Establishment and Maintenance of Academic Optimism in Michigan Elementary Schools: Academic Emphasis, Faculty Trust of Students and Parents, Collective Efficacy

Jill Van Hof
Western Michigan University, jillvanhof@yahoo.com

ESTABLISHMENT AND MAINTENANCE OF ACADEMIC OPTIMISM IN
MICHIGAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS: ACADEMIC EMPHASIS,
FACULTY TRUST OF STUDENTS AND PARENTS,
COLLECTIVE EFFICACY

by

Jill Van Hof

A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Educational Leadership, Research and Technology
Advisor: Sue Poppink, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan
April 2012

THE GRADUATE COLLEGE

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

KALAMAZOO, MICHIGAN

Date _____ February 28, 2012 _____

WE HEREBY APPROVE THE DISSERTATION SUBMITTED BY

_____ Jill B. VanHof _____

ENTITLED Establishment and Maintenance of Academic Optimism in Michigan

Elementary Schools: Academic Emphasis, Faculty Trust of Students and Parents,

Collective Efficacy

AS PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE

DEGREE OF _____ Doctor of Philosophy _____

Educational Leadership, Research and Technology

(Department)

Dissertation Review Committee Chair

Educational Leadership

(Program)

Dissertation Review Committee Member

Dissertation Review Committee Member

Dissertation Review Committee Member

APPROVED

_____
Dean of The Graduate College

Date _____ April 2012 _____

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In response to heightened standards and calls for accountability, schools have dramatically intensified their work to meet the growing challenges. Schools require strategies for improvement that will transcend demographic factors such as SES. Research has shown the construct of academic optimism as contributing to student achievement despite a school's socio-economic status (Goddard, LoGerfo, & Hoy, 2004; Goddard, Sweetland, & Hoy, 2000; Hoy, 2002; Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Hoy & Sabo, 1998; Hoy & Tarter, 1997; Hoy, Tarter, & Kottkamp, 1991; Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006; McGuigan & Hoy, 2006; Smith & Hoy, 2001; Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, & Hoy, 2000).

There exists, at the elementary level, a lack of research that describes conditions contributing to academic optimism. This research helps to fill that void by identifying, describing, and categorizing the norms, behaviors, strategies, and other pertinent characteristics that exist in a low-SES school that has established and is maintaining an academically optimistic environment.

Via two illustrative and critical-instance case studies in Michigan low-SES, and high-achieving elementary schools, this research describes the work and characteristics

of an academically optimistic environment. Study results identify, describe, and categorize elementary school level norms, behaviors, strategies, and building characteristics that may have contributed to the development of one or more of the properties of academic optimism: academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust.

Analysis of field-notes from observations, interviews, focus groups; and document reviews revealed two sets of deductive and inductive themes: five primary themes and three secondary themes. Primary themes include: expectations/goals, alignment, collaboration, communication, and a needs awareness/care of kids. Secondary themes include: data analysis, support staff, and continuous learning. There are implications for other schools that serve predominantly low-SES populations. The findings from this study might also have implications for schools with significant low SES sub-populations. Understanding more about the norms, behaviors, and strategies that exist in such a school may be beneficial for other schools, teachers, and administrators that engage in endeavors to create an academically optimistic environment in pursuit of improving student achievement.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:13)

Each step in the journey to complete my degree has been challenging, requiring patience, fortitude, determination, perseverance, and prayer. I will be forever grateful for the opportunities this challenge has afforded me. Along the way I have learned a great deal about myself, the field of education, and the complexities of research.

I could not have accomplished any of this without the assistance of many individuals. I would like to thank my dissertation committee: Dr. Sue Poppink, my chair, Dr. Patricia Reeves, Dr. Jeffrey Edmonds, and Dr. Angelique Day. Your support, encouragement, and guidance throughout this process were essential to my success. In addition, I would like to extend my gratitude to professors and staff at WMU. Your sophisticated intellect, unbridled dedication to the field, and seemingly-unending fountain of knowledge provided inspiration and motivation throughout my course of study. It has been a privilege and honor to study with and learn from you.

