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A PHENOMENOGRAPHY OF MISSISSIPPI AFRICAN AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL
STUDENTS' PROGRESS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS (ELA)

A Dissertation
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Department of Teacher Education
The University of Mississippi

by

EBONEE N. WILLIAMS

August 2015

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ABSTRACT

Increasing academic achievement among African Americans has become increasingly challenging for several educators. To receive aid in their pedagogical efforts, many of these teachers read qualitative literature and often discover success stories told by teachers and/or administrators. Qualitative research rarely includes African American students who share *their own* journey of academic achievement. To offer different insight that will specifically help high school educators increase ELA achievement among students of color, this qualitative study employed a phenomenographic approach to uncover how African American students in a Mississippi public high school perceived their experiences of meeting growth in English Language Arts (ELA).

For three consecutive school years, the selected school has collectively demonstrated success on state assessments and has met growth in ELA, as measured by the Mississippi Subject-Area Testing Program 2 (SATP2): English II. The primary participants from this school included three juniors and nine seniors. In an attempt to saturate the data and fact check, three ELA teachers who taught the juniors and/or seniors served as the secondary participants. Interviewing was the only data collection method employed, and data collected was utilized to depict the story of how African American students were able to make gains in ELA.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my mother, Louise Sanders. She suggested that I become a full-time Ph.D. student and supported me financially throughout the *entire* process and provided encouragement whenever I became discouraged. Additionally, this dissertation is dedicated to Sam Williams (my father) who provided financial support at the beginning of this process and Roderick Williams (my brother) who offered and supplied monetary contributions when needed. I would also like to dedicate this work to my long-time boyfriend, Erskine Brown, for his constant encouragement and prayers. Last, but certainly not least, this dissertation is dedicated to my deceased grandparents (Willie D. & Minnie Sanders) who believed that I could achieve *any* dream.

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I would like to acknowledge a special group of people who assisted me along this journey, but I first would like to thank GOD because without HIM, completing this work would have been impossible. Throughout the dissertation process, my committee chair and members provided me with substantial support, and for this reason, I would like to thank each of them. I thank Dr. Oliphant-Ingham, my dissertation chair/advisor, for carefully reading and re-reading my chapters and providing constructive feedback before my submission of final drafts to the committee. I am also grateful for all of my committee members: Dr. Britton, for providing encouraging words throughout the journey and offering guidance related to my research procedures, and Dr. Bartee and Dr. Gauthier for their beneficial suggestions that greatly enriched my work.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

To situate the context of this study, chapter one begins with an overview of the achievement gap and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. This chapter also explains the two types of state exit exams which are in compliance with the NCLB Act and provides a list of states that have implemented one of the specified assessment types. Additionally, chapter one includes the purpose of the study, which was to uncover how African American students in a Mississippi public high school perceived their experiences of meeting growth in English Language Arts (ELA). For this reason and to further establish the foundation for this study, a description of Mississippi's assessment system is provided. Research questions that guided this study, literature which supports the value of this study, and definitions of key terms throughout this dissertation are also included in chapter one. This chapter concludes with an overview of the remaining chapters.

The Achievement Gap and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act

For decades, educators across the United States have been on a mission to increase academic achievement among *all* students. Although states, districts, and schools have, indeed, been striving to accomplish this mission, a number of them have failed (United States Department of Education, 2004). This failure is evident by the longstanding achievement gap, as subgroups, especially African Americans, continue to perform lower than others on state and national achievement tests (United States Department of Education, 2004; Anderson, Medrich, &

Fowler, 2007; N. Chudowsky, V. Chudowsky, & Kober, 2009) . In fact, African American students are performing below their peers in both ELA and mathematics but notably in ELA (N. Chudowsky, V. Chudowsky, & Kober, 2009; National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), 2010; ACT Research and Policy, 2012; NCES, 2013). In an effort to bridge the achievement gap, Congress reauthorized but amended the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 by enacting the NCLB Act in 2002, which mandated that *all* public school students be proficient or advanced in ELA and mathematics by 2014 (Rosenburg, 2004). This law included four expectations for states, districts, and schools: (1) accountability for results, (2) scientifically based research, (3) expanded parental options, and (4) expanded flexibility and local control (United States Department of Education, 2004).

Accountability for Results

Under the NCLB Act provisions, states, districts, and schools are held accountable for increasing ELA and mathematics achievement among *all* students. The details of this accountability are described below:

- (1) **Assess Students-** States must annually assess third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh graders in ELA and mathematics and once in science. In contrast, states must test high school students only once in the three subject areas, either in tenth, eleventh, or twelfth grade, before pupils complete high school (Education Week Research Center, 2011).
- (2) **Report Test Data-** States, districts, and schools are required to publicly report test data every year (Education Week Research Center, 2011).

(3) Meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)- States must determine if each of their schools are meeting AYP, or whether the students in each school are progressing towards proficiency in ELA and mathematics. If for two or more years schools fail to meet AYP, these schools will be placed on an improvement plan or possibly face consequences such as teacher dismissals and curriculum restructuring (Education Week Research Center, 2011; New America Foundation, 2014). When schools are in need of improvement, the school administrators are expected to meet with the school’s faculty, staff, and stakeholders to develop an improvement plan (United States Department of Education, 2004). “The district must ensure that the school receives [appropriate] assistance as it develops and implements [the plan]” (United States Department of Education, 2004, p. 2). A school may receive assistance with the following:

- Identifying problems in instruction or curriculum.
- Analyzing and revising the school’s budget so its resources are more effectively targeted to activities most likely to help students learn (United States Department of Education, 2004, p. 2).

Additionally, under the NCLB Act provisions, all schools are required to hire highly qualified teachers. The NCLB Act defines a highly qualified teacher as one who obtains “a bachelor’s degree, full state certification[,], and demonstration of subject-matter competency for each subject taught” (United States Department of Education, 2004, p. 3). States are expected to develop goals for recruiting and retaining such teachers (United States Department of Education, 2004).

Scientifically Based Research

Under the passage of the NCLB Act, states, districts, and schools are expected to implement research-based practices and programs that have proven effective and must receive federal funding to support the practices and programs. The NCLB Act ultimately supports early childhood development programs (e.g., Early Reading First) since early childhood education impacts student achievement in upper grades (United States Department of Education, 2004).

Expanded Parental Options

As included within the NCLB Act provisions, school districts must provide a parent with his or her child's state testing results, along with the achievement status of all district schools. If a child attends a school in need of improvement, the school must allow student transfer options (United States Department of Education, 2004). For example, "[i]n the first year that a school is considered to be in need of improvement, parents receive the option to transfer their child to a higher-performing public school, including a charter school, in the district" (United States Department of Education, 2004, p. 5).

Expanded Flexibility and Local Control

States and districts are allocated federal funding under the NCLB Act, without any limitations. Spending funds with the focus of increasing student achievement is the only requirement. For instance, districts receive funding for professional development and are expected to only financially support training that will benefit teachers, and thereby raise student achievement (United States Department of Education, 2004).

State Exit Exams

In compliance with the NCLB Act, twenty-six states have instituted state exit assessments. Most states administer either comprehensive or end-of-course (EOC) exams (McIntosh, 2012). A comprehensive exam includes content from multiple subjects and is usually taken during the tenth or eleventh grade; the content aligns with state standards for the specific grade in which the test is administered (Zabala, Minnici, McMurrer, & Briggs, 2008). Contrarily, a student takes an EOC exam to demonstrate mastery of content for one particular subject. Schools administer the assessment before students complete the course (McIntosh, 2012). “For example, a state may require students, at the end of a school year, to take an EOC exam covering the content taught in an Algebra II course completed that year” (McIntosh, 2012, p. 9). Table 1 shows the states which have adopted exit exams and includes the type of assessment(s) administered.

Table 1

States That Administer Exit Exams and the Types Administered

State	Type of Exam Administered
Alabama	Comprehensive
Alaska	Comprehensive
Arizona	Comprehensive
Arkansas	End-of-course
California	Comprehensive
Florida	Comprehensive
Georgia	Comprehensive
Idaho	Comprehensive
Indiana	End-of-course
Louisiana	End-of-course
Maryland	End-of-course
Massachusetts	Comprehensive and end-of-course
Minnesota	Comprehensive
Mississippi	End-of-course
Nevada	Comprehensive
New Jersey	Comprehensive
New Mexico	Comprehensive
New York	End-of-course
Ohio	Comprehensive

Oklahoma	End-of-course
Oregon	Comprehensive
Rhode Island	Comprehensive
South Carolina	Comprehensive
Texas	Comprehensive
Virginia	End-of-course
Washington	Comprehensive

Note. Adapted from “State High School Exit Exams: A Policy in Transition” by McIntosh, 2012, p. 15-16.

In spite of the specified test a state administers, students across all twenty-six states are tested in ELA and mathematics. States with EOC exams ordinarily test students in additional subjects (McIntosh, 2012).

Nearly all states that administer exit exams require students to pass the assessments as a graduation requirement. If a student fails a test on the first attempt, states offer multiple retake opportunities (McIntosh, 2012). “Most states offer students between four and six retake opportunities before the end of 12th grade, but the specific number ranges from as few as two in Rhode Island to as many as twelve in Maryland and Oregon” (McIntosh, 2012, p. 17). McIntosh (2012) contended that students’ school experiences are central factors which affect a student’s ability to pass an exit assessment during any attempt. “For example, students who fail an exit exam are often taught a narrowed curriculum because they are assigned to remedial courses and other interventions that affect their learning opportunities” (McIntosh, 2012, p. 15).

All twenty-six states offer alternate routes for graduation, but the paths vary:

[Twelve] states [a]llow students to take an alternative assessment or substitute scores from another assessment, such as the ACT or SAT[:]

Arkansas, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, Virginia, [and] Washington.

[Eight] states [p]ermit students to use portfolios of coursework or end-of-the course projects to demonstrate their knowledge in lieu of passing an exit exam[:]

Massachusetts, Maryland, New Jersey, New Mexico, Nevada, Oklahoma, Oregon, [and] Washington.

[Seven] states [o]ffer waivers or appeals of exit exam requirements, typically after students have made repeated attempts to pass an exit exam and have met other requirements related to attendance, remediation, and/or grade point average[:]

Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Minnesota (math only), New York, Ohio, [and] Rhode Island.

[Three] states [g]ive students who fail exit exams an opportunity to earn an alternate diploma, such as a certificate of completion (which is not always equivalent to a regular diploma)[:]

California, Louisiana,[and] Virginia (McIntosh, 2012, p. 18).

Mississippi's EOC Assessments

Mississippi administers four EOC assessments: Algebra I, Biology I, English II, and U.S. History. Students typically take Algebra I and Biology I in the ninth grade, English II in the tenth grade, and U.S. History in the eleventh grade (Mississippi Department of Education (MDE), 2013). According to MDE (2013), “[s]ince the 2001-2002 school year, students have been required to pass the subject area tests for graduation and are not allowed to participate in commencement exercises unless all tests have been passed” (p. 1).

Students who initially fail an exam are offered various opportunities to pass the assessment before graduation. Seniors, for instance, are allowed to retake an assessment twice in the fall and once in the spring. Test administration is additionally conducted for all subjects in May, and students receive their scores before graduation. To help students pass the test prior to graduation, the state has offered the following:

- Additional retesting opportunities...
- Personal notification from the State Superintendent to the parent/guardian of any senior who has not passed one or more of the subject area assessments.
- Communication from the State Superintendent to every district superintendent regarding the steps the district/school are to take to ensure success for all students, including meeting with the parents/guardians of each senior who has not passed all subject area tests.
- Development of online remediation session resources for teachers and students to access on-demand.

- Offering of best practice sessions for school/district personnel on how to develop/implement more effective remediation strategies for students.
- Conducting a three-day ‘SATP2 Teacher Boot Camp’ in July where teachers will attend an intensive training session to better prepare them to teach a course included in the assessment program.
- Development of annotations for existing practice tests which will provide a detailed explanation of why the correct answer is correct and why the incorrect answers are not.
- Allowing senior students who are re-testers to have 2 days to complete the English II assessment.
- More precise data collection to allow better decision-making related to all aspects of the assessment system.
- Identification of collaborative resources to provide a better support system for teachers and principals.
- Student/Parent information guides are provided to the districts in July, in time for school orientation with students enrolled in SATP2 courses (MDE, 2013, p. 2).

Based on test data, ever since the state assessments have been administered, the lowest passage rate has been in English II, with the exception of one school year. Table 2 shows the passage rates for the last three school years.

Table 2

Mississippi SATP2 Data from the 2010-2011, 2011-2012, and 2012-2013 School Years

Year	Percentage Passing			
	Algebra I	Biology I	English II	U.S. History
2010-2011	85.4	73.0	71.8	93.0
2011-2012	81.9	74.7	73.1	72.9
2012-2013	85.2	78.5	73	81.3

Note. During the 2010-2011 and 2012-2013 school years, Mississippi’s students performed the lowest in English II, compared to other subject-areas. However, though not shown in the table, in all school years prior to 2010-2011, the lowest passage rate was in English II.

Overview of the Mississippi SATP2: English II

During this past school year (2014-2015), Mississippi began implementing Common Core State Standards (CCSS), including the newly developed SATP3: English II Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) (MDE, 2014). However, from 2008 to 2013, this state implemented the SATP2: English II (MDE, 2012). “The English II Subject Area Test measure[d] a student’s knowledge of language arts, reading comprehension, and effective writing skills according to competencies found in the *2006 Mississippi Language Arts Framework, Revised*” (MDE, 2012, p. 4). Unlike the other state assessments which were composed of only one section, English II was composed of both reading and writing sections (MDE, 2012). This entire exam consisted of 78 multiple-choice items. There were sixty-six scored items on the test. Each of these items measured one of the four competencies: vocabulary, reading comprehension, writing, and grammar. An additional twelve, unscored experimental items were included (MDE, 2012).

Below is a test blueprint:

Table 3

Blueprint of the Mississippi SATP2: English II

Competency	Number of Scored Multiple-Choice Items
Vocabulary 1. The student will develop and apply knowledge of words and word meanings to communicate.	7
Reading Comprehension 2. The student will comprehend, respond to, interpret, or evaluate a variety of texts of increasing length, difficulty, and complexity.	26
Writing 3. The student will produce, analyze, and evaluate effective communication.	23
Grammar 4. The student will use Standard English grammar, mechanics, and sentence structure to communicate.	10

Note. Vocabulary and reading comprehension competencies were included in the reading section of the English II Subject Area Test, and writing and grammar were included in the writing section (MDE, 2012).

The performance levels for the English II Subject Area Test were as follows:

Scale Score Value	Label
661 and above	Advanced
650-660	Proficient
642-649	Basic
641 and below	Minimal

Students at the advanced level consistently performed in a manner clearly beyond what was required, and those at the proficient level demonstrated solid academic performance and mastery of skills. Students at the basic level demonstrated partial knowledge; in contrast, students at the minimal level were below basic and did not demonstrate mastery (MDE, 2012).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to uncover how African American students in a Mississippi public high school perceived their experiences of meeting growth in ELA¹. Since there has not been extensive research with this specific aim, educators across the world will be provided with new literature to support their goals of increasing academic achievement. In addition, most studies concerning students' successes and/or failures are not told from students' perceptions but are certainly necessary for further details or suggestions related to the studied phenomenon (Wiggan, 2007).

Research Questions

The following research questions were utilized to guide this study:

1. What qualities do African American high school students, in a consistently high performing minority school in Mississippi, perceive as influential in their personal ELA growth experiences?
2. What do school community members (faculty, staff, and parents) ascribe as contributing factors towards student growth in ELA at a minority school in Mississippi?

¹ To determine if each student is achieving growth in ELA, the state predicts each student's score and subtracts the predicted scale score from the actual scale score. A student makes growth in ELA when he or she meets or exceeds the predicted scale score.

Significance of the Study

As pointed out by a considerable number of researchers, African Americans continue to perform below their Caucasian, Asian, and Hispanic peers (Center on Education Policy (CEP), 2007; Harris, 2010; NCES, 2010; McMurrer & Kober, 2011; ACT Research and Policy, 2012). This gap has been especially apparent in high school ELA, as African Americans consistently struggle to make gains (Kober, Chudowsky, & Chudowsky, 2009). Unfortunately, a plethora of Mississippi's African American high school students are failing to progress in ELA (MDE, 2013b). Table 4 shows the latest results.

Table 4

African Americans vs. Peers on the Mississippi SATP2: English II

Year	Percentage Passing				
	Black	White	Asian	Hispanic	Native American
2010-2011	60.8	83.8	86.5	74.8	77.8
2011-2012	62.0	84.8	88.4	73.7	67.2
2012-2013	61.0	85.4	93.1	76.4	77.5

Note. For the last three school years, Mississippi's African American high school students have been performing below all of their peers in ELA. African Americans' percentage passing indicates that they are not progressing, with nearly half of students failing, scoring below 645. In order to possibly show gains, they must score 645 and above, meeting or exceeding their predicted scale score (MDE, 2011).

If students fail to progress in ELA, they will likely experience failure in other subjects (Giouroukakis & Connolly, 2012). Giouroukakis and Connolly noted that ELA skills are not only employed in English courses, but students must also use and transfer these skills for success

in other content areas. For example, in order for students to comprehend texts and compose essays in history, students must utilize various ELA skills to complete these tasks successfully (De Oliveira, 2011). According to researchers, if students experience failure in English or any other subject, their motivation for learning decreases, which unfortunately leads to higher drop-out rates (Holme, Richards, Jimerson, & Cohen, 2010). This not only affects the failing students but the entire nation, as costs increase for social services, health care, and criminal justice (NCES, 2011; Nelson-Royes, 2013). As indicated by research, ELA is fundamental for the success of students across all subject areas; therefore, it is imperative that students are especially successful in this subject (Nelson-Royes, 2013).

Further, because this study described the qualitatively various ways in which African American high school students made gains in ELA, it will aid in increasing academic achievement among this student population. For this reason, high school ELA teachers of African American students, particularly, will benefit from this study. This study will also benefit all educators who support the teaching and learning of ELA (e.g., curriculum specialists, principals, conference presenters, college professors).

Definition of Terms

Common Core State Standards (CCSS) include ELA and mathematics standards for kindergarten through twelfth grade. They were developed to ensure that students are college- and career-ready. All states have adopted CCSS, with the exception of Alaska, Indiana, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Texas, and Virginia. Minnesota only adopted the ELA standards.

Competencies were categories (vocabulary, reading comprehension, writing, and grammar) which were tested on the English II Subject Area Test.

English Language Arts (ELA) is a term referring to the subject in which students should learn reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and visually representing. The goal is to prepare students to be effective communicators. All states that administer high school exit exams include ELA content but usually only include reading and/or writing.

Minimum competency exams (MCEs) are known as the first adopted high school exit exams.

Mississippi Curriculum Test 2 (MCT2): Eighth Grade Language Arts measured the ELA knowledge of eighth graders across the state. This test was the latest state ELA measurement before the SATP2: English II. The following were the performance levels for MCT2: Eighth Grade Language Arts:

Scale Score Value	Label
167 and above	Advanced
150-166	Proficient
138-149	Basic
137 and below	Minimal

Students at the advanced level consistently performed in a manner clearly beyond what was expected, and those at the proficient level demonstrated solid academic performance and mastery of skills. Students at the basic level demonstrated partial mastery and may have experienced difficulty in the next grade or course in the content area, but those at the minimal level inconsistently demonstrated the knowledge of skills that defined basic level performance.

Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) are online assessments that align with the CCSS to measure students' progress towards becoming college- and career-ready.

Quality of Distribution Index (QDI) is an instrument that MDE used (before Mississippi’s new accountability system that was implemented during the 2013-2014 school year) to measure the increase of Mississippi students’ proficiency levels (Advanced, Proficient, and Basic) and ranged from 0-300. QDI and growth were different: QDI measured the change in proficiency levels; whereas, growth measured change in scores. QDI and the degree to which a school met its expected growth value determined a school’s performance classification. These classifications were A (Star School), B (High Performing), C (Successful), and D (Academic Watch). In addition, there were three types of F classifications: F (Low Performing), F (At-Risk of Failing), and F (Failing). Further description of how MDE determined a school’s performance classification is included in Table 5.

Table 5

Mississippi’s Performance Classification Model

Cut points on QDI	Inadequate Academic Gains	Appropriate Academic Gains
200-300	B (High Performing)	A (Star School)
166-199	C Successful	B High Performing
133-165	D Academic Watch	C Successful
100-132	F Low Performing	D Academic Watch
0-99	F Failing	F At-Risk of Failing

Note. Schools that ranged within a specific QDI was able to move from one classification to another. For instance, if a school’s QDI ranged between 133 and 165, which was an “Academic Watch” (D) classification, but met growth, they would move to “Successful” (C).

Subject-Area Testing Program 2 (SATP2): English II, also known as the English II Subject Area Test, was a Mississippi achievement test which measured tenth graders' knowledge of ELA. Students were required to score at least 645 in order to pass.

SATP3: English II is the newly developed assessment that Mississippi tenth graders must pass; the first assessment was administered during this past school year (2014-2015). This is a rigorous test that includes a range of complex texts.

Overview of Remaining Chapters

This dissertation contains four remaining chapters—chapters two, three, four, and five. Chapter two includes review of literature concerning the educational history of southern African Americans and the achievement gap. Chapter one pointed out the use of state exit exams, but chapter two further explains the origin of high stakes testing and its effect on education. Also, chapter two highlights schools that have raised student achievement among their African American students and practices and programs that have been implemented for success. Chapter three introduces the methodology (phenomenography) and theoretical framework (attributional theory) that guided this study. The context of this study is also described, including an explanation of the setting and why it was selected. Additionally, chapter three contains the participant selection criteria and describes the data collection methods. The research findings are revealed in chapter four and are further discussed from a broader scope. Implications and direction/awareness for future research is shared in the last chapter.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Chapter two includes five sections: (1) Educational History of Southern African Americans, (2) The *Brown* Decision and Its Effects on Education, (3) High Stakes Testing, (4) Perspectives Concerning High Stakes Testing and the NCLB Act, and (5) Effective Leaders and Teachers' Impact on Student Achievement. "Educational History of Southern African Americans" emphasizes African Americans' long journey to receiving an education. "The *Brown* Decision and Its Effects on Education" explains efforts of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) for an equalized education and its impact on African Americans' academic achievement. "High Stakes Testing" includes the origin of standardized testing and its effect on education. "Perspectives Concerning High Stakes Testing and the NCLB Act" discusses positive and negative viewpoints related to standardized assessments. "Effective Leaders and Teachers' Impact on Student Achievement" highlights schools with predominantly African Americans that were successful as a result of effective leaders and teachers.

