	13	5
Total	42	14 M, 28 F	13	18	13	10	41	11

Table 9: Middle School Averages for Math, Reading, and Algebra 1 Proficiency; API Scores; SES and Special Education Populations

School	Math Proficiency Average	Reading Proficiency Average	Algebra EOI Proficiency Average	API Score Average	SES Population Average	Special Ed Population Average
SMS	79	88	74	1202	34	19.5
HMS	82	88	84	1246	32	18
CMS	86	95	83	1299	24	15.5
OMS	86	92	93	1291	24	14.5
CNMS	87	89	91	1272	33	14.5
District	84	90	86	1262	28	15

VITA

Christine A. Hunt

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Thesis: A CASE STUDY OF TEACHER BELIEFS ABOUT STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN A SUBURBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL

Major Field: School Administration

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Education in School Administration at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma, December, 2012.

Completed the requirements for the Master of Education in Guidance Counseling at Northeastern State University, Tahlequah, Oklahoma, May 1989.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Science in Secondary Education at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma, May 1982.

Experience:

Social studies teacher for six years and guidance counselor for nine years at North Intermediate High School, Broken Arrow, Oklahoma; assistant principal at Haskell Middle School, Broken Arrow, Oklahoma for seven years; assistant principal at Sequoyah Middle School for three years; assistant principal at North Intermediate High School, Broken Arrow, Oklahoma for one year.

Professional Memberships:

Oklahoma Association of Secondary School Principals; Cooperative Council for Oklahoma School Administration