I also extend my thanks to the faculty of the elementary schools who participated in the study. I appreciate the time and effort each teacher invested into sharing their thoughts with me as well as welcoming me into their classrooms.

This process was not without moments of self-doubt. I thank my immediate and extended family members and friends who kept faith in me even in unsteady times. Most importantly, my endless gratitude and appreciation goes to my children, Theo and Lucy,

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Acknowledgments—Continued

and my husband, Jeremy, who were always my most ardent supporters. Your patience,

love, and confidence in me over the past six years went beyond all expectation. This

degree belongs to all of us. I love and cherish each of you.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

State and national standards, federal legislation, and elevated accountability mandates have increased the pressure on schools to raise student achievement levels. Accountability, concerning public education, refers to the "systems that hold students, schools, or districts responsible for academic performance" (Elmore, 2004, p. 90). Public schools are evaluated using systems that include high stakes measures: standardized tests and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) reports.

In an effort to comply with these demands, schools continue to search for methods to overcome heightened obstacles to meet higher goals. Educational stake holders— administrators, researchers, teachers, and policy-makers—have sought to identify school characteristics that improve student achievement. Decades ago, Coleman (1966) concluded in the landmark report titled Equality of Educational Opportunity, that "only a small part of student achievement is the result of school factors, in contrast to family background differences between communities" (p. 297). Essentially, the study suggested that school characteristics and effects are not nearly as accurate indicators as that of socio-economic status (SES) and family background (Smith, 2008).

Due to the strength in research findings supporting the impact of SES on schools, research over the last decade has focused on school improvement efforts that may be powerful enough to transcend the SES of a school and boost achievement. School climate, principal leadership, teacher pedagogy, and subject matter competence are but a

few of the variables that have permeated research endeavors (Brookover et al., 1982; Elmore, 2003; Fullan, Bertani, & Quinn, 2004; Gigliotti & Brookover, 1975; Goldhaber & Brewer, 2000; Marzano & Pickering, 2001; Reeves, 2003; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2004).

Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk (2006) sought to explore school characteristics that can improve student achievement despite the school's SES. This work defined a new construct: academic optimism. This construct consists of academic emphasis, faculty trust of parents and students, and collective efficacy. This work indicates that these three school characteristics, in concert with one another, make a significant contribution to student achievement levels while controlling for SES.

The specific framework of academic optimism was chosen for use in this study because, although quantitative data is significant and abundant (Goddard, Sweetland, & Hoy, 2000; Hoy et al., 2006; Smith & Hoy, 2007), a large gap exists in the qualitative paradigm. At the elementary level specifically, very little research has been dedicated to exploring the strategies and behaviors that exist in schools that have low SES, have high academic proficiency rates, and self-report high levels of academic optimism.

The proposed research study expands on the work of Hoy and others who have demonstrated the relationship between academic optimism and student achievement. This research describes the behaviors and strategies that are employed and the norms that exist, at the elementary school level, in order to establish and maintain an academically optimistic environment.

Background and Conceptual Framework

Research on student achievement as it relates to educational pedagogy has long been a mainstay of educational study. However, efforts have been invigorated since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002). Although legislators have frequently discussed possible changes to the bill as time passes, it continues to drive school improvement and achievement efforts throughout the nation's districts.

NCLB (2002) is based on four pillars: stronger accountability for student achievement results, freedom for states to make educational decisions, effective and research-based educational methods, and further choices for parents. Of the four pillars, two are directly related to the renewed interest in student achievement.

Early research by Coleman (1966) concluded that socioeconomic factors were strongly linked with student achievement. Coleman's report inspired decades of research on school effects and the impact of SES on achievement. Researchers such as Bane and Jencks (1972) supported Coleman's conclusions that SES showed to be the most prominent achievement indicator. More current research reflects these conclusions by showing large gaps in student achievement due to factors outside of school control and continuing to support many of Coleman's findings (Alspaugh, 1996; Gamoran & Long, 2006).