Educational History of Southern African Americans

Education: The Pursuit of Slaves and Freedmen

Obtaining an education had always been a dream of slaves but was prohibited by law (Anderson, 1988; Williams, 2003; Love, 2004; Olsen, 2007). If caught teaching or receiving any knowledge, slaves faced drastic consequences (Anderson, 1988; Love, 2004). For instance,

when laborers were caught writing, a slave owner chopped their forefingers (Anderson, 1988; Love, 2004). “In [one] instance[,] a slave by the name of Scipio was put to death for teaching a slave child how to read and spell, and the child was severely beaten to make him ‘forget what he had learned’” (Anderson, 1988, p. 17). To appease their unyielding desire for education, a few courageous slaves clandestinely learned to read through self-teaching, while others attended literacy sessions taught by former slaves (Nolen, 2001; Love, 2004; Reynolds & Barnett, 2006). By 1860, approximately five percent of slaves were literate (Anderson, 1988). After the Civil War, freedmen immediately pursued their educational goals (Anderson, 1988; Williams, 2003; Love, 2004; Olsen, 2007). Harriet Beecher Stowe conveyed this sense of urgency: ““They rushed not to the grog-shop but to the schoolroom—they cried for the spelling book as bread, and pleaded for teachers as a necessity of life’” (Anderson, 1988, p. 5).

One of the most vigorous pre- and post-Civil War efforts of freedmen was to provide schooling for African American children (Anderson, 1988; Pellegrino, Mann, & Russell, 2013). Before the war ended in 1865, liberated African Americans established small private schools in their communities. They controlled and supported their own schools but failed to provide students with a systematic education and lacked adequate funding (Anderson, 1988; Royster, 2000; Gates, Steele, Bobo, Dawson, Jaynes, Crooms-Robinson, & Darling-Hammond, 2012). Consequently, African Americans lost regulation of their schools in 1865 but were gratefully salvaged by the Freedmen’s Bureau, an organization which joined forces with the United States Army to control the South and support southern freedmen. Under this new administration, the schools received both federal and local financial support (Anderson, 1988; Finkelman, 2006; Faulkner, 2011). African Americans’ educational movement appeared to be successfully underway until officials ordered a temporary closure of all African American schools in 1866

(Anderson, 1988; Faulkner, 2011). In an effort to continue their educational movement, over 10,000 African Americans petitioned this order and began transforming federal (private) schools into free (public) schools to ensure education for *all* children of color (Anderson, 1988).

Public Schools for African Americans and the Shift of Planters' Authority

By 1870, the public school system was officially institutionalized, and funding these schools was mandated for all states (Anderson, 1988; Cox, 2004). School enrollment was on the rise and continued to increase, as more African Americans desired a public education (Anderson, 1988; Span, 2009). As a result, laborers were sparse, and planters were desperate for workers. A few planters were extremely vulnerable and accepted an educational clause proposed by African Americans, which gave laborers permission to attend school. In some instances, planters offered schooling on their plantations (Anderson, 1988; Span, 2009).

During the period of public schooling, planters regained control of the South. Their resistance of African Americans' educational movement was apparent (Anderson, 1988; Asch, 2008). This elite group underfunded African American schools and "stressed low taxation, opposed compulsory school attendance laws, blocked the passage of laws that would strengthen the constitutional basis of public education, and generally discouraged the expansion of public school opportunities" (Anderson, 1988, p. 23). Much of the opposition was in the following states: Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Florida, Mississippi, and Louisiana (Anderson, 1988).

Despite planters' tactics, African Americans continued supporting their children's educational needs. Just as Caucasians had implemented a quality curriculum in their schools, so did African Americans (Anderson, 1988; Fairclough, 2006). Anderson (1988) described this imitated curriculum:

Students in elementary schools received instruction in reading, spelling writing, grammar, diction, history, geography, arithmetic, and music.

Normal school students [those at teacher preparatory schools] took this standard English curriculum with additional courses in orthography, map drawing, physiology, algebra, and geometry, as well as the theory and practice of teaching (p. 28).

Because they received quality teaching, African Americans' illiteracy rates declined significantly (Anderson, 1988).

The Rise of African American Public High Schools

Beginning in 1880, southern states instituted four-year public high schools for students of color. Since states made these schools available to Caucasians years prior, high schools were not new to upper-class communities (Anderson, 1988; Brockliss & Sheldon, 2012). African Americans had instituted elementary schools with one or two high school grades preceding 1880 but were not fortunate enough to establish four-year high schools (Anderson, 1988).

Ten years after high schools were developed for students of color, only .39 percent (3,206 out of 804,522) pupils were enrolled. The attendance rate eventually increased to 10.1; yet, there were low rates in states such as Alabama, Arkansas, and Georgia. Mississippi was also included and had the lowest rate but also the largest population of secondary-aged children in the United States (Anderson, 1988). According to researchers, the prime reason for low enrollment in these four states was the limited number of high schools available for African Americans (Anderson, 1988; Brockliss & Sheldon, 2012).

African Americans' Aspirations for Learning but Not Enough Teachers and Schools

The enrollment of African American public schools continued to increase in the 1900s. This continual change became problematic because there were only a few trained African American teachers, and most Caucasians refused to teach students of color (Anderson, 1988; Pellegrino, Mann, & Russell, 2013). Children were denied enrollment primarily due to insufficient teachers and space. To ensure the education of *all* African American children, these schools began hiring less qualified teachers (Anderson, 1988; Slavin & Madden, 2006; Pellegrino, Mann, & Russell, 2013). Yet, the teacher-shortage lingered, causing an increase of student-teacher ratios:

In 1900 in the sixteen former slave states[,] there were 26,770
[African American] teachers for the 2,485,737 children
[of color] ages five through eighteen, or one [African American]
teacher for every 93[...]children of school age
(Anderson, 1988, p. 111).

This high ratio exceeded the state requirement of one teacher per 30 pupils and exceeded the one teacher per 57 student ratio at schools for Caucasians (Anderson, 1988; Wright, 2006). In response to this inappropriate student-teacher ratio, the South began developing teacher training preparatory programs for African Americans (Anderson, 1988; Kridel, 2010). Compared to programs for Caucasians, however, those designed for African Americans were based on low standards. This was, yet, another method to impede the educational development of African Americans (Anderson, 1988).

Due to the limited number of African American public schools available in the 1900s, most children did not attend school and yielded to laboring in the fields with their parents. As

opposed to Caucasians, state and local governments did not provide African Americans with transportation to schoolhouses; therefore, students of color were unable to attend schools outside of their communities (Anderson, 1988; Gordon-Reed, 2002). This did not hinder every student from attending school in other regions. In fact, a number of students took long, rough walks of about one and half miles to school every day (Anderson, 1988; Love, 2004). African Americans longed for a better life for their children and became intensely annoyed at the South's educational disparity that was present even after the so-called *Plessy v. Ferguson* 1897 decision of "separate but equal." They soon responded by migrating to northern states in 1914 (Anderson, 1988). A Caucasian editor of *Daily News* in Jackson, Mississippi, observed this yearning for advancement:

A[n] [African American] father, if he is honest, hard working, and industrious, has the same ambition for his children that a [Caucasian] man possesses. He wants to see his offspring receive an education in order that they may be properly equipped for the battle of life. But they are not getting this. Every person who is familiar with educational affairs in Mississippi knows this to be the case. And it forms one of the chief reasons why thrifty, industrious [African Americans], who want to get ahead in the world, who have a desire to live decently, are following the lure of higher wages and better living conditions and moving in the northern states" (Anderson, 1988, p. 152).

The *Brown* Decision and Its Effects on Education

In spite of the *Plessy* decision, African Americans continued to face unjust treatment, and for that reason, the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund initiated an unprecedented approach (Love, 2004; McNeal, 2009; Brockliss & Sheldon, 2012; United States Courts, 2014). According to the United States Courts (2014), the Fund “devised a strategy to attack Jim Crow laws by striking at them where they were perhaps the weakest—in the field of education” (para. 5). The Fund began representing plaintiffs in cases related to segregation in education: *Murray v. Maryland*, 1938; *Missouri ex rel Gaines v. Canada*, 1938; *Sweat v. Painter*, 1950; and *McLaurin v. Oklahoma Board of Regents of Higher Education*, 1950 (Doolin & Sealey, 2013; United States Courts, 2014). In 1952, the Supreme Court faced five common cases relating to segregation of public schools: *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, *Briggs v. Elliot*, *Davis v. Board of Education of Prince Edward County (VA.)*, *Boiling v. Sharpe*, and *Gebhart v. Ethel*. Since all cases were similar, they were consolidated and named *Brown v. Board of Education* (Raffel, 1998; Wheeler, 2005; United States Courts, 2014). Thurgood Marshall, leader of the Fund, argued for plaintiffs:

[S]eparate school systems for [African Americans] and [Caucasians] were inherently unequal, and thus violate the ‘equal protection clause’ of the Fourteenth Amendment to the U. S. Constitution...[He] also argued that segregated school systems had a tendency to make [African American] children feel inferior to [Caucasian] children, and thus such a system should not be legally permissible (United States Courts, 2014, para. 12).

The Court was unable to reach a unanimous decision until May 14, 1954, concluding that “in the field of public education the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place[,] [and] separate

educational facilities are inherently unequal” (United States Courts, 2014, para. 13). Because of expected opposition from southern states, Justices of the Supreme Court proactively developed desegregation plans for every state (United States Courts, 2014). Still, states avoided executing the plan; hence, approximately one year later, the Justices ordered all states to proceed with desegregation (Belknap, 2005; United States Courts, 2014).

Between the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was an outbreak of integrated schools across the South. The African American community found hope in this schooling transformation, believing desegregation was the panacea for educational equality (Orfield, 2001; Brooks, 2009). They continued to firmly uphold this tenet, especially when their children’s academic progress became apparent in both reading and mathematics (Orfield, 2001). Barton and Coley (2010) pinpointed this yearly progression but also noted its inconsistency and eventual stagnation:

- 1) From the early 1970s until the late 1980s, a very large narrowing of the gap occurred in both reading and mathematics...For 17-year-olds, the gap declined from 53 points to 20 points. In mathematics, the gaps also were narrowed significantly, especially for 13- and 17-year olds.
- 2) During the 1990s, the gap narrowing generally halted, and actually began to increase in some cases. In reading, for example, for 13-year olds, the gap increased from a low of 18 points in 1988 to about 30 points at the end of the 1990s. In mathematics, the gap rose steadily during the decade of 1990s, particularly for 13- and 17-year olds.
- 3) From 1999 to 2004, the gap [began] to narrow again, with the largest reductions occurring in reading.

4) Between the 2004 and 2008 assessments, there [was] little change in the gap in mathematics; in reading, the gap narrows somewhat for 9- and 13-year-olds (p. 6-7).

Factors of the Achievement Gap

School Factors v. Non-School Factors

As previously mentioned, during the 1970s and early 1980s, African Americans improved significantly in reading and mathematics (Barton & Coley, 2010). Researchers attributed this achievement to school level factors (high quality resources and teachers), as a result of integration (Armor, 2001). Armor (2001) investigated this suggested factor by analyzing NAEP data and examined school-factors (i.e., financial resources, staffing, curriculum, and standards) and non-school factors (i.e., students' family backgrounds).

While investigating, he discovered counter evidence: Data indicated that in both segregated and desegregated schools, African Americans made considerable gains in reading and mathematics. In each school with meaningful desegregation levels, there was an achievement gap. He also learned that segregated and desegregated schools had similar resources, and African Americans from both schools performed at the same level. He concluded that desegregation and school factors had a non-significant impact in disproportionate student outcomes (Armor, 2001). Conversely, he discovered that non-school factors (socioeconomic status and family structure) had a significant impact. As additionally suggested by Armor (2001), “[this] means that [the gap] already exists when children start their schooling” (Armor, 2001, p. 653-654).

Barton and Coley (2010) also sought to determine why the achievement gap narrowed during the 1970s and 1980s. They examined the following factors: family and demographic

changes, investments into early education, rigorous curriculum, class size, school desegregation, and minimum competency testing. These researchers learned that family and demographic changes impacted the narrowing of the achievement gap. Their evidence also suggested that the decline of large classroom sizes and desegregation, specifically in the South, was a major influence (Barton & Coley, 2010).

Scholars and Pundits Blame African American Culture for Achievement Gap

Proponents of the Jim Crow era argued that African Americans were responsible for racial segregation due to their subordinate culture (Anderson, 2004; Murphy, 2010). In recent years, this ideology has resurfaced among scholars and commentators who believe that the achievement gap is a result of African American culture. These scholars and commentators, which include African Americans, claim that this culture's history was formed by their experiences of segregation and slavery and presume African Americans have resisted education due to its association with the elite (Ogbu, 1990; D'Souza, 1996; Scott, 1997; Harrison & Huntington, 2000; McWhorter, 2000; Ogbu, 2003; Anderson, 2004). Anderson (2004) and other scholars combat this ideology with evidence, pointing out that African Americans ultimately sought after freedom because of its path to educational opportunities.

High Stakes Testing

The Rise and Fall of Minimum Competency Exams

The 1970s was the period in which high school exit exams began to emerge. According to Au and Gourd (2013), these exams emanated from intelligence quotient (IQ) testing. French psychologist Alfred Binet developed IQ testing in 1904 to determine the intelligence of children, and then provide interventions when necessary (Au & Gourd, 2013). Thirteen years later, other psychologists such as Yerkes, Goddard, and Terman employed IQ testing but only for the

purpose of selecting soldiers for World War I. When analyzing the test results, Yerkes discovered that African Americans consistently had the lowest IQ compared to Hispanics, Asians, and Caucasians (Au & Gourd, 2013). In 1932, schools began utilizing IQ testing to divide students into ability groups; colleges also began using IQ testing to identify students for admission (Au, 2009).

In the 1970s, states began adopting their first high school exit exams, known as minimum competency exams (MCEs). Under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, which was established to improve the education of African Americans and students living in poverty², public schools were required to administer MCEs (Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Blake, 2012). These exams were developed to “prod schools to improve the way they educate the lowest achieving students [specifically African Americans], to increase the effort put forth by students, and to provide certification that students have mastered a given set of skills, thereby increasing the labor market value of a high school diploma” (Holme et al., 2010, p. 476). Citizens soon criticized the implementation of MCEs for widening the achievement gap among Caucasians and African Americans (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Au & Gourd, 2013). Eventually, a number of states relinquished these exams. In the 1990s, states began implementing more rigorous examinations to ensure students were, indeed, prepared to compete in a competitive global society (Holme et al., 2010).

² The ESEA is further discussed in this chapter within the section “Perspectives Concerning High Stakes Testing and the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act.”

Effects of High School Exit Examinations

High school exit examinations have had both positive and negative effects on students (Holme et al., 2010). A noted positive effect has been the development of remediation courses. These courses usually include pupils who failed a specific exam and are specifically tailored to prepare these students for future retakes. If implemented effectively, remediation courses will prepare students for success and build intrinsic motivation. On the other hand, high school exit exams have created negative effects (Holme et al., 2010). Since schools are now being held accountable for the achievement of every student, devising unscrupulous methods to push low achievers out of school has become a common approach (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Holme et al., 2010). Another negative effect is the psychological issue produced among failing students. This evokes a lack of motivation for learning and eventually causes students to drop out of school (Holme et al., 2010).

Borg, Plumlee, and Stranahan (2007) essentially sought to ascertain the effects of high-stakes on Duval County, Florida, students. In Florida, students are required to take the tenth grade Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT), which includes reading and math sections. Students must pass this test on one of the six attempts to be eligible for a standard high school diploma. If students fail to achieve a passing score, they will be compelled to accept a certificate of completion (Borg et al., 2007).

After conducting their investigation, Borg et al. (2007) discovered indicators of student success on the FCAT: SES of the student's household, race and ethnicity, student mobility, school characteristics, and teacher qualifications. The study's results are listed and described below:

SES of the student's household. Students who are from high-income households (accumulating \$30,000 or higher per year) have a significantly higher probability of passing the FCAT, compared to students who are from low-income families (earning \$10,000-\$20,000 per year) (Borg et al., 2007). In fact, “[s]tudents from households in the highest income category have a 9% probability of failing under the new standards as compared to a 26% probability for students from households in the lowest income category” (Borg et al., 2007, p. 18).

Race and ethnicity. It is strongly probable that African Americans will fail, and Caucasians will pass the FCAT on the first attempt (Borg et al., 2007). Borg et al. (2007) clarify this probable chance: “An average [Caucasian] student has a 65% probability of passing the FCAT graduation requirement on the first try as compared to a 34% probability for an identical African American student...” (p. 18).

Student mobility. Schools with high percentages of minorities have more student withdraws and re-enrollments than schools with predominantly Caucasian students. Students withdrawing and re-enrolling has a negative effect on academic success (Borg et al., 2007).

School characteristics. Pupils at magnet high schools, whether they are college preparatory schools for gifted students or fine and performing arts for talented students, have a significantly higher probability of passing the FCAT than non-magnet high school students (Borg et al., 2007).

Teacher qualifications. Students who have teachers with advanced degrees are more likely to pass the FCAT than students who have teachers with a bachelor's degree. Also, schools with a high percentage of new teachers (high turnover rate) negatively impact academic success. Disturbingly, highly populated minority schools, those with students who are at a disadvantage before entering school, are usually the ones with high turnover rates (Borg et al., 2007).

The Negative Effects of High-Stakes Testing on the Teaching of ELA

Au and Gourd (2013) affirmed that high-stakes testing has a negative effect on instruction. They specifically pointed out its effects on ELA instruction and believe that high-stakes testing has caused English teachers to reluctantly teach contradictory of ELA research (Au & Gourd, 2013). “For example, in Massachusetts, where students participate in the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), teachers report how they teach writing, as well as the types of writing students are asked to perform, are being controlled by high-stakes tests” (Au & Gourd, 2013, p. 17). Luna and Turner (2001) defined the Massachusetts’ state assessment: “The MCAS is a series of performance-based standardized tests in a variety of subjects, including English, in which students in grades four, eight, and ten are expected to answer multiple choice and open-response questions and write a five paragraph essay” (Luna & Turner, 2001, p. 79). High school students are required to pass this assessment in order to graduate (Luna & Turner, 2001).

English teachers at an unsuccessful, predominantly minority high school in Massachusetts articulated their beliefs about the MCAS. These instructors contended that state assessment limits instruction. Although they continue teaching major components of English, these disgruntled teachers feel the urgency to teach to the test and rush through the curriculum (Luna & Turner, 2001). Below are teacher responses in reference to the MCAS:

Harry [noted] that, because of the MCAS, “you can’t spend much time on a particular novel, discussing various implications...you can’t go down various roads that you used to go down because you’ve got to make sure that you get this [test] preparation done.” And finally, according to Dennis, teachers’ curricula are now being guided by the test, rather than the state

frameworks: “We look at the media standards, and we can immediately rule all that stuff out... You look and you say, all right, there are fifteen questions on similes on the test, all right, let’s concentrate on this kind of thing (Luna & Turner, 2001, p. 83).

Instead of in-depth teaching and engaging students in meaningful activities, these teachers feel compelled to teach students how to answer the MCAS multiple choice items. When teaching writing, they feel constrained to focus on the format of writing, rather than teaching students to write for a purpose. They argue that this type of teaching does not involve students in critical thinking (Luna & Turner, 2001). As one teacher described it, “We’re putting the numbers down and [the students are] filling in the colors. There’s no creativity involved at all” (Luna & Turner, 2001, p. 83).

In an extended discussion, Au and Gourd (2013) stated that multicultural literature is also disintegrating from the language arts curriculum. As reported by these researchers, this type of literature is a motivational tool which offers relevance to the curriculum. When this literature is infused in lessons, students are able to “compare and contrast perspectives from canonical and multicultural literature, recognizing differences and similarities” (Au & Gourd, 2013, p. 19). This type of activity helps students build cognition (Au & Gourd, 2013).

Furthermore, high-stakes testing was supposedly developed to help increase the achievement of minorities, but instead, it has negatively impacted their education. Teachers have been teaching to the test in a way that has lowered the standards for students and is less motivating. This type of instruction has not been advantageous to students (Au & Gourd, 2013).

Tactics of Low Performing Schools in Response to High-Stakes Testing

In a study conducted by Jennings and Sohn (2014), they uncovered the effects of high-stakes testing on low performing students in unsuccessful schools. On state assessments, students' proficiency levels are equivalent to scales scores. Schools where students perform at high levels are likely to have a successful school rating (Jennings & Sohn, 2014). Therefore, as teachers face accountability pressure, they tend to focus on students who are closest to proficiency, neglecting those who are far below this level (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Booher-Jennings, 2005; Hamilton, Stecher, Marsh, McCombs, Robyn, Russell, Naftel, & Barney, 2007). This is known as educational triage and has virtually become a common practice among teachers. Though this may be an effective approach, it creates a within-school disparity (Jennings & Sohn, 2014).

Also, at low performing schools, teachers usually predict skills that will be tested on exams and narrow their curriculum based on those questions. Once the content items are reduced, teachers teach to these items, including its format, which does not engage students in critical thinking (Koretz, 2008; Jennings & Sohn, 2014).

Perspectives Concerning High Stakes Testing and the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act

Under the leadership of President Lyndon B. Johnson, Congress made unprecedented efforts in response to *Brown*. They established the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 to meet the educational needs of African Americans and students living in poverty (Screenivasan, 2009; Hewitt, 2011). For instance, Congress developed the Title I program to help address educational necessities by granting federal aid to poverty schools (Screenivasan, 2009; Frederickson, 2010; Hewitt, 2011).

Congress attempted to continue ESEA's legacy by establishing the NCLB Act (Hewitt, 2011). This initiation has had a negative impact on student achievement. During the pre-NCLB era, the achievement gap began to close. After the NCLB Act was established, the gap widened, and unfortunately, still remains. Additionally, schools have been forced to teach to the test and engage in immoral activities such as cheating; therefore, Hewitt (2011) proposed the following necessary adjustments in order for the NCLB Act to make a significant difference in student success: (1) redefine accountability, (2) standardize graduation rates, (3) eliminate harsh school discipline policy as a barrier to learning, (4) close the "opportunity gap," (5) ensure equitable access to highly qualified and effective teachers, (6) promote enhanced diversity, and (7) safeguard educational equity.

Redefine accountability. The NCLB Act places too much emphasis on standardized test scores and accountability and not enough focus on efforts to increase academic achievement (Hewitt, 2011). Thus, "[t]he revised statute should ensure accountability across a broader range of indicators, with meaningful targets for student, school, and district performance for each indicator" (Hewitt, 2011, p. 180).

Standardize graduation rates. Sadly, there has been an inflation of drop-outs among African Americans, while graduation rates have been steadily decreasing (Hewitt, 2011). Hewitt (2011) criticizes the NCLB Act for this drop-out crisis due to their so-called accountability system. Under the NCLB Act, there is no systematic approach for calculating the graduation rate; instead, states are charged with this responsibility. Failing to disaggregate data to identify which subgroups are not graduating is another issue. Hence, for the NCLB Act reauthorization, these issues should be addressed (Hewitt, 2011).