After the Coleman report, interest in the field led researchers to seek links between school characteristics and student achievement while controlling for SES, previous performance, and other demographic variables. The effective schools movement began in the late 1960s wherein studies centered on identifying the characteristics that are related to school effectiveness (Mace-Matluck, 1987). Researchers were influential in

studying school factors such as school-level leadership, high achievement expectations, school atmosphere or climate, emphasis on academics, and effective assessment of student progress that effect student achievement (Brookover et al., 1978, 1982; Edmonds, 1979).

More recently the work of Elmore (2003) has focused on school improvement and reform from a policy perspective. Elmore centers on the concept of linking educational policy with instructional change. A coherent system, he suggests, would include educators, students, and parents zeroing in on effective educational practice.

Similarly, Reeves' (2003) work focused on 90/90/90 schools. These schools were originally defined as those where 90% or more of the students were eligible for free and reduced lunch, 90% or more the students were members of ethnic minority groups, and 90% or more of the students met the district or state academic standards in reading or another subject area. More currently, the term has been more broadly applied to describe successful academic performance in schools with significant numbers of poor and minority students.

Goldhaber and Brewer (2000) found associations between teacher certification, college degrees, and subject matter competence with higher test scores. In contrast, Marzano and Pickering's (2001) work revealed both effective teaching practices and strategies to be most salient, while the research of Fullan et al. (2004) and Waters et al. (2004) has focused on effective school leadership that can substantially boost student achievement.

Further work by Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk (2006) links three school properties— academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust in students and parents—

together as a single construct coined "academic optimism." These three elements are said to contribute to a school's level of student achievement. My research continues to explore how schools operationalize the elements of academic optimism.

Academic Emphasis

Academic emphasis is defined as a school's campaign for academic excellence. High, yet reasonable, goals are set for students, the environment is orderly, students are motivated, and students respect academic achievement (Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Hoy, Tarter, & Kottkamp, 1991). Academic emphasis has been reliably measured by a subtest of the Organizational Health Inventory (Hoy & Tarter, 1997).

At least four studies have confirmed that the academic emphasis of the school is significantly related to student achievement when controlling for SES (Goddard et al., 2000; Hoy et al., 1991; Hoy & Sabo, 1998). The results have held regardless of school level and regardless of method—regression, structural equation modeling, or hierarchical linear modeling.

Collective Efficacy

Teacher self-efficacy has been identified as one of few teacher characteristics associated with student achievement (Woolfolk Hoy & Weinstein, 2006). This efficacy has been defined as a teacher's sense of capability to bring about desired outcomes related to student engagement and learning. Teachers not only have individual perceptions about their own efficacy but beliefs about the competency of the school in totality. This perceived collective efficacy is the judgment of the faculty about the performance abilities of the group in which they are working (Bandura, 1997). Similar to academic

emphasis, Bandura's research revealed that collective efficacy also notably contributes to the level of a school's academic performance.

Hoy (2002) developed and tested a model of school achievement with collective efficacy cited as the central variable. When controlling for SES, efficacy again proved to be significantly related to school achievement. Finally, the research of Goddard, LoGerfo, and Hoy (2004) indicated that collective efficacy was the key in explaining student achievement in reading, writing, and social studies regardless of school level (e.g., elementary, middle, high).

Faculty Trust of Students and Parents

The third school property central to academic optimism focuses on faculty trust. Again, Hoy (2002), using a subset of the Organizational Health Inventory, found that faculty trust in parents and students was positively related to student achievement. Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, and Hoy (2000) concluded that the concept of trust consists of five facets: benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, and openness. Teachers' trust is then defined as their willingness to be vulnerable to another party (students and parents) based on their confidence that the latter party will respect the five facets of trust.