Eliminate harsh school discipline policy as a barrier to learning. The NCLB Act must address inappropriate school discipline. Although disciplinary actions help keep students safe, schools are doing students an injustice when pushing them out for minor infractions (Hewitt, 2011). Hewitt (2011) noted that “[s]tudents cannot learn unless they are safe, but they also cannot learn if they are not in the classroom due to a suspension, expulsion, or assignment to an alternative education placement” (p. 181). He suggested that Congress provide schools with federal aid for implementing school-wide programs such as Positive Behavioral Supports to help improve school culture and student achievement (Hewitt, 2011).

Close the “opportunity gap.” Schools in impoverished areas typically have fewer resources than those in flourished communities. In order for *all* schools to achieve their missions of increasing academic success, being provided with sufficient resources is central. Nonetheless, under the reauthorization of the NCLB Act, states should be required to develop resource equity plans (Hewitt, 2011). Hewitt (2011) provides a description of this plan:

This requirement would call for school districts to report actual expenditures on teaching, instructional, and non-instructional staff salaries, as well as related expenditures such as technology and staff support costs. States would also have to allocate sufficient additional resources to school districts and schools that serve concentrations of the neediest students (p. 188).

Ensure equitable access to highly qualified and effective teachers. Having effective teachers has a significantly positive effect on student achievement. Compared to Caucasians, African Americans are more likely to have ineffective teachers. To avoid this disproportion, teachers should be evaluated utilizing an appraisal rubric with multiple indicators, which “should

illustrate their ability to distinguish themselves from their peers based on the degree to which they can positively influence student achievement and school climate” (Hewitt, 2011, p. 190). The rubric must be an appropriate measure of teacher effectiveness (Hewitt, 2011). “[I]mportant measures to be included in such an evaluation rubric are student achievement data, peer and supervisor evaluations, and student surveys” (Hewitt, 2011, p. 190).

Promote Enhanced Diversity. If a school is located in a poverty area and has a high percentage of minorities, there is a strong indication it is a low-performing school. Under the current NCLB Act, if students attend a failing school, they are permitted to attend another school within the district. Other schools in these districts, however, are often low performing as well. To ameliorate this issue, the NCLB Act reauthorization must include other school options outside of the district (Hewitt, 2011).

Safeguard Educational Equity. Students and parents should be afforded the opportunity to state their input concerning educational issues (Hewitt, 2011). “Thus, the reauthorized law should offer parents and students the opportunity to enforce their rights to key provisions through administrative and/or judicial proceedings, particularly in federal court” (Hewitt, 2011, p. 193).

Effective School Leaders and Teachers’ Impact on Student Achievement

Leaders of Elmont Memorial Junior-Senior High School

Elmont Memorial Junior-Senior High School in Elmont, New York, is one school which has increased academic achievement among its predominantly African American students. This school was “recognized by The College Board as the high school that gets more African-American students taking and passing (getting a score of 3 or higher) AP World History than any other school in the country (23 in 2004)...” (Chenoweth, 2005, p. 4). Elmont’s students also

performed exceptionally well on mathematics and English EOC exams. During the 2003 school year, all students passed both the mathematics and English assessment. In 2004, 96 percent of students passed the mathematics test, and 99 percent passed the English test. In order to obtain this success, Elmont utilized multiple strategies, but according to teachers, having effective administrators was the most impactful factor. Elmont's administrators believed student success required effective teaching; therefore, they focused on improving teachers' instructional practices by affording teacher-collaborative opportunities and observing and providing teachers with effective feedback (Chenoweth, 2005).

The administrators required teacher collaboration at departmental meetings. During their leisure, teachers cooperatively created lesson plans and assessments. To ensure lessons were effectively implemented, administrators and department chairpersons frequently observed teachers and provided immediate feedback. This feedback included teachers' strengths and weaknesses, followed by an action plan. The plan included necessary actions for improvement, which may have required observing a specific colleague (Chenoweth, 2009). "Here [is] one example: "By observing Ms. McDonnell, you will take note of smooth transitions between lesson activities that will enable you to maintain student attention..." (Chenoweth, 2009, p. 17).

Administrators and department chairpersons observed lessons and shared feedback with each other to improve observational techniques. Sometimes lessons were videotaped, and administrators and department chairpersons watched it collectively. During their own time, they wrote detailed feedback and met the next day to share their suggestions. This allowed them to learn observational methods from one another (Chenoweth, 2005).

Leaders of Randolph High School

Randolph High School in Massachusetts, another school with predominantly African American students, experienced academic excellence. They especially increased academic achievement among their tenth grade ELA students, as measured by the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) (Achievement Gap Initiative, 2009). In fact, “when their gains from [eighth]...to [tenth] grade [were] compared to those of other high schools in the state, Randolph High [ranked] near the 80th percentile—performing better than 70 to 80 percent of other schools in the state” (Achievement Gap Initiative, 2009, p. 112).

In an effort to accomplish such success, the administrators began by developing a school-wide vision statement and expected teachers to “teach students, not subjects” (Achievement Gap Initiative, 2009, p. 114). Randolph’s administrators believed student-engaged activities that elicited higher-order thinking and effective written and oral communication skills produced student success. Therefore, the principals encouraged teachers to infuse higher-order thinking and writing in lessons every day (Achievement Gap Initiative, 2009).

Randolph’s school administrators asserted that improving teachers’ pedagogical practices was essential for successful student outcomes and indicated this by scheduling professional development and requiring teachers to read various books related to instructional practices. With the assistance of instructional coaches, the principals also conducted mid-year and end-of-the-year evaluations and walk-throughs. Walk-throughs were done several times throughout the year, as principals and instructional coaches visited teachers’ classrooms to monitor and provide feedback. To strengthen their observational methods, the administrators and instructional coaches enrolled in a mentoring and monitoring course (Achievement Gap Initiative, 2009).

Administrators and instructional coaches were not the only ones who conducted walk-throughs; the principals also encouraged teachers to conduct peer walk-throughs.

The school administrators also fostered a collaborative community: Teachers of the same content were granted common planning periods on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays to monitor student data and create lesson plans. Also, instructional coaches used this time to provide lesson plan feedback and share instructional strategies. On Fridays, the administrators conducted professional development with each department (Achievement Gap Initiative, 2009). Moreover, as conveyed by Achievement Gap Initiative (2009), Randolph's administrative team was the cause of student achievement.

ELA Teachers in Poverty Areas

Langer (2001) and other colleagues conducted a study to determine characteristics of effective middle and high school ELA instruction. These researchers investigated 44 English classrooms in 25 successful schools in four states, with most schools located in poverty areas. To execute a thorough investigation, researchers collected student work samples and test scores, completed classroom observations, and interviewed students, teachers, and administrators. After collecting and analyzing data, Langer (2001) and colleagues identified three main features of these teachers' instruction: (1) Teachers taught skills in multiple lesson types; (2) Teachers integrated test preparation into instruction and made connections across instruction, curriculum, and life; and (3) Teachers taught strategies for doing the work, expected students to be generative thinkers, and fostered cognitive collaboration (Langer, 2001).

Teachers taught skills in multiple lesson types. In these classrooms, teachers implemented three main learning approaches—separated, simulated, or integrated activities. When the entire class, groups, or individuals lacked knowledge about a specific rule, skill, or

item, teachers employed the separate activity. For instance, if a teacher noticed individuals having difficulty identifying literary devices (e.g., alliteration and idioms), he or she required these students to study examples of the devices. Depending on student needs, teachers also engaged pupils in simulated activities for learning application, which may have included reading literature to identify specific literary devices. An integrated activity was another approach used to involve students in learning application, but student knowledge was applied in more authentic activities such as explaining how literary devices affected them as readers (Langer, 2001).

Teachers integrated test preparation into instruction and made connections across instruction, curriculum, and life. ELA teachers in these successful schools also integrated test preparation into instruction. However, before integration, teachers met to study the assessment and take it themselves. These educators not only collaborated for test preparation experiences but also cooperated to make connections across instruction, curriculum, and life. When collaborating, teachers discussed skills to be taught and ways to teach across the curriculum (Langer, 2001).

Teachers taught strategies for doing the work, expected students to be generative thinkers, and fostered cognitive collaboration. The researchers also explained how effective ELA teachers supplied students with different strategies for completing tasks. Before students engaged in independent work, teachers modeled how to complete the activity and think through each process. When students were involved in the task, teachers provided scaffolding when needed, rather than suggesting answers. Indeed, these educators expected their students to be generative thinkers and often involved students in engaging, rigorous activities that elicited critical thinking. In addition, these teachers believed in fostering cognitive collaboration; thus,

when engaged in activities, students were not demanded to be quiet and work alone but were expected to learn from each other in collaborative groups (Langer, 2001).

ELA Teachers at Florin High School

Florin High School in Sacramento, California, is a school serving predominantly minority students; yet, despite challenges, this school increased academic achievement across all subject areas among *all* students. The gap between their African American and Caucasian students narrowed by eleven percentage points (United States Department of Education, 2005).

According to faculty members, the English department was the major factor in this achievement due to the English teachers' reading-focused classrooms. These English teachers motivated students to read by providing opportunities to read a variety of self-selected books in class, and the teachers and students shared and recommended books (United States Department of Education, 2005). Florin also "[provided] time for "sustained silent reading" where one day a week in their English class, students [were] allowed to read a book of their choice for one class period" (United States Department of Education, 2005, p. 34). In addition to the reading-focused English classes, Florin's English teachers collected formative assessments daily to monitor student progress and drive instruction (United States Department of Education, 2005). "If English assessments [were] especially weak in basic grammar skills, grammar [became] something the school [emphasized]" (United States Department of Education, 2005, p. 33).

ELA Teachers at Urban High Schools

To conduct a study on the effectiveness of ELA teachers, Adkins-Coleman and Lyons (2010) selected ELA teachers (Ms. Morrison and Ms. Lomax) from different successful predominantly minority high schools. Even though Ms. Morrison and Ms. Lomax taught at separate schools, pupils and administrators at both facilities exclusively credited the ELA gains

to the teachers (Adkins-Coleman & Lyons, 2010). It was through classroom observations, teacher interviews, and instructional artifacts that Adkins-Coleman and Lyons (2010) discovered why such credit had been given. The researchers described five identified practices of both instructors: (1) facilitated motivation, (2) developed strong relationships and mutual respect, (3) built empathy through words and actions, (4) maintained high behavioral expectations, and (5) engaged students in cognitive tasks and demanded effort (Adkins-Coleman & Lyons, 2010).

Facilitated Motivation

Both teachers articulated their beliefs about motivating students. They believed motivation was fundamental for student achievement. Ms. Morrison and Ms. Lomax firmly upheld the old English proverb, “Children don’t care about how much you know until they know how much you care” (Adkins-Coleman & Lyons, 2010). Ms. Lomax demonstrated her concern when she told the class “that coming to work, for her, was like going to a party because she had so much fun...” (Adkins-Coleman & Lyons, 2010, p. 45).

Developed Strong Relationships and Mutual Respect

Showing their commitment to students in words and actions was another characteristic of both Ms. Morrison and Ms. Lomax. As a result, strong relationships and mutual respect between the teachers and students were developed (Adkins-Coleman & Lyons, 2010). It was evident that Ms. Lomax had built substantial relationships with her pupils:

On one occasion, a student whom she had pushed intellectually during class lingered in her classroom after the bell rang. She asked the student if she had “figured out her situation.” The student responded that she did have a place to stay, but it was outside of the school district so she had to take public transportation to and from school. Ms. Lomax asked her where

she was staying and, after she answered the question, the teacher responded,
“Let me know if you need a ride, because I go right through there”

(Adkins-Coleman & Lyons, 2010, p. 46).

Built Empathy Through Words and Actions

Ms. Morrison and Ms. Lomax demonstrated empathy for their students through words and actions. They avoided sitting behind desks and making students feel unimportant. Each teacher wanted students to know their worth. To demonstrate this, Ms. Morrison moved throughout the classroom and sat in student desks when communicating with individual pupils (Adkins-Coleman & Lyons, 2010).

Maintained High Behavioral Expectations

Despite challenges, these teachers maintained high behavioral expectations for students. Ms. Morrison and Ms. Lomax created an environment that was conducive to learning and refused to allow students' misbehavior to infringe upon others' learning. These teachers established classroom rules and expectations the first day of school. Students were expected to follow these rules, and Ms. Morrison and Ms. Lomax never wavered in their expectations.

The following shows Ms. Morrison establishing classroom expectations at the beginning of a school term: “This is my classroom[,] and you're going to respect my classroom[,] and there's no compromising in that. This is mine[,] and these are the rules[,] and that's it...” (Adkins-Coleman & Lyons, 2010, p. 47). If pupils failed to meet an expectation in Ms. Morrison or Ms. Lomax's classroom, they would be handled accordingly. Keeping students engaged in activities during the entire class period helped alleviate major infractions (Adkins-Coleman & Lyons, 2010).

Engaged Students in Cognitive Tasks and Demanded Effort

Ms. Morrison and Ms. Lomax expected students to engage in activities at all times. There were never free-days in these teachers' classrooms. When involved in activities, Ms. Morrison and Ms. Lomax demanded student effort, while simultaneously providing encouragement (Adkins-Coleman & Lyons, 2010). Failure was not an option for these students:

Ms. Morrison, for example, encouraged a male student to think on his feet and deliver an oral presentation for which he was unprepared. She said to him and the entire class, "Y'all need to exercise some common sense. If you're coming up to the front, do I know you don't have anything prepared for me? Act like you spent the last seven days working on it"

(Adkins-Coleman & Lyons, 2010, p. 50).

Furthermore, both of these teachers believed that expressing concern for students academically and personally, motivating students, and providing them with meaningful, engaging activities and academic support, were all key elements for increasing academic achievement (Adkins-Coleman & Lyons, 2010).

Reading Remediation Teacher at a Florida High School

In Florida, tenth graders are required to take and pass the Reading and Mathematics Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT) for eligibility of a standard high school diploma. If students fail the assessment during their tenth grade year, they are permitted a retake the following spring and fall (Houchen, 2012).

The Reading and Mathematics FCAT levels, which represent scale scores, range from 1-5. As indicated by FCAT data, African Americans have lagged behind their Caucasian peers in reading (Houchen, 2012). "In 2010, 70% of Caucasian students passed this exit exam with a

level 3 or higher during their 10th grade year. However, only 36% of African American students scored a level 3” (Houchen, 2012, p. 93). According to Florida’s statutes, if a student scores a one or two, he or she must be enrolled in a remedial intensive reading course. Unsurprisingly, this class has a high enrollment of African Americans throughout the entire state (Houchen, 2012).

Houchen (2012) was an instructor for this remedial course. She taught two courses—a class of ninth and tenth graders and one with eleventh and twelfth grade students. This teacher conducted action research and searched for effective teaching practices to successfully prepare students for the exam. After considerable research, she followed the instructional principles below:

- (1) create strong and caring relationships with students based on mutual respect and high expectations,
- (2) access student thinking regarding their own learning needs and their cultural background to inform the curriculum, and
- (3) teach metacognition and comprehension skills and strategies in multiple formats both explicitly and generatively (Houchen, 2012, p. 98).

Keeping these fundamentals at the forefront, Houchen (2012) developed a total of five units with outlined goals for each. She avoided haphazardly creating units and goals by allowing research literature to guide her decisions. The following includes the unit descriptions and corresponding goals:

- **Unit 1: Class Building and Diagnostic Assessments-** Getting to know students academically and personally was the ultimate goal. This was achieved by employing learning and interest inventories.

- **Unit 2: Short-Term FCAT Preparation-** Reinforcing skills (e.g., reading comprehension) and teaching test-taking strategies such as the process of elimination was the target for this unit. After effective instruction, students were assessed.
- **Unit 3: Immigration-** This was a topic in which students found interesting, thus, was used as the basis for teaching various concepts such as summarizing main ideas, synthesizing sources, and identifying themes and author's perspective. Assessments guided instruction, and after receiving quality teaching, students were assessed.
- **Unit 4: Mid-Year Reflections and Focus Groups-** Once the retake results were issued, the instructor began another preparation cycle for students who had failed. Determining the re-takers' needs was the teacher's new additional approach. This was done in focus groups and informal conversations with students and by reading students' personal journals.
- **Unit 5: Novel Reading-** This teacher utilized two novels, one written by a Caucasian male and one by an African American male, which highlighted the realities of life. These novels were the bases for teaching key concepts (e.g., inference, author's purpose, and vocabulary) (Houchen, 2012).

It was through the student focus group interviews and teacher journal and observations that Houchen (2012) learned five lessons to help improve her instructional practice:

Lesson one: Failure on the FCAT test can translate to personal failure for the student. A number of students abhorred attending the remedial class and were unreceptive of instruction due to low-self efficacy. When analyzing her students' test

results, she noted all classes had similar strengths and weaknesses. Houchen then assumed she could teach both classes using the exact curriculum, but surprisingly, she could not. Because her eleventh and twelfth graders were especially despondent and despised communicating with classmates, she realized that these students wanted to learn alone. She then made modifications. For instance, instead of requiring students to sit in a circle, she rearranged the desks into rows.

Lesson two: Being assigned to a remedial class is perceived as a loss to the student's academic choice making and affects their school related persona. As a result of failing the Reading FCAT, students were compelled to attend this course, which replaced their elective. Elective courses were typically more laid back and of interest to students such as Performing Arts or Weightlifting. Additional consequences of this class included being ridiculed by students and criticized by teachers.

Lesson three: Relationships are built one on one. Students were reluctant to attend this course, and this was certainly reflected by their misbehavior. To help ameliorate this situation, Houchen began forming partnerships with the administrators, but “learned that wrestling with the students’ unacceptable behaviors, being honest regarding [her] disappointment and offense, and speaking truthfully and directly while simultaneously nurturing the relationship with the student did more to change the behavior” (Houchen, 2012, p. 106).

Lesson four: A relaxed class is not a lax class. According to students, Houchen created a comfortable learning environment. She explained that it enumerated from data analysis. For instance, after perusing students’ results of Gardner’s Multiple Intelligence test, she discovered that all of her students were musically inclined. Therefore, she

deviated from the school rules and permitted students to listen to music on their MP3 players while completing assignments.

Lesson five: All literacies are valid and can be used for instruction. Through a reading questionnaire, Houchen learned that reading text messages was of high interest to students. She did not dismiss this revelation but used it to her advantage by sending mass texts reminding students of due dates and sending individual texts to aid students with complex skills (Houchen, 2012).

Motivating her students was instrumental in their achievement, and collecting data was also crucial for making instructional decisions. Evidently, her methods had proven to be effective (Houchen, 2012). “[O]verall 84% of the students taking the FCAT Retake exam during the 2009 to 2010 school year passed[...].” (Houchen, 2012, p. 103).

North Central High School Administrators and Teachers

North Central High in Indianapolis, Indiana, is another school that increased academic achievement among their minority students. During the late 1990s, “...only 40 percent of [North Central’s] minority students were passing the state test...” (United States Department of Education, 2005, p. 42). Nevertheless, after implementing professional development and instructional programs, North Central narrowed the ELA achievement gap between their African American and Caucasian students by ten percentage points. As a result, Florin achieved a 98 percent graduation rate (United States Department of Education, 2005).

As stated by the principal, providing ongoing professional development was a key factor of this achievement. These professional development programs were not aimlessly chosen but were selected based on the school’s needs. The teachers were required to attend all sessions and were held accountable for implementing techniques learned from the sessions in their

classrooms. During frequent departmental meetings, each department chair was responsible for collaborating with his or her team to discuss approaches for implementing the learned strategies. The department chair and team were also responsible for planning and monitoring student data (United States Department of Education, 2005). North Central believed in building a culture of community. After eliciting support from parents and community members, several members began assisting with school programs and services such as tutoring and fundraising (United States Department of Education, 2005).

To narrow the ELA achievement gap, North Central implemented an ELA curriculum which “focus[ed] on literacy, writing, critical thinking, and analytical skills” (United States Department of Education, 2005, p. 41). In addition to textbooks, teachers infused supplemental materials within the curriculum. Teachers also implemented “writing across the curriculum” initiative (United States Department of Education, 2005). “Following its introduction as a major tenet of North Central’s curriculum, faculty were given professional development and provided with resource materials on how to develop essay questions that elicit thoughtful and well-articulated responses from students” (United States Department of Education, 2005, p. 41). Similar to the teachers, students were also provided opportunities to collaborate in cooperative learning groups, another achievement factor (United States Department of Education, 2005).

Tubman High School Administrators and Teachers

For fifteen years, students at Tubman High School (pseudonym) in San Diego, California, achieved below their Caucasian peers. However, Tubman’s students subjugated their low performance by achieving significant gains for the past two years. Teachers credit this success to three school-wide initiatives: (1) focused and accountable professional development, (2) daily independent reading (with conferences), and (3) block scheduling.

Focused and Accountable Professional Development

Tubman's administrators considered focused, accountable professional development as a necessary approach to develop effective teachers, and thereby increase student achievement. Hence, administrators formed a professional development committee, and members were responsible for identifying beneficial training sessions. The entire committee concurred that implementing a school-wide reading initiative was crucial for student success. They believed this would afford students the opportunity to repeatedly practice reading comprehension strategies, which is not only needed for ELA success but for achievement in other subjects (Fisher, 2001). In preparation for the initiative, the committee provided back-to-school in-service training on the seven selected strategies, which included "writing to learn, K-W-L (what I know, what I want to learn, what I have learned) charts, concept mapping, reciprocal teaching, vocabulary instruction, structured notetaking, and read-alouds" (Fisher, 2001, p. 93). The following includes descriptions and examples of the aforementioned strategies:

Writing to learn. Writing to learn is a strategy employed as a *pre-reading, during-reading, and/or post-reading activity*. As a *pre-reading activity*, writing to learn can be used to activate students' prior knowledge. For example, before introducing a new skill, a teacher may ask students to write a summary of what they read last night for homework. If used as a *during-reading activity*, writing to learn can engage students in making predications. This activity can be as simple as predicting what may happen next in a lesson. The purpose of the *post-reading activity* is to extend students' knowledge about what they have learned (Fisher, 2001). A social studies teacher explained the benefits of implementing writing to learn as a pre-reading activity:

I used writing to learn as my opening activity almost every day. I gave kids a prompt that was related to their reading assignment from

the night before. These prompts were reflective of the reading, not just summaries like “name three causes of World War II.” It wasn’t long before they knew that they had better do the reading, or talk with a friend about the reading, before my class if they wanted to be successful. I knew that the writing would be good for them, but I didn’t realize that they would be much more focused for the rest of my class. After writing, they were into my subject, not still talking about what just happened during the passing period (Fisher, 2001, p. 94).

What I know; What I want to learn; What I have learned (K-W-L). K-W-L is a specific strategy designed to activate and build students’ prior knowledge. Before introducing a topic, teachers ask students what they already know or think they know (K) and what they want to learn (W). After students have acquired knowledge about the topic, teachers ask pupils what they have learned (L). All responses are recorded on a graphic chart (Fisher, 2001). The following is an example of how a ninth-grade English teacher utilized this approach to begin her discussion of *Romeo and Juliet*:

[She began] with the question “What do you know about love?” After a lively discussion about the difference between love and lust that was recorded on chart paper, she asked the students, “What do you know about love between members of different socioeconomic classes or races?” This question generated significant debate in the class. After approximately 15 minutes, the teacher asked, “Is there anything that you still want to know about this?” The students in the class focused the remaining conversation on why it mattered if people loved each other but were from the different classes

or races. Before introducing the play, the teacher asked students to write a personal response to this question in their journals (Fisher, 2001, p. 94).

Concept mapping. Concept mapping helps students understand main ideas by including the most pertinent information learned from a unit. A biology teacher demonstrated how she utilized concept mapping when teaching photosynthesis. First, she provided students with a chart that included a circle in the center with four lines connected (Fisher, 2001). “Inside the circle, students were asked to write the word *photosynthesis*. Students then recorded responses to ““What is it?”” ““Who uses it?”” ““What happens if it is not present?”” and ““How does it affect the food chain?”” on each of the four arms extended from the center” (Fisher, 2001, p. 95). Students were permitted to use the textbook, Internet, and videos to complete this map. In addition, the teacher required students to illustrate each of the four arms (Fisher, 2001).

Reciprocal teaching. This strategy permits students to become teachers, as they read text associated with a particular topic and then explain it to others (Fisher, 2001). “The four steps of reciprocal teaching are (a) summarizing, (b) questioning, (c) clarifying, and (d) predicting” (Fisher, 2001, p. 95). If someone observed reciprocal teaching, he or she should see students explain meanings constructed from a text (Fisher, 2001). Fisher (2001) provides a more detailed explanation of the four processes:

In the first phase, *summarizing*, learners read a passage and identify “big ideas.” Unanswered *questions* are then created. In the *clarifying* phase, each reader focuses on unfamiliar vocabulary and puzzling concepts. In the final phase, *predicting* each student uses all the information available in the reading, including pictures and text structure, to determine what might happen next (Fisher, 2001, p. 95).

A social studies tenth grade teacher explained how she infused reciprocal teaching in her classroom: During a unit on the United States Constitution, she divided her class into four groups, and students were expected to read various texts (e.g., letters and diaries). Each group member was accountable for reading a section of the text and providing an explanation to their group. Before students began this task, the teacher appointed a group leader who was responsible for ensuring the group discussions remained on topic (Fisher, 2001).

Vocabulary development. Since vocabulary knowledge was a common weakness among Tubman's students, vocabulary development was the major priority of the initiative. Teachers were prepared to deliver vocabulary instruction, which included affixes, word families, and semantic feature analysis (Fisher, 2001). Word charts were also employed to build vocabulary knowledge:

For example, in a music class students were expected to learn about instruments. The teacher knew that her students did not have the vocabulary knowledge to discuss string instruments, so she used a vocabulary prediction chart. The first column of the chart was a list of words necessary to discuss string instruments intelligently, including *bow*, *sound hole*, *bridge*, and *bass*. The second column required that students predict what they thought the words meant in terms of music. The third column provided space for students to record the accepted musical definition of the words. The final column required students to identify where they found the accepted definitions (Fisher, 2001, p. 95).

Structured notetaking. Because a writer uses various text structures, students must recognize them for comprehension. Structured notetaking is a strategy that will help pupils

comprehend and retain presented information. To assist students in structuring notes, teachers should provide an appropriate organizer for the text. After practicing with pre-designed organizers, students should begin developing their own notes (Fisher, 2001).

Read-alouds. Elementary teachers are the main users of read-alouds, but secondary teachers should also read books aloud to students. This is a useful tool, specifically, when modeling the various literary devices (e.g., setting and character development) and reading strategies (e.g., predicting and summarizing) (Fisher, 2001).

As stated by Tubman’s teachers and administrators, all content-area teachers are expected to implement the aforementioned strategies and receive support from the administrators and other teachers throughout the school year. When administrators conduct a teacher evaluation, they expect to observe quality instruction, which includes infusing the required strategies effectively. An administrator noted that before the school began making gains, the administrators scheduled professional development for teachers but were not holding teachers accountable for implementing strategies and ideas learned from the sessions. The principals realized that if they were going to spend money on professional development, linking accountability was essential (Fisher, 2001).

Daily Independent Reading (with conferences)

Every day for twenty minutes after lunch, everyone at Tubman engages in sustained silent reading (SSR). This is a designated time for students, teachers, and administrators to read independently and silently. Although pupils often read their own books, every classroom has a selection of books for students to choose. Teachers also read aloud during this time and conduct conferences with students to ask questions about books (Fisher, 2001). Questions may include “What just happened in your book? Could that really happen? What do you think will happen

next?”” (Fisher, 2001, p. 97). Sometimes in conferences, teachers required each student to read, while noting the student’s weaknesses (Fisher, 2001).

Block Scheduling

Most teachers of Tubman support block scheduling and believe it has made a difference in academic success. Having block scheduling, according to one teacher, benefits teachers and students because of the extended class periods. This additional time allows her to engage students in more activities and provide them with extra instructional support. A science teacher mentioned that she is able to spend more time incorporating literacy activities into instruction, which helps students learn science content (Fisher, 2001).

As a result of block scheduling, teachers have been afforded 90-minute prep periods. On the first Thursday of every month during their prep periods, teachers attended professional development training called prep-period training. This is provided to teachers in addition to after-school professional development (Fisher, 2001).

Conclusion

For decades, the African American community and Congress have been striving to ensure that African American students experience academic success as Caucasian students. According to test results between the 1970s and 1980s, this mission was achieved but has failed since the 1990s, which is indicated by both mathematics and ELA test data. Encouragingly, research indicates that there are high schools which have overcome obstacles and helped their students experience success in ELA. Much of this success has been attributed to effective leadership or ELA teachers, and in some cases, research shows both as impactful factors.

CHAPTER III

THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

Within this chapter, discussions revolve around the theoretical and methodological framework and procedures for this study. The theoretical framework that guided this study was attribution theory. Attribution theory leads researchers in understanding the cause of an event or one's behavior, such as an explanation for why some students passed an exam, while others failed (Harvey & Martinko, 2009; Chodkiewicz & Boyle, 2014). Phenomenography was the methodological framework utilized for this study. This methodology is defined as a descriptive study of the various ways in which people experience a specific phenomenon (Marton, 1986). The context of this study was a Mississippi public high school that serves 100% African American students. Despite its obstacles, it is currently a "High-Performing (B)" school and has met AYP in ELA for three consecutive school years (MDE, 2013b; MDE, 2014). To collect relevant data, and thereby determine the experiences which contributed to students' growth in ELA, interviews were conducted of students and teachers. Researchers describe interviewing as the most common phenomenographic data collection method (KHAN, 2014; Larsson & Holmström, 2007; Marton, 1997; Reed, 2006).

Attribution Theory: The Theoretical Framework

Attributions are people's understandings and descriptions of why specific events occur (Manusov & Harvey, 2000). Harvey and Martinko (2009) specifically defined attribution (exploratory) theory as "a causal explanation for an event or behavior" (p. 147). "Causal attributions are answers to 'why' questions such as 'Why did I fail the exam?'; 'Why did our

team lose?'; and 'Why doesn't my teacher like me?'" (Graham, 1988, p. 6). Possible attributions, or explanations of an outcome, include "effort, skills and knowledge, strategies, ability, luck, the teacher's mood[,] or mistakes by the teacher" (Seifert, 2004, p. 138). A person's attributions influence his or her feelings and behaviors (Weiner, 1985). According to Chodkiewicz and Boyle (2014), positive feelings and behaviors reflect positive attributions, and negative feelings and behaviors mirror negative attributions. These researchers further depicted how students may share the same outcome but have distinct attributions and perceptions:

[T]ake two students who fail a test: one student may believe that they failed because they had not studied hard enough, whilst another student may think that they were simply not smart enough. The explanation attributed to the failure on the test will subsequently influence behaviour [sic]. The former student may use this experience as a motivation to study harder for the next test, whilst the latter will exert even less effort since he or she may be thinking, "why try if I am too stupid to succeed anyway?". Therefore, it is not the experience in itself that shapes us, but how we attribute why the experience occurs, that mediates how we feel and react (Chodkiewicz & Boyle, 2014, p. 79).

The objective of attribution theorists is to understand to whom or what one attributes an outcome. One's explanations are categorized by all of the following: locus of control (internal or external), stability (unstable or stable), and controllability (controllable or uncontrollable) (Weiner, 1985). These categories are further described:

- 1) Locus explains internal or external attribution as a cause for positive and negative behavior and outcomes. Internal attribution means one's inner self is the cause of the behavior and outcomes, but external attribution means that the behavior and outcomes are influenced by one's environment (Harvey & Martinko, 2009). Internal attribution may be one's ability, and external attribution could be task difficulty (Swinton, Kurtz-Costes, Rowley, & Okeke-Adeyanju, 2011).
- 2) Stability explains positive and negative behavior or outcomes as stable or unstable (Harvey & Martinko, 2009). "Stable causes are those that tend to influence outcomes and behaviors consistently over time and across situations... Unstable causal factors, such as the amount of effort exerted towards a task, are comparatively easy to change" (Harvey & Martinko, 2009, p. 148). "For example, ability is perceived as internal and stable, whereas luck is viewed as external and unstable" (Swinton, et al., 2011, p. 1487).
- 3) Controllability explains positive and negative behavior, which may be controllable or uncontrollable. If one is able to control the cause of behavior, or outcomes, the cause is controllable, but if one is unable to control the cause of behavior or outcomes, the cause is uncontrollable (Harvey & Martinko, 2009). The amount of effort exerted on a task is an example of controllable success or failure; luck is a case of uncontrollable success or failure (Swinton, et al., 2011).

In addition to explaining his or her own behavior and outcomes, one can also explain what attributed to someone else's behavior and outcomes. This process of self-explanation is a natural process that humans engage in every day (Harvey & Martinko, 2009).

Harvey and Martinko (2009) ascertain that, as people become aware of their surroundings, they began developing positive and/or negative attributions. When students become adolescents, they become more aware of their attributions. For instance, “as youth are increasingly exposed to gender differences in career selection (e.g., the prevalence of men in engineering and the physical sciences), their causal attributions might reflect these differences (e.g., girls might be more likely than boys to attribute math and science failures to lack of ability), leading to changes in attributions that vary by gender and academic domain” (Swinton, et al., 2011, p. 1488).

Phenomenography: The Methodological Framework

What is Phenomenography?

Phenomenography is a descriptive study of the qualitatively different ways in which people understand the exact same phenomenon—an aspect of the world or reality (Marton, 1986). Individual encounters with an aspect of the world, according to Marton (1981), often indicate a palpable distinction. This variation of experiences is a result of people’s internal relations with reality. In fact, the way in which a specific aspect of reality is experienced is dependent upon individuals’ internal relations with the phenomenon (Marton, 1981). According to Marton (1981), it is through these internal relations, that people become knowledgeable about the world and develop perceptions. To seek and reveal others’ understandings about a specific phenomenon, researchers employ phenomenography.

Assumptions Regarding Phenomenography

Phenomenography was constructed on both epistemological and ontological assumptions (Marton, 1986; Marton & Booth, 1997; Svensson, 1997). The epistemological assumption refers to the way in which people become knowledgeable about an aspect of the world (Marton, 1986;

Marton & Booth, 1997; Svensson, 1997). Based upon this assumption, people “cannot experience [or become knowledgeable] without something being experienced” (Marton & Pang, 2008, p. 535). In other words, knowledge is constructed through an internal relationship between the subject (one who is experiencing) and the object (a specific phenomenon); this understanding is differentiated based on each individual’s thoughts, actions, or external encounters (Svensson, 1997). Marton (1986) affirmed that in order for one to experience reality, a relationship with the object is inevitable.

Further, the ontological assumption of phenomenography is non-dualistic, whereby the relationship between people and reality is inseparable (Marton, 1986; Marton & Booth, 1997; Svensson, 1997). Marton (2000) explained this non-dualistic ontology in further details:

There are not two worlds: a real, objective world, on the one hand, and a subjective world of mental representations, on the other. There is only one world, a really existing world, which is experienced and understood in different ways by human beings. It is simultaneously objective and subjective (Marton, 2000, p. 105).

It is also because of this ontological assumption and the epistemological assumption that phenomenographers aim to describe the variation of the internal relationship between people and an aspect of the world (Marton, 1986; Marton & Booth, 1997; Svensson, 1997).

Origin of Phenomenography

Phenomenographic research closely resembles Piaget’s research: “[His research], especially in its earlier phases, clearly aimed at providing a detailed description and analysis of the qualitatively different ways that children, in different stages of their development, viewed various aspects of the world” (Marton, 1986; Smith & Hepworth, 2012). However, phenomenography was not developed to mimic Piaget’s research but emanated from a study

conducted by Ference Marton, Roger Säljö, Lars Owe Dahlgren, and Lennart Svensson in the 1970s (Marton, 1986; Marton & Booth, 1997; Larsson & Holmström, 2007; Marton & Booth, 2013; Bruce & Ahmed, 2014).

These scholars were interested in describing the “what” and “how” of student learning at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden (Smith & Hepworth, 2012). The “what” was each student’s conception of learning content, and the “how” was the approach taken to develop the described conception (Booth, 1997). This type of research required students to move from an objectivistic and inter-subjectivistic view to a subjectivistic and relative view, as the researchers focused on the students’ meanings or understandings of the learning content. According to Svensson (1997), “[t]his view of subjective knowledge as the object of research was developed in contrast to positivistic and objectivistic views dominant in educational and psychological research (within the behaviouristic [sic] and human information processing traditions)...” (p. 13).

Indeed, this research depended on the subjects’ (the students’) conceptions of the object (the learning content) (Svensson, 1997). Since the researchers were not concerned with students providing a correct or incorrect answer or assigning a grade, they took a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach (Svensson, 1997). It was through this specific process that the researchers were able to describe students’ knowledge of content (the text) (Svensson, 1997; Richardson, 1999). “Knowledge was seen as the meaning of and the understanding of wholes or complexes representing objects or phenomena. Thus[,] the knowledge that students expressed was described in terms of conceptions[;] that is meanings and understandings of phenomena” (Svensson, 1997, p. 163).

After interviewing, the researchers transcribed the interviews, read and re-read the transcripts, and delimited and named the students' described conceptions. It was through this process that the investigators discovered differences in students' explanations of the same text (Marton, 1986; Svensson, 1997). These researchers realized that if students comprehended the exact same text in multiple ways, then people also understood all other phenomena in various ways (Marton, 1986; Lin, 2011). As a result of this finding, in 1979 Marton and his team of researchers coined this type of research as phenomenography (Marton, 1981; Marton, 1986; Booth, 1997; Marton & Booth, 1997; Lin, 2011; Smith & Hepworth, 2012).

Although this methodology can be employed to comprehend all phenomena, the researchers specifically noted its use for the improvement of teaching and learning by viewing a phenomenon through the lens of students (Booth, 1997). As evidenced by research findings, students approach learning tasks differently than other students and teachers due to conceptual variations (Marton, 1981). These distinct variations result from the differences within individuals (i.e., cultures, developmental levels, and mental states) (Marton, 1981).

Phenomenography vs. Phenomenology

As mentioned earlier, phenomenographers did not aim to mimic Piaget's research, nor did it emerge from phenomenology (Marton, 1986). Marton (1986) sustained that phenomenography merely originated from a discovery of teaching and learning in which the founders collected data to describe how learning was understood and experienced by students. This research did entail each student's perspective, but the investigators were more interested in collectively depicting the conceptions. Because these researchers were concerned with others' (students') perceptions, rather than their own, phenomenography was characterized as a second-order approach to collectively describe how people understood and experienced an aspect of the

world. This collection of descriptions is limited, as indicated by previous phenomenographic studies, but aid in comprehending phenomena. People often associate phenomenography with phenomenology (Marton, 1986). Larsson & Holmström (2007) pointed out the obvious—that “[p]henomenography and phenomenology share the term ‘phenomenon’ which means ‘to make manifest or ‘bring to light’” (p. 55).

Marton (1986) began clarifying the difference between the two methodologies by pointing out the suffix of phenomenography (-graph): In phenomenography, its suffix refers to the different ways people think about the same phenomenon. As further clarified by Giorgi (1999), in phenomenology, its suffix (-logos) denotes a focus on the meaning of the phenomenon itself. Edmund Husserl has been considered the father of phenomenology (Patton, 2002). Patton (2002) defined this qualitative approach as “the study of how people describe things and experience them through their senses. His most basic philosophical assumption was that *we can only know what we experience* by attending to perceptions and meanings that awaken our conscious awareness” (p. 105-106).

As contrasted by Marton (1981, 1986), understanding how people experience a phenomenon is the focal point of phenomenography; whereas, phenomenology focuses on comprehending the experience itself. Human experience is the object of both methodologies (Marton & Booth, 2013), but how they explore the experiences are distinct: The answers to a phenomenologist’s research question is based on the *phenomenologist’s perception of others’ experiences*. On the other hand, the answer to a phenomenographer’s question is solely based on others’ perspectives (Feig & Stokes, 2011; Marton & Booth, 2013; Bruce & Ahmed, 2014). “For example, I might explore the research question ‘what is geoscience about?’ from a first-order, phenomenological perspective, based upon my own direct experiences of geoscience.

This would provide a rich and highly individual account, but it would reflect only a limited range of possible conceptions that might exist” (Feig & Stokes, 2011, p. 26).

Unlike phenomenology, phenomenography is from a second-order perspective (Feig & Stokes, 2011; Marton & Booth, 2013; Ahmed & Bruce, 2014). “In this case, a more appropriate research question would be ‘what do people think geoscience is about?’ This would be explored using the descriptions and explanations provided by others to identify critical variations in the collective experience” (Feig & Stokes, 2011, p. 26).

The “Anatomy of Experience”

As noted by researchers, an experiencer cannot become such without the experienced (Marton, 1986; Marton & Booth, 1997; Svensson, 1997; Marton & Pang, 2008). Hence, experiences are relational (Marton, 1986; Marton & Booth, 1997; Svensson, 1997; Marton & Pang, 2008), and according to Marton (1996), an experiencer’s meaning of the experienced is constructed through his or her awareness or consciousness.

The different ways subjects experience a specific phenomenon are each composed of four aspects: the “what” and “how” aspects and the referential and structural aspects (Bruce, Buckingham, Hynd, McMahon, Roggenkamp, & Stoodley, 2004). The “what” (individual conceptions about what was experienced) and the “how” (individual conceptions of how the phenomenon was experienced) are the primary aspects (Marton & Booth, 2013).

The referential and structural aspects serve as the secondary features (Marton & Booth, 2013). The referential, which corresponds with the “what” aspect, refers to the overall meaning that subjects have about an object; this aspect is represented in each category of description (Marton, 1986; Marton & Booth, 1997; Bruce, et al., 2004; Marton & Pong, 2005; Bruce & Ahmed, 2014). In contrast, the structural aspect corresponds with the “how” and refers to a

subject's awareness of an object, which is represented by the conceptions of each category. These conceptions may be characterized as internal or external horizons (Marton, 1986; Marton & Booth, 1997; Marton & Pong, 2005; Bruce & Ahmed, 2014). "The *Internal Horizon* represents the focus of the participants' attention, or that which is figural in awareness and simultaneously attended to" (Bruce, et al., 2004, p. 147). The *External Horizon* represents the delimited awareness which is not as relevant as those conceptions in the internal horizon (Bruce, et al., 2004).

When determining which conceptions are internal and external, Gurwitsch's (1964) field of consciousness is useful for researchers. This field of consciousness includes the thematic field, margin, and theme of awareness (Gurwitsch, 1964). Marton and Booth (1997) referred to this field of consciousness as the structure of awareness. The thematic field contains all collected data about a specific phenomenon. As phenomenographers search for relevant conceptions of the data, these researchers focus on locating significant aspects that will aid in answering the research question (Gurwitsch, 1964; Marton, 1994; Sjöström & Dahlgren, 2002; Reed, 2006). To determine what is relevant, researchers should consider Sjöström & Dahlgren's (2002) suggestions:

1. Frequency: "[H]ow often a meaningful statement is articulated..." (p. 341)
2. Position: "[O]ften the most significant elements are to be found in the introductory parts of an answer..." (p. 341-342)
3. Pregnancy: "[W]hen the subject explicitly emphasizes that certain aspects are more important than others" (p. 342).

Those aspects that are non-related to the studied phenomenon are moved to the margin of awareness. As the researchers continue reading data remained in the thematic field, they should

begin narrowing their focus on aspects directly related to the studied phenomenon (Gurwitsch, 1964; Marton, 1994; Reed, 2006). These focal aspects will then transfer to thematic awareness, which will then be grouped based on their similarities, forming second-order categories of descriptions (Gurwitsch, 1964; Marton, 1994; Reed, 2006).

Context of the Study

As mentioned in chapter one, a number of high schools across the United States with predominantly African American students are low-performing and fail to meet AYP in ELA (Chudowsky, Chudowsky, & Kober, 2009). This unfortunate statistic is a fact for many school districts; consequently, Mississippi's African American high school students have been falling behind their Caucasian, Asian, Hispanic, and Native American peers in ELA (MDE, 2013b). In addition, a high percentage of Mississippi schools with predominantly African American students are not successful (MDE, 2013b). While failure may be common, this study focused on a successfully performing school, Rosa L. Parks High School (pseudonym) in Highland School District (pseudonym). Rosa L. Parks High School is the only Mississippi public high school with 100% African American students that has been successful *and* has met AYP in ELA for three consecutive school years—2011-2012, 2012-2013, and 2013-2014.

Rosa L. Parks High School serves seventh through twelfth graders and has approximately 291 students. During the 2009-2010 school year, it was designated as a "Failing (F)" school but met AYP in ELA. The next school year, however, this school became "Successful (B)" but did not meet AYP in ELA. In the following years, Rosa L. Parks began experiencing consecutive success: During the 2011-2012 school year, the school became "Successful (B)" and was named "High-Performing (B)" the next two school years, meeting AYP in ELA all three years. Table 6 depicts this school's achievement results.

Table 6

Rosa L. Parks High School's Achievement Results

School Year	Accountability Status	ELA Growth Status
2009-2010	Failing (F)	Met
2010-2011	Successful (B)	Not Met
2011-2012	Successful (B)	Met
2012-2013	High Performing (B)	Met
2013-2014	High Performing (B)	Met

Note. Rosa L. Parks High School has experienced success for four consecutive school years, but students did not begin experiencing constant gains in ELA until the 2011-2012, 2012-2013, and 2013-2014 school years.

Recently, this high-performing school received awards for their achievement. It received the Torch Award³ from Mississippi School Boards Association (MSBA). Also, the Program of Research and Evaluation for Public Schools (PREPS, Inc.) awarded this school with the PREPS Value Added Award⁴.