Additional supporting research demonstrated that trust among teachers, parents, and students produced schools that were more apt to demonstrate substantial gains in student achievement in comparison to schools with weak trust relationships which saw nearly no increase in student achievement scores (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

<div align="center">**Problem Statement**</div>

There is a national awareness of the increased accountability standards of our public schools. In response to these heightened standards, schools have dramatically

intensified their work to meet the growing challenges. We know that schools require strategies for improvement that will transcend demographic factors such as SES. We also know that research has shown the construct of academic optimism as contributing to student achievement despite a school's socio-economic status (Goddard et al., 2000, 2004; Hoy, 2002; Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Hoy & Sabo, 1998; Hoy & Tarter, 1997; Hoy et al., 1991, 2006; McGuigan & Hoy, 2006; Smith, Hoy, & Sweetland, 2001; Tschannen-Moran et al., 2000).

The current research on academic optimism focuses on the quantitatively significant relationship between the three elements of optimism and increased school achievement. There is, however, a lack of qualitative research that describes academically optimistic schools. There exists, at the elementary level, a lack of research that describes conditions contributing to academic optimism. "Although many studies have examined the dimensions of academic optimism and the relationship between each dimension and academic achievement, less research has been done on the possible causes of these attitudes" (McGuigan & Hoy, 2006, p. 222). This research attempts to fill that void by identifying, describing, and categorizing the norms, behaviors, strategies, and other pertinent characteristics that exist in a low-SES school that has established and is maintaining an academically optimistic environment.

As schools continue to focus on school improvement efforts to satisfy increased requirements, they search for behaviors and strategies that will accomplish these ends. Much research has revealed that numerous variables that may well improve school achievement do not transcend the influence of SES. The research of Hoy (and others following him), however, has shown a significant relationship between academic

optimism and student achievement despite a school's SES categorization. Consequently, schools may do well to concentrate on the three components of optimism. In order to do so, it is essential that school leaders identify the most effective means of improving school conditions within these three spheres.

Study Purpose

This research, via two case studies in Michigan low-SES, and high-achieving elementary schools, describes the work and characteristics of an academically optimistic environment. This research identifies, describes, and categorizes elementary school level norms, behaviors, strategies, and building characteristics that may have contributed to the development of one or more of the properties of academic optimism: academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust. The research also attempted to "unobtrusively determine the role of the principal and informal teacher leaders in the development of a culture of academic optimism" (W. Hoy, personal communication, April 23, 2010).

Research Questions

This study analysis reveals discoveries and patterns, norms, behaviors, and characteristics of a school that assist in answering two main questions.

1. How does a low SES school with strong academic achievement trends for all of the tested core curriculum areas establish a school environment that is considered highly academic optimistic?

2. How does such a school maintain a school environment that is considered highly academic optimistic once that state is achieved?

In order to address the two central questions, this study would utilize some additional guiding questions.

1. What norms and behavior patterns exist in the academically optimistic school?

2. What strategies are employed in the school?

3. What physical characteristics exist in the school that may reflect and influence its level of academic optimism?

4. How do teachers validate the existence of academic optimism in their school environment, as self-reported?

5. How do teachers account for their status of high student achievement across the tested curriculum areas and their high levels of academic optimism?

Using state department of education databases and published achievement data, thirty schools that meet SES and academic proficiency criteria were asked to complete a quantitative survey. This survey is called the School Academic Optimism Survey (SAOS) and uses a Likert-scale system in asking participants to respond to thirty statements. The responses are used to determine the level of each of the three elements of academic optimism present in a school: academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust in students and parents. From this pool, two cases were chosen that meet a high level of academic optimism, are exemplars of low-SES and student proficiency, and are accessible to the researcher.