Participant Selection

To produce an adequate amount of variation in the data as possible, purposive sampling was employed for this study (Trigwell, 2000; Reed, 2006; KHAN, 2014). Purposive sampling is utilized to select participants who are appropriate for fulfilling the study's purpose (Patton, 2002; Reed, 2006). In addition, since phenomenographers assume there are numerous variations of qualitative perceptions about a specific phenomenon, there should be multiple participants

³ In order to be eligible for this award, a school must be in a Successful District with no schools graded below C; ninety percent or more students participating in the federal Free/Reduced Lunch Program; and at least one school graded B or above.

⁴ This award is given to Mississippi schools for successful performance on the statewide assessments.

(Smith & Hepworth, 2012). According to researchers, there should be between 10-20 subjects in order to provide a complete description of the studied phenomenon (Trigwell, 2000; Reed, 2006; KHAN, 2014). Therefore, a total of twelve primary student participants were selected for this study. Since the purpose of this study was to uncover how African American students in a Mississippi public high school perceived their experiences of meeting growth in ELA, these participants were *English II students* during the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 school years, years that the school met growth in ELA.

Three participants were selected from the 2012-2013 school year; nine were selected from the 2013-2014 school year. The three participants are currently juniors, and the nine participants are seniors. Although it was not a requirement for participation, all of the student participants met growth in ELA when the test was *first* administered. There were more than twelve students at Rosa L. Parks High School who met growth in ELA, but only twelve consented to participating in this study. Moreover, students were selected as the primary participants because they had a relationship with the study's object (growth in ELA), and thereby were appropriate for this study.

This study also included secondary participants for data saturation, allowing for the collection of sufficient data for redundancy, to encourage a more thorough answer to the research question (Pitney & Parker, 2009). Additionally, the secondary participants were involved to serve as the basis for fact-checking, ensuring that every side of the story was told (Ragin & Amoroso, 2011). The secondary participants for this study included three teachers. The senior participants' tenth grade English teacher was involved. The junior participants' eighth grade ELA teacher and the teacher who taught them ninth and tenth grade English was included. Initially, this study was going to include Highland's instructional coach (the newly appointed

principal of Rosa L. Parks High School) who served as the instructional coach during the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 school years. However, time did not afford her the opportunity to participate. The study was also going to involve the student participants' parents, but they did not consent to participate. As a whole, this study included twelve student participants and three teachers, totaling fifteen participants.

Data Collection Methods

Before conducting this study, I followed protocol to obtain permission from The University of Mississippi's Institutional Review Board (IRB). This process included obtaining permission from Highland School District's superintendent and school board to conduct this study within their district, at Rosa L. Parks High School. Once permission was granted from Highland's superintendent and school board and then from The University of Mississippi's IRB, I followed the steps below:

1. *Emailed Rosa L. Parks High School's principal* to introduce myself and the study and schedule a meeting with her.
2. *Met with Rosa L. Parks High School's principal*, as scheduled. At this meeting, she had a list of students who met growth in ELA, and she was given a letter to send home with those students to ask for their participation in the study. (These letters noted the incentives that would be given to students: a \$10 Wal-Mart gift card and pizza party for all participants after the second/final interviews.) After meeting with the principal, a visit was made to the district's superintendent to introduce myself in person.
3. *Emailed the principal (multiple times)* to determine the number of returned student participation consent forms. I received an email from the principal who

sent the MCT2: Eighth Grade Language Arts and English II Subject Area Test results for the students who agreed to participate in the study.

4. *Selected participants.* All participants were selected since it was an appropriate number for my study, and they all made growth in ELA.
5. *Emailed the principal* to schedule the first interviews with students.
6. *Conducted the first interviews with students.* These interviews were conducted over a two-day span at the school. Students were given their \$10 Wal-Mart gift card during this time.
7. *Analyzed data from the first interviews.* The process that was taken will be discussed later in the *Data Analysis* section of this chapter.
8. *Conducted the second interviews with students.* These interviews were conducted during one school day. After all the interview sessions were completed, a pizza party was thrown for the student participants in a vacant room at the school.
9. *Analyzed data from the second interviews.* Again, the process that was taken will be discussed later in the *Data Analysis* section of this chapter.
10. *Contacted the list of teacher participants to schedule an interview.* The principal emailed the junior participants' eighth grade teacher, who currently works at Rosa L. Parks High School, to inform her about this study. The principal had asked that I email her the questions to forward the teacher. I emailed the questions to the principal with a noted preferred time frame for the teacher's response. The teacher did email her responses to me within the preferred time frame that I had provided. The junior participants' ninth/tenth grade teacher and the senior participants' tenth grade teacher no longer worked at the school, so I contacted

them via social media to schedule an interview. Because they lived afar, both of these teachers also preferred that the questions be emailed and that they respond to them during a given time frame. This was allowed since their participation was needed and because they were not the primary participants.

To collect data from their subjects, phenomenographers have most often conducted audio recorded interviews (Marton, 1997; Reed, 2006; Larsson & Holmström, 2007; KHAN, 2014). Therefore, with the permission of the participants and/or their parents, depending on the student participant's age, the interviews were audio recorded. All interviews were *open* and *deep*. In order to collect relevant data, and hence understand a specific phenomenon, it is essential that phenomenographers conduct *open* and *deep* interviews (Marton, 1986; Sjöström & Dahlgren, 2002). An *open* interview means researchers must be willing to deviate from the interview script for data confirmation (Booth, 1997). It is important that the interviewer “make[s] it clear [to interviewees] that the interview is an open one and that [they are] permitted to think aloud, to be doubtful, and also – if necessary – to pause” (Sjöström & Dahlgren, 2002, p. 341). A *deep* interview is comprehensive, resulting in a deep understanding of interviewees' responses (Booth, 1997).

Interview questions must be tailored to collect relevant data, and the same phenomenon must be discussed among all participants (Stamouli & Huggard, 2007). Stamouli and Huggard (2007) explained the type of questions asked during student interviews: “Questions are usually phrased in terms of the students' perceptions, understanding[,] and experience (for example ‘what is your understanding of an array?’), but the interviewer can deviate from those when interesting angles of understanding are exposed through the discussion” (p. 184). Sjöström and Dahlgren (2000) pointed out another essential element for phenomenographic interviews: These

researchers contended that “[t]here is a need, on the part of the interviewer, to interpret immediately what the respondent is saying in order to be able to decide about further questioning or probing. Any misunderstanding in this respect may jeopardize the quality of the interview data” (p. 341).

According to Anderberg (2000), intentional-expressive is an approach to confirm conceptual meanings. This approach includes asking the structured questions first and then asking follow-up questions “to encourage interviewees to reflect on the conceptual meanings of the terms or phrases...used” (Sin, 2010, p. 313). The following is an example of this approach:

“Interviewee: Accountants work in very different industries, tax, audit, corporate accounting...If you ask me what accounting is, I’ll say, it’s a human science.

Interviewer: Human science, what does it mean?” (Sin, 2010, p. 313).

If using the intentional-expressive approach, the interviewer must refrain from influencing the interviewee’s responses (Marton, 1994; Sin, 2010). This is especially important since phenomenographers understand a specific phenomenon through the lens of others (Marton, 1986; Bruce, et al., 2004; Stamouli & Huggard, 2007).

Data Analysis

There are no specific stages that researchers must follow to analyze data; it can be conducted in a variety of ways, dependent upon the researcher and the study being conducted (Larsson & Holmström, 2007; Bruce & Ahmed, 2014). Steps that Marton and his team of researchers followed for phenomenographic studies were utilized for this study, and according to Dahlgren and Fallsberg (1991), these stages have proven to result in a complete understanding of the studied phenomenon:

1. Familiarization: Read each transcript to become familiar with its content and to correct errors if needed.
2. Compilation: Select relevant conceptions of the data.
3. Condensation: Narrow each relevant conception to its central idea.
4. Preliminary Grouping: Group each conception based on similarities.
5. Preliminary Comparison of Categories: Determine the differences between the preliminary groups from step 4, which may result in grouping and regrouping conceptions.
6. Naming the Categories: Name the categories based on the overall meaning of each group of conceptions.
7. Contrastive Comparison of Categories: Determine both the similarities and differences between the categories.

Identifying and Bracketing Subjectivities

Since I am of the same race as the student participants and taught at schools with predominantly African American students, I naturally had a connection with the students, which I believe caused them to feel more comfortable and open to respond to questions asked during the interviews. On the other hand, because I was a high school English teacher, including one year as an English II teacher, I have specific ideas of what I believe to be effective and ineffective for increasing ELA achievement. As a result, I knew it was likely to overlook factors that the participants considered to be effective, factors that I deemed as ineffective. As a phenomenographer, sharing similar experiences as the participants is beneficial when interpreting data; however, this relationship also has potential of tainting data.

Therefore, I was constantly aware of my beliefs, values, perceptions, and experiences by recording them in a journal and revisited them to ensure that my pre-understandings and experiences aided in interpretation. According to Charmaz (2006), it is imperative that researchers bracket, or suspend, preconceptions to retrieve new knowledge. Bracketing is especially important for phenomenographers due to their second-order approach (Marton, 1994; Marton & Booth, 1997). To ensure credibility of data, I supported my interpretations with excerpts from transcripts (Bruce & Ahmed, 2014). Collecting data from both primary and secondary participants ensured reliability (Sin, 2010). Additionally, I had discussions with a qualitative professor, who was also a member of my dissertation committee, about my interpretations of the data to ensure that I was obtaining a clear understanding of how students made gains in ELA.

Conclusion

There is a low percentage of students, not only in Mississippi but across the United States, who are not succeeding in ELA. Therefore, the aim of this research was to comprehend and describe the various ways African American high school students perceived their personal growth in ELA. Phenomenography was utilized for this research in an effort to produce a collective description of the qualitatively various ways in which students understand the studied phenomenon. Although phenomenology and phenomenography both describe human experiences, phenomenology is suitable for understanding the phenomenon itself, which is viewed from a subjective lens; on the other hand, phenomenography is more appropriate for comprehending and describing *others'* perspectives in relation to the studied object, and thereby was the best approach for this research.

CHAPTER IV

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The foundation for this research study was set in the previous three chapters, and now it is time to reveal the data⁵! As pointed out in chapter one, the purpose of the study was to uncover how African American students in a Mississippi public high school perceived their experiences of meeting growth in ELA. The two research questions that guided this study, which were introduced in chapter one, are listed below:

1. What qualities do African American high school students, in a consistently high performing minority school in Mississippi, perceive as influential in their personal ELA growth experiences?
2. What do school community members (faculty, staff, and parents) ascribe as contributing factors towards student growth in ELA at a minority school in Mississippi?⁶

Three themes emerged from the study's data: (1) Teacher Effectiveness, (2) Student Initiatives, and (3) Additional Support. Within this chapter, these outcomes are detailed through a descriptive story that allows readers to experience students' journey of meeting growth in ELA.

⁵ As discussed in chapter three, the primary participants were three juniors and nine seniors who met growth in ELA, as indicated by Mississippi's Subject Area Testing Program 2 (SATP2): English II, which is administered to tenth graders and is the only state ELA assessment given in high school. (The latest ELA state assessment prior tenth grade is administered in eighth grade.) Three ELA teachers who taught the junior and/or senior participants in eighth, ninth, and/or tenth grade were selected as the secondary participants in an attempt to saturate the data and fact check. Detailed information about the student and teacher participants are discussed later in this chapter.

⁶ With the exception of students, there was limited access to community members; therefore, the second question will not be answered directly within the context provided but will be answered inadvertently based on students' perceptions.

There are five sections in this chapter: (1) Prelude, (2) Theme 1: Teacher Effectiveness, (3) Theme 2: Student Initiatives, (4) Theme 3: Additional Support, and (5) Viewing Themes from a Broader Scope. The first section explains how the data collected from the primary and secondary participants was used to depict the narrative told in this chapter. This section also introduces all characters (using pseudonyms) included in the story and provides a description of Rosa L. Parks High School, the narrative's setting. The story is divided into three sections, which are based on the three themes: *Theme 1: Teacher Effectiveness*, *Theme 2: Student Initiatives*, and *Theme 3: Additional Support*. Discussion of the themes' larger tensions is conducted in the latter section. This chapter ends with a conclusion that highlights significant points from the chapter.

Prelude





Using Data to Collectively Depict Students' Success Story



In this study, each student reflected on his or her eighth, ninth, and tenth grade ELA experiences in an attempt to explain how ELA growth was achieved in tenth grade. These reflections were similar among each student and were used to collectively share these students' success story. Data collected from all secondary participants supported the students' recollections. The data used for the narrative was taken *directly* from the primary and secondary participants. When reflecting on their experiences, students recalled specific sayings and thoughts, which are quoted in the narrative. Some quotes may contain brackets of words or phrases to provide clarity, but the meaning of these particular quotes were *not* altered. Opinions other than that of the participants have also been excluded from the narrative. Table 7 contains the list of student participants/characters, along with their eighth and tenth grade ELA state test performance labels and additional information. Table 8 includes information about the ELA





teacher participants/characters, and Table 9 discloses information about non-participant characters, including other ELA teachers and Rosa L. Parks High School’s former instructional coach.



Table 7

Student Characters/Participants

Junior’s Name	8th Grade ELA State Test Performance Label	10th Grade ELA State Test Performance Label	Additional Information about the Character
Jessica 	Proficient	Advanced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Serves as secretary of the church that she attends and is a member of the Principal’s Youth Council (Any changes students want made at the school, the youth council forwards to the principal.) Plans to attend The University of Mississippi and major in pre-pharmacy
Tiera 	Proficient	Advanced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plays the trumpet in the school band Enjoys reading Considers math to be her favorite subject
Jasmine 	Basic	Proficient	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Serves as a member of the school’s cheerleading squad Is on the honor roll Wants to attend The University of Southern Mississippi and major in nursing
Senior’s Name			
Kimberly 	Proficient	Advanced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Serves as the vice president of her class Enjoys attending school and being a member of the Delta Rat Pack Team, which is a group that travels to different schools once a month, telling students the harms of cigarettes and tobacco (Members earn a \$1000 scholarship each year;

			<p>Kimberly has been a member since seventh grade.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aspires to attend Mississippi State University and major in biomedical engineering
<p>Veronica</p> 	Basic	Advanced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Loves to read Deems both English and math as her favorite subjects Does not play sports but tutors elementary students in math Wants to attend Delta State University or Mississippi Valley State University and major in mathematics and journalism Is focused on becoming a mathematician
<p>Brittany</p> 	Proficient	Advanced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is 17 years old but will be 18 in April and is the oldest and only girl among her siblings Was born in Mississippi but moved to Ohio and then Wisconsin and back to Mississippi in eighth grade and began attending Rosa L. Parks High School Considers education in Ohio and Wisconsin to be more advanced than her educational experience in Mississippi Will attend Mississippi State University and major in business, journalism, and/or psychology Desires to major in <i>business</i> because she wants to establish her own so that her kids and their kids will be financially established; <i>journalism</i> because she loves to read and write; and <i>psychology</i> because she likes to help people with their

			problems
Candice 	Basic	Proficient	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is 19 years old • Has one brother and one sister • Likes to dance, watch TV, read books, and sometimes hang with friends in her spare time • Wants to especially go to Jackson State University or Alcorn State University, after graduating from high school, and major in English education or elementary education
Danny 	Minimum	Basic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is going to the military and will be shipped out to Fort Benning, Georgia this summer • Has already been attending drill, which prepares him for Basic Combat Training (BCT)
April 	Basic	Proficient	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serves as a member of the Delta Rat Pack Team and has been a member since seventh grade, like Kimberly • Wants to attend Alcorn State University and major in nursing
Kendrick 	Basic	Proficient	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enjoys math • Likes to have fun and play baseball • Is the pitcher and short stopper of the school's baseball team • Was the quarter back of the school's football team this school year • Plans on attending wherever he obtains a baseball scholarship

<p>Jonathan</p> 	<p>Minimum</p>	<p>Basic</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the only child on his father’s side and has a 23 year old sister • Has been playing on the school’s football and baseball team (has played baseball since the age of 12 and football for three years—during his ninth, tenth, and eleventh grade year) • Plays outfield in baseball and won Golden Glove Outfield Award during his eleventh grade year and won Defensive Linebacker of the Year in football • Likes math and considers it to be his strongest subject and did pass his Algebra I state test • Characterizes English as one of his weakest subjects • Enjoys being outdoors and engaging in hands-on outdoor work • Plans to attend Northwest Community College after high school and major in welding and cutting, and undecided if he wants to play baseball or football as a walk-on
<p>Natalie</p> 	<p>Basic</p>	<p>Proficient</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serves as a member of the school’s cheerleading squad • Enjoys hanging out with friends during her leisure time • Desires to attend Mississippi State University to major in biology because she wants to be an orthodontist but initially wanted to be a model

Note. There are a total of twelve student characters, who are all participants in this study. Nine are female, and three are male.

Table 8

ELA Teacher Characters/Participants

Eighth Grade Teacher
<p>Ms. Baker (J)— African American female between the ages of thirty and thirty-five</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✚ Is a native of Highland, Mississippi ✚ Received her bachelor’s degree from <i>The University of Southern Mississippi</i>; master’s degree from <i>Delta State University</i>, and is currently pursuing her specialist’s degree in reading ✚ Has taught English & reading at the seventh and eighth grade levels for nine years ✚ Teaches only seventh grade ELA now and her responsibilities are to ensure that students are able to perform at the levels of proficiency and above in the areas of: reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and writing and grammar. It is also her responsibility to broaden the horizon of students by equipping them with literary material that will enable them to learn the skills and function at the appropriate grade level and beyond, while also providing students with an opportunity to learn about their culture and the culture of others.
Tenth Grade Teachers
<p>Mrs. Hewitt (S)— Caucasian female in her early thirties</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✚ Graduated from The University of Mississippi ✚ Is a life-long Mississippi resident and has a strong love for the education of our students and future of Mississippi ✚ Taught four years in a public school setting in three different Mississippi counties and was blessed to have taught a state test subject at every school, where she was responsible for assessing her students’ entry level at the beginning of each school term, establishing short and long term academic goals, and mapping a plan for each student to ensure success in meeting those goals ✚ Has taught ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade English; learning strategies for re-testers; and seventh grade ELA ✚ Relocated from another city in Mississippi due to her husband’s job in 2012 and began teaching at Rosa L. Parks High School ✚ Is married to a Hispanic and is a stay-at-home mom of a ten-month old <p>Ms. Kennedy (J/S)— Caucasian female in her early twenties</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✚ Is from New York ✚ Attended Syracuse University for undergrad and majored in advertising ✚ Became interested in a summer internship opportunity with Teach For America (TFA)⁷ during her junior year at Syracuse and was placed at the Mississippi Delta Institute ✚ Applied for the TFA corps during her senior year at Syracuse and returned to Mississippi for an offered teaching position at Rosa L. Parks High School, to begin during the

⁷ TFA is a non-profit organization that recruits candidates who do not necessarily have experience in education but demonstrate potential to be an effective teacher. The selected candidates are expected to teach in designated low-poverty areas for at least two years. The purpose of the organization is to help eradicate the education disparity among subgroups.

2012-2013 school year

- ✚ Taught ninth and tenth grade English and learning strategies for English II re-testers for two years at Rosa L. Parks High School
- ✚ Left Rosa L. Parks High School after two years because she felt like teaching was not a profession in which she felt particularly successful, although she was initially open to the possibility of continuing to teach after the two year teaching commitment with TFA
- ✚ Has now returned to advertising and is working as a digital planner in Nashville, Tennessee

Note. The teachers' ages are based on data from students. (S) denotes that the teacher taught the senior participants, and (J) means that the teacher taught the junior participants. Both Mrs. Hewitt and Ms. Kennedy taught tenth grade English to the senior participants⁸. Kennedy also taught the junior participants in ninth and tenth grade⁹.

⁸ There were two English II teachers assigned to seniors: Ms. Kennedy taught reading and vocabulary and Mrs. Hewitt taught writing and grammar. Students attended both classes daily. The subject was split this way as a pilot—to see if test scores would increase when students were given more time in English class and were able to work on isolated skills.

⁹ During Kennedy's first year of teaching (2012-2013), she taught ninth grade English to the junior participants. During her second year of teaching (2013-2014), she taught them tenth grade English. She taught all four sections (reading, vocabulary, writing, and grammar) in 52-minute classes. Mrs. Hewitt was no longer teaching during this year.

Table 9

ELA Teacher and Instructional Coach Characters/Non-Participants

Eighth Grade Teacher's Name	Race	Age*	Additional Information about the Teacher
Mrs. Hightower (S)	African American	Early 30's	✚ Teaches at the elementary school in the district
Ninth Grade Teacher's Name			
Mr. Parker (S)	Caucasian	Late 20's	✚ Told students that he was abused as a child
SPED Teacher's Name			
Mrs. Tyler	African American	NM	✚ Was Jonathan's SPED teacher in ninth and tenth grade
Instructional Coach's Name			
Mrs. West	African American	NM	✚ Is the current principal of Rosa L. Parks High School but served as the instructional coach during the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 school years

Note. The asterisk (*) beside "Age" denotes that it is *based on data from students*. "NM" signifies *not mentioned* (by participants). All of the listed teacher characters taught the senior (S) participants.

Setting

Located in the Mississippi Delta, right outside Highland, Mississippi and across from and adjacent to a large cotton field is Rosa L. Parks High School. When traveling from downtown Highland, this school can be seen right off the highway. It is a small, red bricked school that contains less than three hundred 7-12 grade students. Behind the school is the district's elementary school, which holds K-6 grade students¹⁰. Rosa L. Parks High School is less than a

¹⁰ There is only one elementary school in the district. Rosa L. Parks High School is also the only school that serves 7-12 grade students.

mile from downtown Highland, and the few buildings in this area look old; the school district's office is located in one of these buildings. Additionally, in this area, is the district's alternative school, which is located beside a barbershop. An aged grocery store and a modern looking Dollar General is also near. The town only has a few businesses, which are mostly locally owned. Subway, which is located beside a cotton field, is the only franchise restaurant in Highland. To eat at another franchise restaurant or shop at other stores such as Wal-Mart, citizens travel to the nearest town, which is about thirty minutes away.

Theme 1: Teacher Effectiveness

When reflecting on their eighth, ninth, and tenth grade ELA experiences, all students ultimately focused on the pedagogical practices of their teachers. These student participants characterized each teacher as effective or ineffective and upheld their claims by describing the teachers' instructional routines. Most students defined an effective teacher as one who demonstrates enthusiasm for teaching, establishes good classroom management, provides multiple instructional strategies, motivates learners, and develops a personal relationship with students. Jonathan asserted that this type of teacher also monitors student data and provides students with additional assistance as necessary. An ineffective teacher, according to students, does not display the aforementioned practices. Students' reflections of the eighth, ninth, and tenth grade teachers are told within this section of the narrative to convey how the teachers were or were not influential in these students' ELA growth experiences. Out of all teachers mentioned, only one teacher—the senior participants' writing/grammar tenth grade teacher—was characterized as effective and considered influential in these students' ELA growth experiences.

Seniors' Reflections

Mrs. Hightower: The Ineffective Teacher Who Ignored Students for the Computer

Every day when students entered Mrs. Hightower's class, a question (the starter assignment/bellringer) was on the smart board waiting to be answered. After students viewed the bellringer, they wrote a response on their paper, read the question with Mrs. Hightower in unison, and discussed the answer as a class. Mrs. Hightower then wrote the day's assignment on the smart board. The task may have been one of the following:

- 1) Read _____ by yourself.
- 2) Write an essay about _____.
- 3) Complete the worksheet _____.
- 4) Answer pages _____ in your book.

After writing the assignment, Mrs. Hightower walked to her desk, her favorite spot in the class.

Though present, Mrs. Hightower gave herself three days off per week, as she refused to provide students with instruction. The computers, however, never had a day off. Almost every day, including Mrs. Hightower's "instructional days," she required students to complete Study Island lessons (e.g., subject-verb agreement) or USA Test Prep questions on the web. Students were often confused when completing assignments.

Students especially felt ignored the three days Mrs. Hightower did not teach because no strategies or assistance was provided. Every time students exhibited confusion, Mrs. Hightower was sitting at her desk typing her life away and never paused to assist students. Because of this teacher's intolerance for noise, students were prohibited from helping each other. During the midst of their confusion, some students stealthily played, while others experienced boredom and fell asleep. Veronica was a student who simply did nothing because she thought, "The teacher is

lazy, so I can lay back, too!” When Jonathan could not understand, his SPED teacher helped him.

On days when Mrs. Hightower was not sitting at her desk, she stood at the front of class, teaching at the smart board. Her instruction included strategies to aid in student understanding, but she did not present them with clarity, causing confusion among learners. As a result, Kendrick considered this class “hard.” Like his classmates, he often found it difficult to comprehend skills and left the classroom in a perplexed condition.

Mr. Parker: A Metamorphosed Teacher (From Effective to Ineffective)

“Stop talking! First warning! Oh, alright, writing assignment! Why are you talking?” Mr. Parker yelled, as he typed on his MacBook, leaning on the counter of what was once filled with microscopes, tongs, beakers, and funnels, before the room became home of English. This was his favorite spot in the room, and he never abandoned it, until his monthly principal evaluations. The day before his evaluations, he forewarned students and said, “I’m going to do _____ tomorrow. I’ll bring you all cupcakes if you be on your best behavior.” (When reflecting on her experience in this class, Candice said, “_____.” She did not provide any specifics.) This was not the only time Mr. Parker offered incentives, which Jonathan described as “bribes.” If the class average was at least an 80 on a test, Mr. Parker rewarded students with a food party. When students earned an average of an A or a B in his class on their report card, he gave each of them clippers to cut a section of his hair.

Although Mr. Parker took vacations from teaching, there was once a time when he taught students every day, and students learned; but when students corrected him, the teacher became defensive. This created an argument between the students and him. As a result of those chaotic moments, Mr. Parker gave up on teaching and did not provide instruction until the scheduled

principal observations. On days when Mr. Parker was at his laptop, students were required to read an assigned book. Readings about Indians were the most famous, as students often read books about Indians falling in love and about reservations. Sometimes students listened to readings of books on CDs, similar to those that elementary teachers play with basal readers. Candice was not a fan of this approach. She stated, “He had that reading to us like we weren’t good enough to read the book by ourselves.” In addition to the readings, students also answered questions related to the book.

One day Natalie asked, “Mr. Parker, how we supposed to know this, and we ain’t ever do this?” He quickly yelled, “Well, apply it to what you been doing!” Ferguson replied, “I don’t know how to do that.” Similar to his experience in Mrs. Hightower’s class, Jonathan also experienced confusion when completing assignments, but his new SPED teacher, Mrs. Tyler, always supported him and other well-behaved students who were not in SPED. When they needed help, students trailed Mrs. Tyler to her room.

In addition to assigning students reading selections, Mr. Parker also administered assessments about the books and weekly vocabulary quizzes. The quizzes included directions such as: (1) Write out the definition for each of the vocabulary words, and/or (2) Write the correct word beside its corresponding definition. Vocabulary was the only skill students learned in Mr. Parker’s class, and when they entered tenth grade, they did not feel prepared.

Mrs. Hewitt: The Effective Teacher

Before students walked into Mrs. Hewitt’s classroom, she always greeted them and smiled. As students entered, they picked up a highlighter and sat down to begin completing their assigned bellringer that was posted on the smart board. The bellringer was always an English II practice state test question. Students read it, highlighted key words, eliminated answers, and

then marked what they believed was the correct answer. When students were off task, Mrs. Hewitt yelled, “Do your stinkin bellringer!” Candice would laugh and always got tickled whenever Mrs. Hewitt said, “stinkin.” Meanwhile, students knew of Mrs. Hewitt’s expectations, which were expressed during the first day of school.

After students completed the bellringer, Mrs. Hewitt asked them if the answer was A, B, C, or D. If a student answered it incorrectly, she modeled how to select the correct answer. Once evidenced that all learners understood why the answer was either A, B, C, or D, she was ready to begin the day’s lesson. She gave each student a PowerPoint handout, which included information related to the skill she was about to teach.

Modeling how to answer test questions for specific state objectives was a major component of Mrs. Hewitt’s teaching. For all questions, she utilized a technique called R.U.B.I.E.S.:

R- Read/Reread (the question)

U- Underline

B- Box-in (key words)

I- Identify (what you’re looking for in the question)

E- Explain (your answer)

S- Select (your answer)

If any student looked lost when she taught, Mrs. Hewitt used a different approach to help each of them. She refused to move to another objective and leave students behind.

When it was time for learners to practice skills, the teacher divided students into four groups: advanced, proficient, basic, and minimal. About four students were in each

group. Usually, they had the same questions to answer, but each person worked alone first. Then, every member took part in a group discussion. This included listening to each person's answer and rationale for the selection. If members of the group were discombobulated before or after the discussion, they asked each other for help or raised their hands. Mrs. Hewitt was working with the minimal group most of the time, but if she saw any student's hand in the air, she left the group to attend to the learner's need. Even if Mrs. Hewitt looked around and saw someone staring at the paper, she walked over and asked, "What's wrong? You need help? You need help?" If students displayed any frustration, she would say, "Come on, _____! Come on! I know you can do it! I know you can do it!" (Referencing to the blank, that is where Mrs. Hewitt would say the student's name.)

Similar to Jonathan's ninth grade year, Mrs. Tyler, his SPED teacher, was also available to SPED and non-SPED students who needed extra help. If Richards needed assistance, he and Mrs. Tyler walked to her room, and she provided him with one-on-one attention. Frequently, general education students who needed help also followed.

Mrs. Hewitt sometimes deviated from the normal grouping and allowed students to choose their group members. She also grouped advanced or proficient students with basic or minimal learners. Mixing ability levels equated to a tutorial session atmosphere. In addition to completing assignments in groups, learners performed skits, played educational games, and taught the class.

Every Friday, throughout the year, students were tested on specific skills. These assessments initially consisted of four advanced level questions, but the number increased as the year progressed. When the teacher graded the tests, she wrote—Advanced, Proficient, Basic, or

Minimal—on each student’s paper. She also calculated the Quality of Distribution Index (QDI) for each class and displayed it outside of her classroom door. Throughout the year, she reminded students of how many questions to answer correctly on the actual state assessment to receive an exceptional score. She chanted, “Don’t forget on the test to shoot for about thirty to thirty-five questions. The ones that you know you got right, put a tally mark in front of your book. When you get done with the first part [the reading section], go back and count your tally marks to see how many you have.”

In addition to the weekly classroom assessments, Mrs. Hewitt gave benchmark assessments throughout the year to determine students’ progress on English II skills. After students took each benchmark assessment, she gave them their score sheet and engaged them in identifying and highlighting their strengths and weaknesses. Once students knew about their performance, she offered tutoring to assist them in their areas of deficiency. Mrs. Hewitt and students cried together when the scores were unacceptable, and she encouraged students to perform better on the next assessment. She wanted all students to perform well, so she retaught skills when necessary and ditched lunch to help students who needed extra assistance. If the scores were satisfying, however, she rewarded students with movie days and food parties. Receiving at least an 80 on their weekly tests or a high QDI on benchmark assessments earned students breakfast. Students recognized Mrs. Hewitt’s care for them and knew she would be there to listen and offer good advice when they needed help with any issue.

Juniors’ Reflections

Mrs. Baker: A Good Teacher, but Not Enough Attention (Effective Overall)

Similar to Mrs. Hewitt’s classroom routine, as soon as students walked in Ms. Baker’s class, they sat at their desks and began completing the bellringer that was displayed on the smart

board. Once students read the question and wrote an answer on their paper, Ms. Baker and the class discussed the correct and incorrect choices. She then began her lesson, teaching students specific reading or writing objectives and modeling how to answer related questions. Ms. Baker also connected skills with real-life situations.

Teaching reading skills was at the heart of her instruction at the beginning of the school year. On a typical day, students engaged in independent or whole group reading after completing the bellringer. Before students engaged in independent reading, they picked a book from the classroom library. The shelves were filled teen dramas, the most popular books among these students, but included other genres. After students selected a specific book of their interest, they read it for thirty minutes. When time was up, the interesting book was replaced with a “boring” book, as students called it.

On some days, students engaged in whole group readings. Prior to these readings, Ms. Baker asked for literature suggestions, which would then be used as a read-aloud. Usually, students took turns reading a section aloud and wrote responses to questions afterwards. Mid-year, writing skills were Ms. Baker’s focus of teaching.

When showing students how to answer questions for different objectives, Ms. Baker used various techniques. Thinking aloud while eliminating answer choices was one of her methods. During this approach, she provided a rationale for the correct answer and explained why the other choices were incorrect for each question. As Ms. Baker was teaching out her soul, students were attentive and copied notes. If learners exhibited confusion on their faces, she showed students other strategies. Usually, after lessons, students completed worksheets individually.

Sometimes Ms. Baker would discard the everyday whole group instruction. Instead, she divided students based on their ability levels: advanced, proficient, basic, and minimal. Ms.

Baker always helped the minimum group and longed for these bottom-leveled learners to climb up the ladder. Other students such as Jasmine wished for special attention but did not receive it. The proficient group, for example, was assigned non-challenging tasks such as completing reading fair projects. Jasmine was in this group but wanted to engage in other activities that would help her learn eighth grade ELA skills. Instead of helping this group progress to the next achievement level, Ms. Baker gave all of her attention to the minimum learners.

Seniors and Juniors' Shared Reflections

In an attempt to prevent confusion when reading this section, it should be reiterated that Ms. Kennedy taught the junior and senior participants. She taught the senior participants reading/vocabulary during their tenth grade year, while Mrs. Hewitt taught them writing/grammar. Ms. Kennedy taught the junior participants ninth and tenth grade English. During the junior participants' tenth grade year, tenth grade English was no longer divided into two sections: reading/vocabulary and writing/grammar. Instead, Ms. Kennedy taught reading, vocabulary, writing, and grammar in 52-minute classes. When the junior and senior participants reflected on their experiences as students in Ms. Kennedy's class, these participants referenced to similar pedagogical practices. Specific skills that she taught, however, were different by grade level. In every student's reflection, Ms. Kennedy's classroom management issues were the highlight of discussion. Students' reflections about this teacher's practices are collectively presented in this sub-section.

Ms. Kennedy: The Ineffective Teacher With Classroom Management Issues

Every day when her ninth or tenth grade students swarmed into the classroom, the bellringer patiently waited for their attention. They were so rowdy that it took the teacher about ten minutes to tame the group. After everyone completed the bellringer, Ms. Kennedy asked

students if the answer was A, B, C, or D and then handed every student the PowerPoint notes for the lesson, like Mrs. Hewitt. Jessica was a fan of this idea because she was able to give her full attention to the teacher, as opposed to copying notes.

In her monotone voice, Ms. Kennedy soon began teaching a specific objective. Her ninth grade instruction for the junior participants mainly included basic skills such as nouns, verbs, and subject-verb agreement. She typically only used one method when modeling how to answer questions. For her tenth grade instruction, however, she taught more rigorous skills, and students were often confused due to her limited number of strategies. Bunches of hands were raised across the room, as a result. Natalie often raised her hand and asked, “Can you break that down?” Ms. Kennedy replied, “Um...I don’t know another way to put it to you.” While Brittany was trying to listen and gain an understanding, her classmates talked to her. Others were yelling across the room, causing Ms. Kennedy to pause from instruction.

Students in her ninth and tenth grade classes, frequently misbehaved when she taught, and she always paused. In her classes, there was a constant pattern of teaching—distractions—teaching—distractions. Ms. Kennedy stopped for any disturbance, including students whispering. She always turned red when she attempted to control the class, which prompted the students to fill the room with laughter. Some students pleaded for her to overlook distractions and continue teaching.

Usually, this teacher assigned an independent practice activity after her instruction. When teaching the junior participants in ninth grade, Ms. Kennedy typically required them to complete worksheets on basal skills. Another popular activity was to create flip booklets. On each page inside the booklet, students were required to write a vocabulary word on one side and its definition on the backside.

During the two different years that Mrs. Kennedy taught the junior and senior participants in tenth grade, she provided similar instruction: She mostly assigned the students passages from old literature, and the learners were required to answer questions related to the readings. Students engaged in other independent activities such as composing poems and books and writing letters to government officials.

Ms. Kennedy rarely included grouping activities in her ninth and tenth grade classes due to frequent student misbehavior. However, requiring students to complete assignments individually did not prevent students from misbehaving. Some students used this time to play with classmates and seldom completed their work. According to Jessica, “[Students] did enough for Ms. Kennedy to put grades in the system.” In Ms. Kennedy’s ninth grade class, Jasmine was one of those students who played but engaged in activities because she was excited to learn the basics. On the other hand, Tiera was bored because she had learned these skills in previous grades and considered the work to be beneath her level. While students completed their individual work, Ms. Kennedy walked around to help as much as she could until distractions stopped her in her tracks, and she then attempted to regain control of the class.

On days that Ms. Kennedy incorporated grouping into her tenth grade instruction, she periodically blended achievement levels so that minimal and basic students could receive assistance from higher-level learners. While in their groups, Ms. Kennedy sometimes required her students to rotate activities. For example, one group worked on definitions. Another group completed test questions, using Ms. Kennedy’s R.U.B.R.I.C.S. strategy (similar to Hewitt’s R.U.B.I.E.S. technique):

R- Read

U- Underline

B- Box-in

R- Reread

I- Identify

C- Cross out

S- Select

Reading an article and answering corresponding questions is another example of a group activity. Every twenty minutes students rotated to another group. If students did not finish, they continued the next day. Typically, during the few times that students were allowed to collaborate on activities, she divided students into four groups, similar to Mrs. Hewitt's grouping: advanced, proficient, basic, and minimal. In groups, each person was required to answer the same questions and provide rationales for the answers and explanations for incorrect choices. Students were required to tackle all questions by themselves first and then share their responses with the group. Regardless of whether students worked alone or together, they felt unprepared to complete their task, attributing this to being taught only one strategy for answering questions. Ms. Kennedy mainly spent time with the minimal group, but after seeing numerous hands in the air, she often left the group and attempted to assist other students. Mrs. Tyler, Jonathan's SPED teacher, also tried to help students. Along with Jonathan, sometimes a group of students followed Mrs. Tyler to her room, hoping it would lead to greater understanding. As Ms. Kennedy walked around to assist students, a chaotic atmosphere ensued, as students were talking and playing with their classmates.

Whenever time permitted, Ms. Kennedy closed her lessons and usually gave students a writing prompt for homework. Almost every day it was the same routine in her class: 1) bellringer, 2) teaching—distractions—teaching—distractions, and 3) independent practice or grouping. On days when the misbehaving students decided to pay attention, Ms. Kennedy was able to teach without distractions.

In contrast to her daily classroom instruction, students were able to receive assistance without any distractions in Ms. Kennedy's tutorial sessions. Students were able to receive one-on-one attention during this time, as there were few attendees. Jasmine believed that her knowledge of English skills accelerated in ninth and tenth grade because of this special attention and the engaging activities assigned such as worksheets on parallel structure, misplaced modifiers, complex sentences, and independent and dependent clause. She and other students also played English related games on an assigned website.

Every week Ms. Kennedy tested all students on skills she had taught. During the junior and senior participants' tenth grade year, she administered and graded assessments like Mrs. Hewitt. At the beginning of the school year, Ms. Kennedy's tests had four multiple choice advanced questions, but as the year progressed, more questions were added. When grading assessments, she wrote advanced, proficient, basic, or minimal on students' papers. Throughout the year, Ms. Kennedy echoed Mrs. Hewitt, in reference to the state's English II assessment, "Don't forget on the test to shoot for about thirty to thirty-five questions. The ones that you know you got right, put a tally mark in front of your book. When you get done with the first part [the reading section], go back and count your tally marks to see how many you have." Besides the weekly assessments, Ms. Kennedy also administered benchmark assessments. After tests

were scanned, she gave students their score sheet and allowed them to highlight their weaknesses and asked for a list of students who needed tutoring.

According to the senior participants, Ms. Kennedy began transforming after evaluating students' low QDI's regularly. She exchanged her monotone for zesty expressions while teaching. She started adding more examples to her repertoire, helping students to grasp more skills, and her classroom management improved.

Seniors' Additional Reflection: Hewitt and Kennedy's Extra Instructional Time

Scanning weekly test score sheets, highlighting the "basic" and below scores, and proceeding to call out names beside these less than perfect scores was common for Mrs. Hewitt and Ms. Kennedy. During their planning periods, beginning the second semester, these teachers pulled students from non-tested classes (e.g., gym) for "pull-out sessions." These designated times were created to give students another dose of teaching, one-on-one assistance, and hands-on activities. Each session not only contained basic and minimal students but also proficient and advanced students. The proficient and basic-leveled learners were mixed, and the advanced and minimal students were together. Higher-leveled students were added to help strengthen students' knowledge of objectives taught. Unlike Ms. Kennedy, Mrs. Hewitt had two planning periods and was able to pull students more frequently. Additionally, Mrs. Hewitt had a learning strategies class which was designed to prepare students for retaking the English II assessment. She helped all of the re-testers pass the test, and the school no longer required these students to be enrolled in this course because of their passing scores. For this reason, Mrs. Hewitt had the second open period.

In addition to tutoring during school hours, both Mrs. Hewitt and Ms. Kennedy offered before and after-school tutorial sessions to their students. In the morning from 6:30-7:00,

students were able to leave the gym and attend tutoring. Only a few students attended these sessions, but more students were present for after-school tutoring. Most of the students needed extra assistance in reading/vocabulary, therefore, attended Ms. Kennedy's after-school tutorial sessions more frequently¹¹.

During the last semester, Mrs. Hewitt and Ms. Kennedy required that all students attend after-school tutoring. Both of these teachers' rooms were filled with students, as a result. Each teacher conducted a 30-minute tutorial session. Students attended Mrs. Hewitt's tutoring first. She gave them a state test packet that included writing/grammar test questions, and students completed the assigned questions. If students hit a dead end while completing the packet, they raised their hands, and Hewitt rushed to assist them. When everyone finished, she displayed the questions on the smart board and asked different students to go to the board and share their selected answer. Students were instructed to explain why their answer was correct and why the other possible choices were incorrect. After this process, everyone gathered their belongings and walked to Ms. Kennedy's class to continue the tutorial routine, which was identical to Mrs. Hewitt's sessions, but included reading/vocabulary practice, instead of writing/grammar.

One of Mrs. Hewitt and Ms. Kennedy's students (Danny) was not afforded opportunities to receive in-class and additional instruction because he was in alternative school. Danny attended this school for four months, from December to April. As mentioned earlier, the alternative school was located downtown by a barber shop. At different times, each teacher (Mrs. Hewitt and Ms. Kennedy) visited students there during her planning periods to teach skills that were taught in class. According to Danny, Mrs. Hewitt went more frequently, compared to Ms. Kennedy, but he was thankful for both of them. He said, "I had really appreciated [both of]

¹¹ Again, Ms. Kennedy taught reading and vocabulary, and Mrs. Hewitt taught writing and grammar during the seniors' tenth grade year.

them for coming over, helping me, because if I had come back to school, and they didn't come over, I wouldn't know [anything]...because many teachers don't come over."

Theme 2: Student Initiatives

Six out of the twelve student participants did not meet growth on the MCT2: Eighth Grade Language Arts. When asked about the reasoning behind their failure, most students responded, "Because I didn't take my work seriously," and/or "Because my teacher didn't teach." Conversely, in tenth grade, all six students took responsibility for their learning. The other six student participants who took responsibility for their learning in eighth grade ELA also took initiative in tenth grade ELA. For various reasons, all twelve students were determined to pass the English II test and initiated multiple efforts which the participants believe were influential in meeting ELA growth; thus, the theme *Student Initiatives* was created. These initiatives are exhibited throughout this section.

Seniors Taking Responsibility

On the first day of school, before walking in Mrs. Hewitt's class, Jonathan told himself, "I'm going up in here, and I'm going to pass my English test on the first try." Jonathan was determined to do just that. Every morning between 6:30 and 7:00, he was in Mrs. Hewitt or Ms. Kennedy's tutorial sessions asking questions about skills he did not understand. At the after-school sessions, Jonathan was there even when other students went home. Jonathan was a football player and did not leave for practice until he grasped specific concepts. With this in mind, Jonathan thought, "I hope I don't fall short. I hope I don't fall short [on the English II test]."

Kendrick frequently attended after-school tutoring. His main go-to room was Ms. Kennedy's. He knew that by attending these sessions, he would receive more one-on-one

assistance without distractions. He stated, “[Mrs. Kennedy] was doing examples like as a class, and I still wasn’t getting it, and it started getting frustrating. So, I started going one-on-one, to after-school tutoring.”

When Kimberly arrived home from school, she did not throw her school materials on the kitchen counter and leave her work alone. Instead, she woke up her computer and began searching the internet for English II questions. This was no surprise to her computer because in eighth grade she frequently went home and googled information on different language arts skills. After searching for English II practice questions and answering them, she often proceeded to studying vocabulary words or pondering questions from old reading and writing tests, trying to understand why her answers were incorrect. In her mind, she thought, “I have to [pass the English II test] because momma and daddy can’t do it for me. I have to do it by myself!”