Significance

This study attempts to address the stated research questions. In so doing, this study sheds some light on (a) the behaviors, norms and strategies that operate in an academically optimistic school; and (b) the interplay between how the school directly addresses issues of student achievement and how they directly address issues of school culture or environment. Teachers' and principals' descriptions highlight elements that

they associate with the establishment of an academically optimistic atmosphere and that have assisted in the maintenance of that optimism.

Because the case study schools are categorized as low-SES and high achieving, this learning may have implications for other schools that serve predominantly low-SES populations. The findings from this study might also have implications for schools with significant low SES sub-populations. Understanding more about the norms, behaviors, and strategies that exist in such a school may be beneficial for other schools, teachers, and administrators that engage in endeavors to create an academically optimistic environment in pursuit of improving student achievement.

This research also uncovers future paths of research to be considered. Possibilities include studies of schools at middle and high school levels, in different states, and those focused on varying populations such as students, administrators, or parents.

Methodology

This study was conducted in the qualitative research tradition using a bounded case-study approach (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). The qualitative paradigm was chosen because qualitative research places an emphasis on processes and meanings. Where quantitative research is focused on statistics, hypothesis testing, and verification, qualitative work seeks a rich, in-depth understanding of individuals, phenomena, and situations (Rudenstam & Newton, 2001). This research fits within this paradigm as it explores a context seeking out a deep and vivid understanding of the whole.

In this study, the qualitative, a critical case-study approach was used. Case-study research involves the study of an issue as explored through one or more cases (Creswell, 2003). Patton (1990) argues that case-studies are particularly useful when researchers

attempt to understand people or a particular problem in great detail. Information gained is full and extensive. Specific case study models in this study include illustrative and critical instance. These case study paradigms are appropriate for this study because it was my intent to understand and describe the people and unique school environment in a far-reaching, comprehensive, and detailed manner.

Delimitations

The study was limited to the elementary school level in Michigan. Two case-study schools were chosen as the sites where the study was conducted. The schools have met AYP and have average an 80% or higher proficiency rate on reading and math MEAP (Michigan Education Assessment Program) tests for the past two years in grades three through five. The schools also have at least 50% of the student population qualified as receiving free or reduced lunch and have a self-reportedly high level of academic optimism (as reported on the SAOS). Results from this study are a representation of this school and its environment and are not assumed to generalize to any other contexts.

While participants represent a diverse sample of teachers with varying ages, years of experience, and races, participation in this study was voluntary and did not involve every teacher in the case study schools. Finally, this study was exploratory in nature and does not attempt to quantify any results.

Summary

This research utilized an existing framework in order to explore the concept of academic optimism in elementary schools. The study adhered to the qualitative research tradition and employed case study methods. It was intended to discover what efforts a school has undergone to establish and maintain an academically optimistic setting.

The remainder of this study includes, in Chapter II, a literature review with descriptions and support for the study's arguments. Chapter III outlines the research methodology, while Chapter IV describes the collected data and emergent themes. The final chapter offers interpretations, suggestions, recommendations for further study, and reflections on how this study has added to the body of literature.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

School Achievement and Socio-Economic Status

In 1966, Coleman's work suggested that "it is known that socioeconomic factors bear a strong relation to academic achievement. When these factors are statistically controlled, however, it appears that differences between schools account for only a small fraction of differences in pupil achievement" (Coleman, 1966, p. 21).

Bane and Jencks (1972) supported these findings with their own research. Although schools are important for improving the lives of students, they claimed, schools can do little to lessen the gap between the rich and the poor or between the more and less-able. In addition, Jencks claimed, like Coleman, that student achievement was the function of the background of the student and that there was not sufficient evidence that school reform could improve student achievement (Jencks, 1972).

These types of research pieces spawned years of studies focused on the relationship between socio-economic status and student achievement.

School Effects

Transitioning from a socio-economic deficit perspective, researchers from the mid-1960s on began focusing on effective schools. Despite the evidence indicating the prominent role that SES plays in determining student success, other research has sought to discover those school effects that also play significant roles.