April did not mention any actions taken in eighth grade to ensure that she performed well. Instead, she focused on her inability to understand Mrs. Hightower’s teaching. When reflecting on her tenth grade ELA experience, however, she recalled taking initiative for her learning outside of school. Instead of relaxing when she got home, every day for the entire school year, she studied. All night before the test, Veronica studied old reading and writing tests and notes. She was determined to pass the test on the first try; she refused to be a re-tester. Repaying Mrs. Hewitt and Ms. Kennedy for their hard work was on Veronica’s agenda. Veronica considered the word, “Passed,” on her score report as a repayment. Candice had the exact feelings as Veronica. Candice wanted to please her teachers. She did not want to be on the re-testers list, either, because previous English II students said, “Oh, the test gets harder and harder every year.”

Retaking the test or being excluded from participating in the graduation commencement was not an option for Danny, either. Throughout the year, he studied at home. Several weeks before the test, he engaged in a lot of studying to “recalibrate his mind.” He also paid attention in class, as if Mrs. Hewitt and Ms. Kennedy were his drill sergeants.

When scrolling through her list of priorities in tenth grade, Brittany shifted the list down and made “studying” number one. This change was driven by an astronomical amount of students in the previous senior class who failed the English II state assessment. Reading was also a high priority of Brittany’s, and this caused her to better understand English II skills. Natalie also read a lot of books, “boring” books, as she pointed out. She began reading these books after pondering on Mrs. Hewitt and Ms. Kennedy’s echoed words, “You’re going to have to read boring passages on the test. On the test, they’re not going to give you something interesting.”

Juniors Taking Initiative

When Jessica arrived home from school, her plate was full of English related duties. Using the SATP2 practice book that she had purchased online from Amazon, she studied skills such as grammar, fact and opinion, and appropriate and inappropriate language. In addition to Ms. Kennedy’s teaching, 25% of what she learned from the book was beneficial when answering questions on the state test. One or two months before the assessment, around March or April, her routine also included reading “boring” books, since these would be the types of passages on the test.

Tiera valued education and was driven to do well on the English II test. She prayed constantly, paid attention in class, and asked questions. This student even snuck one of the SATP2: English II practice books out of class. She practiced on test items from the book and

studied when she got home. If she did not understand a skill, she searched the internet, looking for information that would aid in comprehension. Tiera also read books excessively, which built her vocabulary and was beneficial when reading passages on the eighth and tenth grade state ELA assessments.

In eighth grade, Jasmine took school for a joke and thought it was play time. Once she entered tenth grade English, she re-evaluated her priorities because she refused to be a re-tester. Jasmine paid attention in class and went to tutoring every week. When she went home, she swapped talking on the phone with boys for at least an hour of study time. Typically, Jasmine used this time to revisit tests and redo questions that she had gotten incorrect. The next day she showed them to Ms. Kennedy, and the teacher checked them for accuracy. About two weeks before the test, she studied her notes, old tests, and other materials that she had received in class.

Theme 3: Additional Support

Have you ever been in a situation where you needed help to accomplish a goal, or perhaps, did not realize you needed assistance until someone came along and lent a helping hand? If so, you may likely recall showering that person with thank yous, followed with, “I don’t know what I would’ve done without your help!” During this study, some student participants reflected on those other than general classroom teachers who provided additional support to help students achieve in ELA. This support included the school’s instructional coach and a SPED teacher and an unidentified educational group as well as classmates and family members. According to the students, the additional support was influential in their ELA growth experiences. All teacher participants upheld this assertion but also recollected receiving pedagogical support from the instructional coach. In fact, Mrs. Hewitt does not believe that she would have been as effective without the extra support. Mrs. Hewitt and Ms. Kennedy and the

student participants expressed gratitude for the additional support that was usually not asked for but offered. Furthermore, this supplementary support helped lead some students to ELA growth, and for this reason, *Additional Support* emanated.

Help for Seniors

Instructional Coach

Mrs. West, the current principal and former instructional coach of Rosa L. Parks High School, was helpful to students and teachers. In addition to Mrs. Hewitt and Ms. Kennedy's pull-out sessions, Mrs. West also pulled students and taught skills such as verbal, dramatic, and situational irony. She periodically visited classrooms, usually Ms. Kennedy's room, to assist students.

Mrs. West also played a key role in teacher development. She modeled lessons when needed and aided teachers with locating classroom resources, helped teachers develop instructional ideas, and assisted teachers with monitoring student growth. Mrs. West also overlooked late lesson plans, which produced less stressful teachers. Her shoulder was always there to lean on when teachers wanted to give up. One day Mrs. Hewitt was in the hallway crying on Mrs. West's shoulder because the tenth grade students did not excel on a benchmark assessment, and Mrs. West provided comfort.

SPED Teacher

Mrs. Tyler supported Jonathan's efforts to pass the English II test on his first attempt. In addition to Mrs. Tyler being alongside Jonathan and helping other students in class with him, she encouraged him to attend pull-out sessions. Jonathan occasionally was not motivated to attend these sessions, but Mrs. Tyler reminded him of his goal. Making sure that he was in enough

tutoring sessions was also on Mrs. Tyler's agenda, as well as calling Jonathan's parents to discuss his class performance and progress.

Classmates

In addition to the weekly tutoring, students met with peers on weekends to gain extra practice. April and some of her classmates were determined to excel on the English II test. On designated Saturdays, April studied with a couple of her classmates. They met at someone's house, and for a couple of hours, the students went over specific reading and writing skills. If April did not understand a skill, one of her classmates helped her reach an understanding.

Assisting Juniors

Educational Group

One day, a few weeks before the English II test, the junior participants were provided with test preparation from an unidentified educational group. This group walked from room to room during the school's two-hour block schedule, offering test-taking tips to tenth grade English students. Tiera asked several questions about summarizing/précis and received helpful responses. Before this day, she did not have any understanding about this skill because when Kennedy taught it, there was always the constant *teaching—distractions* pattern. One day after school, Tiera walked to Ms. Kennedy's room to obtain assistance on this skill, but the teacher said, "Don't worry about it because there is not going to be a lot of questions on the test about it. Just do your best." On the day of the test, Tiera flipped through the booklet and discovered a slew of summarizing/précis questions. She grew highly upset at Ms. Kennedy, but after she calmed down, she began putting the educational group's strategies to use. She also employed other techniques that the group had shown and was able to complete 75% of the test using strategies gained from the group.

Methods for answering fact and opinion questions, among others, were useful to Jessica. Both Jessica and Tiera considered the tips on “the process of elimination” to be helpful. The group reinforced approaches taught by Ms. Kennedy by showing students how to eliminate answer choices. While answering questions on the test, Tiera replayed the group’s words in her mind, “Pay attention to what the question is asking. Most of the time, you can eliminate two answers that are wrong.”

Family Members

Ms. Kennedy frequently assigned students writing prompts for homework. When Jessica got home, she diligently worked on the assigned prompt. Sometimes, however, she faced writer’s block. In the midst of her crisis, her aunt stepped in, leading Jessica to a well-developed idea. “Write from the heart” is the advice that Jessica’s aunt always gave.

When Jasmine arrived home after school, her mother yelled, “No phone, Jasmine! You have to have an hour of study time!” Jasmine had already planned to study more at home this year because she did not want to be on the re-testers list, but she was grateful for the accountability.

Viewing Themes from a Broader Scope

Discussion of the themes’ larger tensions is conducted in this section. “*To Be or Not to Be*” *Successful*, the first sub-section, begins with an explanation of oppositional cultural theory, which has caused people to believe that African Americans do not want to succeed. The following sub-section—*Does Race Matter?*—starts with professors and researchers’ belief that students of color need an African American teacher to experience academic success. Theories discussed within both sections are followed with counterarguments that are supported with current literature and findings from this study.

“To Be or Not to Be” Successful

Data which is represented in this study indicates that student motivation can positively influence academic achievement. When referencing to student motivation and academic achievement, people have been led to believe that students of color *do not* want to succeed (Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005). Researchers have claimed for years that African Americans avoid academic success because of its perceived identification with Caucasians (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Weissert, 1999; McWhorter, 2000; Wasonga & Christman, 2003). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) coined this ideology as oppositional cultural theory and believe this identification developed as a result of being enslaved by Caucasians who exhibited discrimination towards African Americans (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Weissert, 1999; McWhorter, 2000; Wasonga & Christman, 2003). As noted by Fordham and Ogbu (1986), the African American community has defined *academic success* as a Caucasian attribute, or “acting white.” To avoid this identity, people of color have opted for lower standards (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) further argued that the long-standing achievement gap between students of color and Caucasians has resulted from the African American community’s opposition to success. While some researchers have disagreed with the idea of African Americans being motivated to succeed, results from this study, along with others, oppose this ideology.

Contrary to the aforementioned assertions, Downey and Ainsworth-Darnell (2000) suggested that African American students were *more* motivated to learn than their Caucasian peers. Additionally, in Cook and Ludwig’s (1998) study, which measured the degree to which both groups valued education, it was found that while Caucasians’ levels were slightly higher, there was an insignificant difference in the degree of value. In his book, Anderson (2004) also displayed African Americans’ desire for an education during their pre and post-enslavement.

The African American community not only longed for education in times past but has continued to strive for excellence (Tyson, et al., 2005).

In correlation with current literature, the findings from this study also showcase students of color who have aimed for success. Most of the student participants explicitly stated their motivation for excelling on the English II assessment as “to graduate,” “avoid re-testing,” and/or “please the tenth grade teachers.” Two students (Jessica and Tiera), however, did not state reasoning behind their motivation to succeed on the test. Regardless of their motives, all of the participants desired an achievable score on the test and accomplished their goals. These students not only wanted to be successful on the test but are also motivated to achieve beyond high school. One student is going to the military after high school, and others plan to attend college. The following includes a list of desired majors: pre-pharmacy, nursing, biomedical engineering, mathematics, journalism, business, psychology, nursing, welding, and biology. Veronica dreams of becoming a mathematician, and Natalie’s goal is to become an orthodontist. Brittany wants to major in journalism, business, and/or psychology and further stated her goal:

[I want to major in business because] I know [that] I want to establish my own so that my kids and their kids will be set; journalism because I love to read and write; [and] psychology because I [want to] help people with their problems.

Brittany is a student participant who has been identified as “acting white” because she “talks Standard English.” Despite this characterization, she continues to pursue her endeavors.

Does Race Matter?

Milner and Howard (2004) conducted a study about teacher preparation for African American students and interviewed professors who contended that these learners need to be taught by teachers of the same race. These participants believed that African American teachers are more culturally aware than Caucasian teachers, and thereby are more suitable to teach students of color (Milner & Howard, 2004). The professors further argued that the achievement gap resulted from a lack of African American teachers, and therefore, upheld the importance of recruiting and retaining these teachers. One participant pointed out that Caucasian teachers are capable of being effective but need training; however, she affirmed her belief that African American teachers are what these students need in order to experience academic achievement (Milner & Howard, 2004). Other researchers also contended that teachers of color are necessary for the success of African American students (Foster, 1990; Holmes, 1990; King, 1993).

Douglas, Lewis, Douglas, Scott, and Garrison-Wade (2008) learned that African American students at a school with predominantly Caucasian teachers still felt academically equipped as a result of their teachers' instructional practices. The students once attended a predominantly African American school but enjoyed being at their current school more because of the positive learning environment and effective teachers (Douglas, Lewis, Douglas, & Garrison-Wade, 2008). According to Stronge (2007), being *effective* is the most significant teacher characteristic for *all* students because *effective* teachers are equipped to lead *every* student to success. Table 10 includes Stronge's Standards of Effective Teaching.

Table 10

Stronge's Standards of Effective Teaching

I. Professional Knowledge The teacher demonstrates an understanding of the curriculum, subject content, and the developmental needs of students by providing relevant learning experiences.
II. Instructional Planning The teacher plans using the state's standards, the school's curriculum, effective strategies, resources, and data to meet the needs of all students.
III. Instructional Delivery The teacher effectively engages students in learning by using a variety of instructional strategies in order to meet individual learning needs.
IV. Assessment of/for Learning The teacher systematically gathers, analyzes, and uses all relevant data to measure student academic progress, guide instructional content and delivery methods, and provide timely feedback to both students and parents throughout the year.
V. Learning Environment The teachers uses resources, routines, and procedures to provide a respectful, positive, safe, student-centered environment that is conducive to learning.
VI. Professionalism The teacher maintains a commitment to professional ethics, communicates effectively, and takes responsibility for and participates in professional growth that results in enhanced student learning.
VII. Student Progress The work of the teacher results in acceptable, measurable, and appropriate student academic progress.

Note. Stronge provides a teacher effectiveness performance evaluation system that can be used to conduct informal and formal teacher evaluations. The elements in this chart, along with examples of each, are listed on Stronge's observation forms.

In this study, participants discussed their African American and Caucasian teachers' pedagogical practices. Mrs. Hightower and Ms. Baker were the two African American teachers mentioned. Students indicated that Mrs. Hightower was an ineffective teacher because she rarely provided instruction. Whenever she taught, she did not provide effective strategies to help students understand concepts. Although students pointed out an ineffective trait of Ms. Baker, they still characterized her as an effective teacher because she established a positive classroom environment and provided various strategies when teaching.

The three Caucasian teachers were Mr. Parker, Mrs. Hewitt, and Ms. Kennedy. Students considered Mr. Parker ineffective because he only taught during his scheduled observations. Occasionally, Ms. Kennedy was able to teach when students decided to behave on certain days, but on most days, she was unable to teach because of constant student misbehavior; therefore, students deemed Ms. Kennedy as an ineffective teacher. Out of all the teachers mentioned in this study, Mrs. Hewitt was the only teacher in which students did not find *any* flaw and who students considered to be exceptional and effective. The data revealed that this Caucasian teacher possessed all of the following characteristics of an effective teacher, according to Stronge's Standards of Effective Teaching. A comparison of his standards and her qualities are outlined in Table 11. When asked about advice that they would give schools to help African Americans achieve in ELA, all students referred to aspects of Mrs. Hewitt's teaching that are displayed in Table 11. Alexis strongly stated, "[Students] need a teacher like Mrs. Hewitt because she was determined for us to pass the test."

Table 11

A Comparison of Stronge’s Standards of Effective Teaching to Mrs. Hewitt’s Pedagogical Practices

Stronge’s Standards of Effective Teaching	Evidence of Mrs. Hewitt’s Effective Teaching
<p>I. Professional Knowledge The teacher demonstrates an understanding of the curriculum, subject content, and the developmental needs of students by providing relevant learning experiences.</p>	<p>She utilized multiple methods to help students comprehend concepts. If students did not understand one strategy, she provided another method. Because of these different techniques, each student developed an understanding of skills.</p>
<p>II. Instructional Planning The teacher plans using the state’s standards, the school’s curriculum, effective strategies, resources, and data to meet the needs of all students.</p>	<p>She evaluated data with Ms. Kennedy to identify students for “pull-out sessions.” In preparation for lessons, Mrs. Hewitt also solicited the help of the instructional coach (Mrs. West) to locate resources and develop teaching ideas.</p>
<p>III. Instructional Delivery The teacher effectively engages students in learning by using a variety of instructional strategies in order to meet individual learning needs.</p>	<p>Mrs. Hewitt utilized various strategies when teaching (e.g., R.U.B.I.E.S., highlighting key words, justifying correct and incorrect answers). She also allowed opportunities for students to teach the class, play games, and perform skits and provided differentiated instruction (divided students based on their readiness levels, learning styles, or multiple intelligences).</p>
<p>IV. Assessment of/for Learning The teacher systematically gathers, analyzes, and uses all relevant data to measure student academic progress, guide instructional content and delivery methods, and provide timely feedback to both students and parents throughout the year.</p>	<p>Mrs. Hewitt administered weekly and bi-weekly assessments. Each class period received a QDI, and she posted every QDI outside of the class. She also evaluated data weekly with Ms. Kennedy and pulled students during planning periods to help the identified learners who needed extra assistance, based on test data from the previous week.</p>
<p>V. Learning Environment The teachers use resources, routines, and procedures to provide a respectful, positive, safe, student-centered environment that is conducive to learning.</p>	<p>There were three main daily routines in Mrs. Hewitt’s class: 1. <u>Bellringer</u>- Every day the students were expected to enter the room quietly and complete their bellringer. Once completed, the teacher asked students for the correct answer. (Students were always</p>

	<p>required to justify the correct and incorrect answer choices.) If students answered a question incorrectly, Mrs. Hewitt explained the correct answer and justified why it was correct and why the other choices were incorrect.</p> <p>2. <u>Instruction</u>- She provided instruction related to a specific ELA state objective.</p> <p>3. <u>Groups</u>- Mrs. Hewitt divided students into groups to answer questions which aligned with the objective that was taught. Students answered the questions by themselves first, and then the students participated in a group discussion. Each student shared his or her answer. If anyone selected a different choice, the group further discussed the question to decide on one answer.</p> <p>On another note, there was never any chaos in the class. Mrs. Hewitt respected the students, and the students respected her.</p>
<p>VI. Professionalism The teacher maintains a commitment to professional ethics, communicates effectively, and takes responsibility for and participates in professional growth that results in enhanced student learning.</p>	<p>She treated all students fairly. She also participated in sessions with the instructional coach who modeled lessons when needed and helped teachers locate resources and monitor student growth.</p>
<p>VII. Student Progress The work of the teacher results in acceptable, measurable, and appropriate student academic progress.</p>	<p>During the school year that she taught the senior participants, students showed growth in ELA. Additionally, in her learning strategies class, a class for English II re-testers, all of the students passed when the test was re-administered.</p>

Note. All evidence of Mrs. Hewitt’s effective teaching is based on the student participants’ data but is also supported by the teacher participants’ responses.

Conclusion

This chapter identified three themes that emerged from the data: *Teacher Effectiveness*, *Student Initiatives*, and *Additional Support*. Each of these categories was described in a narrative format, and all data collected from participants reflected one of the recognized themes. When recalling their ELA growth experiences, student participants often referred to their teachers' instructional practices. It was from the seniors' collective responses that *Teacher Effectiveness* originated. *Student Initiatives* was a theme that became apparent after each student labeled his or her initiatives as a key component to showing growth in ELA. The two chief actions included studying and attending tutorial sessions. Some students not only credited a teacher and/or themselves for meeting growth in ELA but also recognized others who were influential in this accomplishment, resulting in *Additional Support* as another overwhelming theme. Moreover, all three themes are the answers to research question one. The three themes also serve as the responses to research question two: In reference to the community members, as stated in question two, teachers (faculty) were the only members included in this study, which ensued from a limited number of responses to the question. These responses were the same as the students' answers from research question one. Moreover, there were more similar responses to the question but were based on the student participants' perceptions. In addition to describing the three themes, aspects of two themes—Teacher Effectiveness and Student Initiatives—in respect to current literature were discussed in this chapter. This discussion adds to current literature, as it combats ideologies related to African American students.

CHAPTER V

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Teacher Effectiveness, Student Initiatives, and Additional Support were the three themes presented in chapter four. As a result of each emerged theme, ideas were developed to support educators in their endeavors of increasing academic achievement among their African American students. These thoughts are discussed in the first section of this chapter: *Implications for Educators*. The other two sections of this chapter are *Future Directions/Awareness* and *Outcome Space*. *Future Directions/Awareness* offers directions for future research and provides methodological awareness to support others in their future research plans. As a final highlight of the study's findings, this chapter concludes with discussion of the outcome space/hierarchical figure, which displays the emerged themes from most to least significant.

Implications for Educators

Encourage Teachers to Teach Daily by Conducting Informal Evaluations

Evaluating teachers frequently should be considered one of the most important responsibilities of administrators. As conveyed in this study, a teacher can negatively or positively influence student achievement. Observing teachers and providing constructive, immediate feedback has been employed by administrators as a vehicle for supporting each teacher in his or her professional growth, and thereby the success of students. Conversely, some administrators simply conduct scheduled (formal) teacher evaluations because they are required by the school district; however, they should also conduct informal observations by dropping in

classrooms unannounced. This should not be done to frighten teachers, but it should be conducted to ultimately help teachers develop in their pedagogical practices. Although providing teachers with this type of support is vital, perhaps, it will also encourage them to teach daily. As seen in this study, Mr. Parker only taught students during his scheduled evaluations. According to Candice, this was the only time that the principal observed Mr. Parker. Conceivably, if the principal conducted frequent informal evaluations, Mr. Parker and possibly other teachers would have taught more often.

Prepare Administrators in the Area of Curriculum and Instruction

Administrators are not fully equipped to support each teacher if they lack knowledge about effective teaching. Therefore, school districts should prepare administrators in the area of curriculum and instruction by conducting continual training sessions on various topics such as *What Constitutes an Effective Teacher*, *How to Use Evaluation Instruments*, and *Providing Instructional Coaching and Modeling*. Even though schools and districts may have curriculum specialists or instructional coaches, it is also important that the principal knows how to observe teachers and provide constructive, immediate feedback since he or she is essentially the instructional school leader. Having a principal who is knowledgeable about curriculum and instruction would be beneficial to the curriculum specialist or instructional coach, particularly when additional support is needed (i.e., needs help observing teachers who have multiple deficiencies). If there are at least two leaders who possess an understanding of instructional practices, it will additionally afford teachers the opportunity to receive various perspectives and ideas related to improving student learning.

Conduct Professional Development Sessions for Teachers

Schools and districts should also provide meaningful professional development sessions for teachers with classroom management issues. As seen in this study, classroom management can inflict a negative impact upon student learning. If there is no classroom management, students are unable to learn because of constant distractions. For this reason, administrators should identify teachers who find it challenging to control their students and provide these teachers with multiple sessions on how to establish and retain a positive learning climate. Teachers should be required to employ what is learned from the sessions in their classrooms, and administrators should frequently monitor these teachers to ensure effective implementation. Possibly, after teachers build an effective learning environment, they will no longer be required to attend the sessions.

Avoid Preconceptions and Myths about African American Students

When teaching African American students, teachers should avoid being led by preconceptions, believing that it is impossible for students of color to learn, or myths such as the oppositional cultural theory. Veronica, one of the student participants, discussed the negative impact of teacher pre-conceived notions. She stated, “Teachers need to stop thinking that students cannot learn. There were some teachers who told us that we were not going to be able to pass the state test, [such as] the U.S. History test. It prevented kids [from] do[ing] their work. [The teachers] were holding us back.” To help prevent teachers from entering their classrooms with assumptions about African American students, schools should conduct meaningful professional development sessions before the school year begins. The goal of these sessions should be to help teachers understand African American students; topics could include *Myths about Students of Color* and/or *How to Motivate African American Students to Learn*.

Offer Family Support

As pointed out in this study, family support can influence student success. Some families, however, may not know how to provide adequate support. Because of this, schools or districts should offer parents and/or guardians workshops that will help these families support their children academically. Topics may include *How to Motivate Your Children for Success* or *How to Help Your Child Prepare for State Exams*.

Attach Incentives to All State Assessments

In this study, all students took initiative to pass the English II test, but only three of them were responsible for their learning in eighth grade and excelled on the MCT2: Eighth Grade Language Arts. More students took action in tenth grade because of the meaning attached to their English II test scores. If students earned a passing score on their subject area tests, they were afforded the opportunity to graduate, a serious motivational factor for most of the student participants.