Ron Edmonds is considered one of the founding researchers in the school effectiveness movement. He concluded that schools can make a difference by closing the achievement gaps between high and low SES students and he framed his work by five variables that would be used for decades when discussing school reform. These include: strong leadership, high expectations, orderly atmosphere, emphasis on basic skills, and frequent monitoring (Edmonds, 1979).

Coinciding with the work of Edmonds, a large contingent of researchers invested time in the field of effective schools thus framing the Effective Schools Movement. The work of the school-effectiveness movement has continued for decades and persists still. Gigliotti and Brookover (1975) focused on the school climate to determine whether high and low achieving schools, regardless of SES level, had similar social environment characteristics. The culmination of this work indicated that indeed certain "factors and characteristics occur to a greater extent in higher achieving schools. It also shows that they can exist in schools of all SES levels" (p. 259). These factors or characteristics include: a belief that students can be successful, positive expectations about the academic enterprise, and appropriate supports for creating these beliefs and expectations (Gigliotti & Brookover, 1975).

Brookover continued this line of study with another group of researchers as published in 1978. Again they studied the school climate of Michigan elementary schools. It was found that "some aspects of school social environment clearly make a difference in the academic achievement of schools" (p. 316). The analysis indicated that the evaluations and expectations made of students and the students' perceptions of these expectations were clearly related to achievement (Brookover et al., 1978).

Brookover and a group of colleagues, based on the school climate and effects work, created an in-service program designed to enhance the learning climate and thus raise achievement. The program, in its published form, details researched-based information, suggested activities, and resources for eleven learning modules. These modules include such topics as effective instruction, expectations for learning, and parent involvement (Brookover et al., 1982).

The work of the Effective Schools Movement continued during an era of heavy concentration on America's public school system. In 1983, *A Nation at Risk*, a comprehensive report directed by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, was released.

The piece reported findings regarding content, expectations, time, and teaching. Concerning content, the researchers suggested that schools offered a cafeteria-style curriculum, which has led more students towards a general education track and away from college-preparatory materials. Regarding expectations, the report stated that there was a general lowering of student expectations including time on homework, graduation requirements, and challenging materials. Related to time, it was asserted that students in America were spending much less time in school and that time was spent in less academically challenging courses than those students in other industrialized countries. Finally, when considering teaching, the researchers found that teachers were under-qualified, lowly paid, had little influence over decisions, and little opportunity for growth.

This type of report only allowed the call for school accountability to gain momentum in the 1980s. The need for reform in the nation's schools was furthered supported in the next two decades with additional research linking student achievement

and SES. For example, Alspaugh's (1996) research showed a gap of nearly one standard deviation existed in mean reading and math achievement levels between twenty high and low SES elementary schools in a Midwestern urban district.

In 1990, Levine offered a retrospective on the effective schools work as it had been presented, to that point, in the field of education. He argued that although some factors were correlated to high student achievement, the path for schools to establish those characteristics remained less clear. Each school environment has differing variables and no specific program can be adequately prescriptive. With that word of caution, Levine also supported some key findings of the movement. He suggested that successful schools will insist that key stakeholders take responsibility for improvement, all will persist in doing what must be done to attain high standards, individuals will be resilient and push for progress despite obstacles, and there must be a consistency in implementing programs designed to improve instruction (Levine, 1990).

Reform efforts were further invigorated in 2002 with the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. This act requires states to more accurately report student achievement, use research-based programming, and links federal funding to school progress. Schools are expected to meet make Adequate Yearly Progress and are threatened with consequences if they do not do so for two or more consecutive years. These consequences increase in severity when a school continues to fall beneath the set standards for longer periods of time. Because of these high pressures, research on school reform and improvement continues to proceed.

Elmore (2003) has focused his research on school reform from a policy perspective. Elmore centers on the concept of linking educational policy with

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instructional change. A coherent system, he suggests, would include educators, students, and parents zeroing in on effective educational practice.

Studies by Reeves' (2003) focused on 90/90/90 schools. These schools were originally defined as those where 90% or more of the students were eligible for free and reduced lunch, 90% or more the students were members of ethnic minority groups, and 90% or more of the students met the district or state academic standards in reading or another subject area. The term has now been more broadly applied to describe successful academic performance in schools with significant numbers of poor and minority students.

Goldhaber and Brewer (2000) have found associations between teacher certification, college degrees, and subject matter competence with higher student test scores. Meta-analysis studies by Marzano and Pickering (2001) revealed effective teaching practices and strategies to be most relevant, while the research of Fullan et al. (2004) and Waters et al. (2004) focused on successful school leadership that can significantly advance student achievement.

Academic Optimism

Another current angle on effective schools and school factors takes one structure coined *academic optimism* (Hoy et al., 2006). Academic optimism bonds the three school characteristics of academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust in students and parents together as a single construct. These three elements are statistically correlated to a school's level of student achievement, while controlling for SES.

Academic emphasis. Academic emphasis has been defined as a school's drive towards for academic excellence. High, yet attainable, goals are set for students, the environment is orderly, students are motivated, and students respect academic

achievement (Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Hoy, Tarter, & Kottkamp, 1991). Academic emphasis

has been reliably measured by a subtest of the Organizational Health Inventory (Hoy &

Tarter, 1997).

A number of studies have validated that academic emphasis of a school is

significantly related to student achievement when controlling for SES (Goddard et al.,

2000; Hoy & Sabo, 1998; Hoy et al., 1991). One study (Licata & Harper, 1999) found

that a healthy school-level emphasis on academics had a significant effect on the overall

health and environmental robustness of the school. The results have held in varying

school levels and regardless of method—regression, structural equation modeling, or

hierarchical linear modeling. In fact, Wang (1995) conducted an analysis of twenty

school-effects studies and academic emphasis was one of six characteristics most cited as

effective school factors contributing to student success.

A large meta-analysis study of numerous school-effects research by Marzano

(2001) led to a list of nine factors related to positive school reform. "Pressure to achieve,"

"time" (referring to time on task and time in quality instruction, and "monitoring"

(referring to the consistent evaluation of student learning and goal obtainment) were three

of the most highly correlated variables (Marzano, 2001, p. 50).

Collective efficacy. Teacher self-efficacy has been identified as one teacher trait

coupled with student achievement (Woolfolk Hoy & Weinstein, 2006). Collective

efficacy refers to teacher perceptions that the efforts of the faculty can and will have a

positive effect on students. Brinson and Steiner's (2007) research indicated that collective

efficacy has been positively correlated with an increase in student performance, a voiding

of effects of low SES, the building of parent/teacher relationships, and an increase in
teacher commitment to a school.

Teachers not only have individual perceptions about their own efficacy but
attitudes about the capabilities of the school in totality. This perceived collective efficacy
is the judgment of the faculty about the performance abilities of the entire system
(Bandura, 1997). Bandura's research revealed that collective efficacy, like academic
emphasis, also markedly contributes to a school's academic performance.

Hoy (2002) constructed and tested a model of school achievement with collective
efficacy cited as the central variable. Controlling for SES, it was verified that efficacy
proved to be significantly related to school attainment. As a final point, the research of
Goddard et al. (2004) specified that collective efficacy was a key factor in explaining
student achievement in reading, writing, and social studies regardless of school level
(e.g., elementary, middle, high).

Faculty trust of students and parents. The final school component central to
academic optimism centers on faculty trust. Hoy (2002), using a subset of the
Organizational Health Inventory, found that faculty trust in parents and students was also
positively correlated to student achievement. Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) defined
the concept of trust as consisting of five elements: benevolence, reliability, competence,
honesty, and openness. When teachers trust students and parents they are displaying a
willingness to be vulnerable to another party rooted in their confidence that both students
and parents will respect the five facets of trust.