Mississippi rewards high school students who pass *all* end-of-course (EOC) exams by allowing students to graduate, but no incentive is attached to other state assessments. Because rewards have proven to be a powerful tool—as signified when comparing student initiatives in eighth and tenth grade—states, districts, and schools should also, perhaps, offer incentives to all students who are required to take state exams. These rewards can be given for an exceptional academic performance and for showing significant progress. If the incentives are meaningful to students, this approach may likely encourage students to take responsibility for their learning.

Future Directions/Awareness

Research Directions

As a result of conducting this study, there were various research ideas that came to mind. When comparing data between alternatively prepared teachers, to those who received traditional certification, researchers discovered differences among students' test scores (Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, & Heilig, 2005). Data indicated that students in alternatively prepared teachers' classrooms do not perform as well as students who are in the classrooms of traditionally certified teachers (Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, & Heilig, 2005). According to Stronge (2007), "Teachers with little or no coursework in education consistently have difficulty in the areas of classroom management, curriculum development, student motivation, and specific teaching strategies" (p. 6). Indeed, Ms. Kennedy (the teacher participant who was not traditionally certified) had similar issues, as she had trouble controlling the class and lacked the skills needed to motivate students or even present alternative learning strategies. Moreover, it would be interesting to conduct a qualitative comparison of ELA teachers who went through a traditional path versus TFA teachers who did not.

As mentioned in chapter three, there is only one Mississippi public high school with predominantly African American students that has been successful for the past three years and has also shown growth in ELA within those time frames. Additionally, there is a school in Mississippi with similar demographics that has shown growth in ELA for more than three consecutive school years but has not been successful. The current study could be extended by collecting data from this additional school, and data collection procedures can be similar to those that were followed in this study. The findings from the proposed study and those that were uncovered in this study can then be compared and/or contrasted.

Another extension of the current study could be to determine how African American high school students perceive their growth experiences in all of the following subjects—mathematics, science, ELA, and history—as measured by Mississippi’s Subject Area Testing Program 2 (SATP2): Algebra I, Biology I, English II, and U.S. History. If there is one school that has shown growth in all areas, it could be selected as the setting, but if such a school is non-existent, different schools that have shown the most growth in *specific* subject areas could be targeted. When using the latter approach, a Mississippi public high school (with predominantly African American students) that has shown the most growth in mathematics could be a choice. A school that has demonstrated the most growth in science could also be selected. The schools would be selected in the same manner for ELA and history. Since African American students are performing behind other subgroups across subject areas, this will provide insight into how students have been able to make growth in each of the areas and may allow for more data and comparisons.

As an exterior to the current study, a qualitative comparison could be conducted to uncover how Caucasian students perceive their ELA growth experiences. This would provide an array of perspectives and be fundamental for providing educators with valuable insight on how students of a different race were able to meet growth, which may lead educators to new pedagogical approaches. Other ideas for qualitative research include the following:

1. Allow students in a predominantly African American high school to tell their experiences of *failing* to meet growth in ELA.
2. Study the impact Caucasian teachers have on the success of African American students in ELA, compared to African American teachers.
3. Conduct a study on the self-efficacy of African American high school students.

Methodological Awareness

Avoid Taking Notes During Interview Sessions

One of the main lessons learned when conducting this phenomenographic study is to avoid taking notes during interview sessions. It has been suggested that interviews for this type of study be open (deviating from the interview script to ask other significant questions) and deep (producing an understanding of the studied phenomenon). Based on experience, in order to deeply internalize participants' responses and then follow with other significant questions, the interviewer should avoid taking notes.

In addition to tape recording an interview, taking notes has been employed to record significant aspects of the interview such as the participants' responses and reactions. Taking notes is a valuable practice, but someone other than the researcher(s) should be the designated recorder(s). This allows the researcher(s) to fully internalize the participants' responses and ask significant questions, besides those scripted. In the interview sessions for this study, there was a designated recorder, but I also recorded notes to ensure that all significant aspects of the interview (i.e., a participant's reaction) were not overlooked. If this action could have been avoided, it would have allowed for a deeper interpretation of the students' responses, which could have led to asking more significant questions. However, all notes proved beneficial: There were some parts of the interview that did not record clearly, but I was able to refer to both sets of notes for clarity. With this in mind, maybe, there should be more than one designated recorder in an interview.

Decide on the Best Approach for Analyzing Data

Because phenomenography is a study that aims to uncover the various perspectives of *others*, this methodology allows one to gain various perspectives about a specific phenomenon.

As a result, there is an abundance of collected data that the researcher will need to analyze. This research was done without the use of qualitative software such as NVivo to analyze data; instead, it was conducted by reading each transcript three times and eventually recording significant excerpts, words, or phrases on sticky notes and searching for similarities and differences to develop categories. This process is time consuming but is also beneficial because it allows researchers to be directly involved with the data. However, if one does not want to work directly with the data, using qualitative software for analyzing is likely more appropriate, but it is ultimately about the researcher's preference.

Outcome Space

To reveal results from a phenomenographic study, an outcome space should be created. This outcome space should include the categories of description, or themes, that represent collected perceptions of the studied phenomenon (Marton & Booth, 2013). Collectively, each theme should be ranked from the least to most significant, forming a hierarchy (Marton & Booth, 2013).

There are three themes that emerged from this study: *Teacher Effectiveness*, *Student Initiatives*, and *Additional Support*. Each of the themes collectively represents how participants perceived their ELA growth experiences. The seniors pointed out teacher effectiveness as a positive influence in their ELA growth experiences. Both the junior and senior participants frequently mentioned personal initiatives that were taken to ensure success in ELA. The students also briefly discussed additional support that had a positive impact on their ELA achievement. *Additional Support* is listed as the least significant. When determining the most significant theme, *Teacher Effectiveness* seemed apparent. However, after thoughtful consideration, *Student Initiatives* was more palpable.

As conveyed in the description of *Teacher Effectiveness*, Mrs. Hewitt's effective instructional practices were influential in the seniors' ELA growth experiences. The juniors considered all but one teacher (Ms. Baker) as ineffective, but neither of them explicitly states any teacher as having a positive influence in their ELA growth experiences. Seniors focused more on the *Power of the Teacher* theme than the juniors. The seniors' attention was more on Mrs. Hewitt's effective practices than Ms. Kennedy's. There was commonality among the juniors and seniors when reflecting on aspects of the *Students in Action* theme. All of these students considered their actions as influential in the ELA growth experience. Although only three participants took initiative for their learning in eighth grade, all of them took action in tenth grade. Most of them stated their reasoning behind taking initiative for their learning—to graduate and pass the test during their initial attempt.

Indeed, seniors were assigned an effective writing teacher (Mrs. Hewitt), but this experience does not always equate to exceptional student test performances. For instance, Jasmine deemed her eighth grade ELA teacher as a “good teacher.” Jasmine further stated that she did not perform well on her eighth grade ELA state assessment because she failed to take her work seriously in eighth grade. Additionally, when asked to explain how some students at the school were able to meet growth in ELA, but others were not, Ms. Baker responded, “[B]ecause [the students who met growth] were the ones who took advantage of different opportunities that were presented to learn both in and outside of the typical setting.” All of this evidence indicates that succeeding in school starts within students. An effective teacher supports students in their achievement efforts. Therefore, I deem *Student Initiatives* as the most significant theme. *Teacher Effectiveness* is the next level of significance. *Additional Support* is the least significant. *Figure 1* depicts each of these themes.

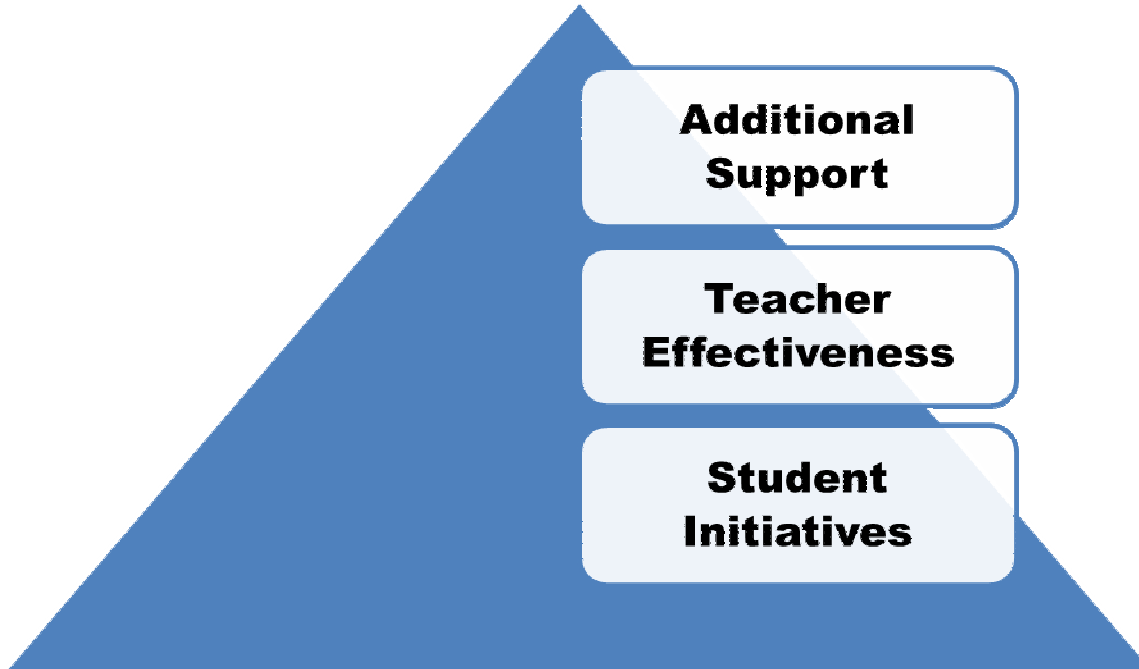


Figure 1. Outcome Space of This Study. This pyramid is used to depict the level of each theme. All themes collectively indicate students' perceptions of their ELA growth experiences.

Conclusion

This qualitative, phenomenographic research study gave African American students a voice that is rarely heard in literature. It was through these voices, that three themes emerged: *Student Initiatives*, *Teacher Effectiveness*, and *Additional Support*. These themes led to implications for educators at the school, state, and district level and resulted in suggestions for future research. The suggested implications should be beneficial to educators of any student population; however, the implications were *specifically* designed to help accelerate ELA success among African American students. Since it has been difficult for educators to increase ELA achievement within this population, advice for future research will hopefully give way to more studies that will aid in increasing ELA achievement among African Americans, and thereby help bridge the achievement gap that has been present for far too long.

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LIST OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM FOR STUDENTS UNDER 18 YEARS OF
AGE

Dear Student:

I would like to invite you to help me with a research study that I am doing at The University of Mississippi.

The purpose of this study is to help me understand how you were able to meet growth in English language arts (ELA), as indicated by your scale score on the English II Subject Area Test.

If you participate in my study, you will be interviewed on two different days for approximately 60-90 minutes for both interviews. If you decide to participate, you will be offered snacks at the first interview and a free meal the day of the second interview. Also, if you participate in both interviews, you will receive a \$10 Wal-Mart gift card.

By signing this consent form, you:

- 1) Agree to be interviewed 60-90 minutes on two different days, and in return, will be offered snacks at the first interview and a free meal the day of the second interview; and a \$10 Wal-Mart gift card if you participate in both interviews.
- 2) Recognize that all data from the interviews will be included in the data analysis of this research.
- 3) Understand that you will not be identified by name in any papers or publications which may result from this study.

No risks are expected as a result of this study. Any data collected to the point of removal will be used in the study, without any harm to you. You are free to quit this study at any time, and I will not be upset with you. If you have any questions or concerns, call me at (662) 291-1118. Thank you for your help.

Sincerely,

Ebonee Williams
Doctoral Candidate
School of Education, The University of Mississippi

Please sign both copies. Keep one copy and return one to the researcher.

_____ Name of Student	_____ Signature	_____ Date
_____ Name of Parent/Guardian	_____ Signature	_____ Date
_____ Name of Researcher	_____ Signature	_____ Date

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM FOR STUDENTS 18 YEARS OLD AND
UP

Dear Student:

I would like to invite you to help me with a research study that I am doing at The University of Mississippi.

The purpose of this study is to help me understand how you were able to meet growth in English language arts (ELA), as indicated by your scale score on the English II Subject Area Test.

If you participate in my study, you will be interviewed on two different days for approximately 60-90 minutes for both interviews. If you decide to participate, you will be offered snacks at the first interview and a free meal the day of the second interview. Also, if you participate in both interviews, you will receive a \$10 Wal-Mart gift card.

By signing this consent form, you:

- 1) Agree to be interviewed 60-90 minutes on two different days, and in return, will be offered snacks at the first interview and a free meal the day of the second interview; and a \$10 Wal-Mart gift card if you participate in both interviews.
- 2) Recognize that all data from the interviews will be included in the data analysis of this research.
- 3) Understand that you will not be identified by name in any papers or publications which may result from this study.

No risks are expected as a result of this study. Any data collected to the point of removal will be used in the study, without any harm to you. You are free to quit this study at any time, and I will not be upset with you. If you have any questions or concerns, call me at (662) 291-1118. Thank you for your help.

Sincerely,

Ebonee Williams
Doctoral Candidate
School of Education, The University of Mississippi

Please sign both copies. Keep one copy and return one to the researcher.

Name of Student

Signature

Date

Name of Researcher

Signature

Date

APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM FOR TEACHERS

Dear Teacher:

I would like to invite you to help me with a research study that I am conducting at The University of Mississippi.

The purpose of this study is to help me understand how students at your school were able to meet growth in English language arts (ELA), as indicated by their scale scores on the English II Subject Area Test during the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 school years.

If you participate in my study, you will be interviewed for approximately 60-90 minutes. If you decide to participate, you will be offered a free meal the day of the interview.

By signing this consent form, you:

- 1) Agree to be interviewed approximately 60-90 minutes, and in return, will be offered a free meal the day of the interview.
- 2) Recognize that all data from the interviews will be included in the data analysis of this research.
- 3) Understand that you will not be identified by name in any papers or publications, which may result from this study.

No risks are expected as a result of this study. You are free to withdraw from this study at any time without consequences. Any data collected to the point of removal will be used in the study, without any harm to you. If you wish to withdraw from the study or have any questions or concerns, please call me at (662) 291-1118. Thank you for your help.

Sincerely,

Ebonee Williams
Doctoral Candidate
School of Education, The University of Mississippi

Please sign both copies. Keep one copy and return one to the researcher.

_____ Name of Teacher	_____ Signature	_____ Date
_____ Name of Researcher	_____ Signature	_____ Date

APPENDIX D: RELEASE FORM

The University of Mississippi

Release Form

For valuable consideration, I do hereby authorize The University of Mississippi, its assignees, agents, employees, designees, and those acting pursuant to its authority (“UM”) to:

- a. Record my participation and appearance on video tape, audio tape, film, photograph or any other medium (“Recordings”).
- b. Use my name, likeness, voice and biographical material in connection with these recordings.
- c. Exhibit, copy, reproduce, perform, display or distribute such Recordings (and to create derivative works from them) in whole or in part without restrictions or limitation in any format or medium for any purpose which The University of Mississippi, and those acting pursuant to its authority, deem appropriate.
- d. I release UM from any and all claims and demands arising out of or in connection with the use of such Recordings including any claims for defamation, invasion of privacy, rights of publicity, or copyright.

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone No.: _____

Signature: _____

Parent/Guardian Signature (if under 18): _____

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Protocol for Primary (Student) Participants

1. In eighth grade, you scored (advanced, proficient, basic, minimal) on the MCT2: Eighth Grade Language Arts. Why do you believe you earned that score?
2. Tell me about your experiences in your eighth grade language arts class? Ninth grade English class? Tenth grade English class?
3. How do you feel that your experiences were similar or different than your classmates?
4. Describe your feelings about the English II Subject Area Test as you remember that day?
5. How would you describe your level of preparation?
6. Tell me about the day you found out you passed the English II Subject Area Test?
7. When examining your MCT2: Eighth Grade Language Arts test results and your English II Subject Area Test results, I noticed that you performed really well on the English II Subject Area Test compared to your performance on the MCT2: Eighth Grade Language Arts. Why do you believe you performed so well on the English II Subject Area Test?
8. What advice would you give schools across the United States to help students make improvements in language arts?
9. Is there anything you would like to add regarding your experience of improving in English language arts?

Protocol for Secondary (Teacher) Participants

1. What are your responsibilities as an ELA teacher?
2. What specific steps have you taken that you believe are contributing factors to students' growth in ELA, as indicated by the English II Subject Area Test results?
3. Explain how some students at your school were able to meet their predicted SATP2: English II scale score, but others were not able to meet their predicted scale score.
4. What actions does the school take to help students pass the English II Subject Area Test prior graduation?
5. What advice would you give schools across the United States to help their students meet growth in language arts?
6. Is there anything you would like to add regarding the factors that contribute to your students making growth in ELA, as indicated by the English II Subject Area Test?

VITA

EDUCATION

The University of Mississippi, University, Mississippi

M. Ed. in Curriculum & Instruction

August 2011

Emphasis: Secondary Education

Specialization: English

Mississippi State University, Mississippi State, Mississippi

B. S. in Elementary Education

December 2008

Endorsements: English and Social Studies

MISSISSIPPI CERTIFICATIONS & ENDORSEMENTS

(M.S.) English, 7-12 (AA)

(B.S.) Elementary Education, K-6 (A)

(B.S.) Social Studies, 7-12 (A)

(B.S.) AP English Literature and Composition (A)

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

August 2013 – December 2013	K12 Inc., Herndon, Virginia <i>Part-Time High School English/Social Science Online Teacher</i>
September 2012 – May 2013	Durant Public School, Durant, Mississippi <i>Third Grade Reading Teacher</i>
June 2011 – July 2011	Holly Springs Intermediate School, Holly Springs, Mississippi <i>Third Grade Summer School Teacher</i>
August 2010 – May 2011	Holly Springs High School, Holly Springs, Mississippi <i>12th Grade English Teacher; 12th Grade AP English Literature and Composition Teacher; 9th/12th Grade Learning Strategies Teacher</i>

August 2009 – May 2010 Holly Springs High School, Holly Springs, Mississippi
10th/12th Grade English Teacher; 9th Grade Learning Strategies Teacher

January 2009 – May 2009 Holly Springs High School, Holly Springs, Mississippi
Substitute Teacher

August 2008 – December 2008 East Oktibbeha Elementary School, Starkville, Mississippi
1st/4th Grade Student Teacher

June 2008 – July 2008 Project Southside Inc., Columbus, Mississippi
5-6 Years-Old Camp Teacher/Counselor

RELATED PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

February 2015 – April 2015 Columbus Middle School, Columbus, Mississippi
Academic Consultant
 Provided the principal with support in analyzing student assessment data and implementing the RtI process effectively. Placed teachers in tiers and developed observation schedules for Tier 3 teachers. Observed Tier 3 teachers and provided immediate feedback. Performed other duties as assigned by the principal.

October 2013 – February 2014 Durant Public School, Durant, Mississippi
Elementary Reading Consultant
 Collaborated with Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) school literacy coach to observe the third grade reading teacher and provide immediate feedback. Assisted the reading teacher with analyzing student data to guide instructional decisions. Worked with students in whole and small group reading instruction in the context of modeling, co-teaching, and coaching. Developed informal and formal assessments for the elementary reading teachers.

August 2010 – May 2011 Holly Springs High School, Holly Springs, Mississippi
Mentor Teacher
 Conducted weekly classroom observations of new teachers and provided immediate feedback. Assisted teachers with data analysis.

School-Wide Reading Initiative Coordinator
 Demonstrated how to implement research-based reading strategies across the curriculum at professional development and engaged teachers in the process. Supported teachers in their implementation of the methods.

English Department Chairperson

Observed all English teachers and provided immediate feedback. Conducted weekly meetings to provide and demonstrate reading and writing research-based strategies and engaged teachers in hands-on activities for practice. Demonstrated how to utilize data to guide instructional decisions.

Clinical Supervisor for Student Teachers

Supervised teacher education candidates.

August 2009 – May 2010

Holly Springs High School, Holly Springs, Mississippi
Teacher Support Team (TST) Chairperson

Coordinated the deliberation of student interventions. Collaborated with team members to analyze data, provide immediate and accessible support to referring teachers, and design or redefine intervention processes that addressed problem areas.

August 2008 – December 2008

Project Southside Inc., Columbus, Mississippi
Pre-K – 2nd Grade Tutor

Tutored students in small groups and individually, depending on each student's needs. Worked to build students' reading foundation by incorporating engaging reading and writing activities.

VOLUNTEER SERVICE

August 2012 – September 2012

Durant Public School, Durant, Mississippi
Academic Consultant

August 2011 – May 2012

Holly Springs Junior High School, Holly Springs, Mississippi
ELA Consultant

August 2010 – May 2011

Holly Springs High School, Holly Springs, Mississippi
Tutor, English II Senior Re-testers

PUBLICATIONS

Williams, E. (2014). Breaking the barriers to reading success in middle and high schools. *Reading Improvement, 51*(2), 233-236.

Williams, E. (2013). Closing the achievement gap: Breaking the barriers to success in middle and high schools. *National Teacher Education Journal, 6*(2), 63-69.

RESEARCH INTERESTS

- Practices to bridge the achievement gap
- Drop-out prevention initiatives
- Methods to attract and retain effective teachers for African American students
- Parental engagement programs
- Motivational strategies for African American students
- Culturally responsive literacy instruction

PRESENTATION

Professional Development, Columbus Middle School, Columbus, MS. “Planning/Aligning Instruction.” September 2012.

GRANTS

- | | |
|------------------------------|---|
| January 2015
<i>Grant</i> | <i>Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) Reading Literacy (\$25,000)</i>
Edited the grant for Durant Public School District. |
| August 2013 | <i>Mississippi Community Oriented Policing Services in School (MCOPS) Grant (\$10,000 matching grant)</i>
Composed 95% of the grant, which was designed to provide funding for School Resource Officers (SROs), and edited the remaining 5% for Durant Public School District. |

AWARDS & RECOGNITIONS

- | | |
|------|---|
| 2014 | -Invitation to peer review an article for the <i>International Journal of Educational Policy Research and Review</i>
-Certificate of Attendance at the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Southeast’s professional development—Integrated Early Childhood Longitudinal Data System: A Powerful Tool |
| 2013 | -Growth Award (for increasing ELA achievement of low performing third grade students at Durant Public School)
-Certificate of Appreciation (Durant Public School) |
| 2011 | -Appreciation Plaque (from Holly Springs High School Seniors, 2011) |
| 2008 | -Recognition from parents for preparing their children to leave Project Southside Inc. Camp with a strong reading foundation |

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

National Alliance of Black School Educators (NABSE)

National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD)

National Education Association (NEA)