Research by Bryk and Schneider (2002) concluded that trust among teachers,
parents, and students created schools that were more apt to experience substantial gains in

student achievement in comparison to schools with weak trust relationships which saw little to no increase in student achievement scores.

After conducting a meta-analysis of several leadership research pieces, Fullan, Bertani, and Quinn (2004) also addressed the issue of trust. They listed trust as one of ten crucial components to a successful school. "Low-trust cultures do not have the capacity to engage in the great effort and difficult work of improvement. High-trust cultures make the extraordinary possible, energizing people and giving them the wherewithal to succeed under enormously demanding conditions and the confidence that staying the course will pay off" (Fullan et al., 2004, p. 45).

Clearly, these elements of academic optimism have been shown crucial to school improvement and student achievement. This study applied this framework to two elementary schools that are high-achieving, considered low-SES, and highly academically optimistic. The work adds to the body of knowledge on how academic optimism is successfully operationalized in schools.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This study took a qualitative approach. Qualitative research places an emphasis on the deeper meanings and processes of an event, people, or place. Quantitative research centers on statistics and hypothesis testing while qualitative work seeks a rich, in-depth understanding of individuals, phenomena, and situations (Rudenstam & Newton, 2001). Because this study was concerned with individuals' experiences with the topic of academic optimism with no preconceived variables, it was most appropriate to explore the situation from a qualitative paradigm. This approach best allowed for the creation of a vivid visual of the daily occurrences in an academically optimistic school environment.

Qualitative research attempts to make sense of various phenomena and emphasizes the meanings people bring to issues (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). This study utilized the case-study approach of qualitative research. Case-study research involves the examination of an issue as explored through one or more cases (Creswell, 2007). Patton (1990) argued that case-studies are particularly useful when researchers attempt to understand people or a particular problem in great detail. Information obtained is plentiful and thorough.

Yin (1993) first classified case studies into three categories: exploratory, explanatory, and descriptive. In exploratory studies, the research questions may evolve and hypotheses are created as the research ensues. In explanatory studies, the researcher

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attempts to illustrate the existence of a casual relationship. Descriptive case studies begin with a theory and use data to match patterns between cases.

Further work by Davey (2000) defined explanatory studies as those undertaken before a larger research enterprise begins. These studies help to identify questions and possible research measures. Davey also identified five other case study paradigms: illustrative, critical instance, program implementation, program effects, and cumulative. In short, the program implementation and program effects types of case studies are concerned with the implementation of programs and their success or failure rates. Cumulative case studies seek to relate current cases to past or future ones. For the purposes of my research, both illustrative and critical instance case studies were most relevant.

This research is illustrative in that it utilizes "one or two instances to show what a situation is like" (Davey, 2000, p.2). In these case studies the case or cases must adequately represent the issue as a whole, serve to make the unfamiliar familiar, and use a small number of cases for in-depth examination and reader interest. This description applies to my research in that it uses exemplar cases appropriate to the situation, describes an environment and its characteristics that may be unfamiliar to the field, and only describes a small number (2) of cases in a comprehensive manner.

The second case study approach in my research is the critical instance. Again, using this approach requires the use of a critical or unique case. These results are not sought to be generalizable but to describe, in detail, what is occurring in this critical environment. Yin (2002) argues the importance of information-oriented sampling for these cases. A random sample will tend to yield an average case. Using an information-

oriented sampling allows the researcher to identify extreme or atypical cases thus yielding in richer data collection.

This research clearly uses this critical case approach in identifying schools that best represent atypical cases: low-SES, high-achieving, high academic optimism. In purposefully selecting these critical cases, the richest data about the environment can be gathered.

In addition, case study methodology was chosen for this study, as opposed to ethnography, because of the intent of the research. Although ethnographies do aim to understand cultures, as does my study, they are also inward looking. The intent is to understand the entire operation of the culture being studied as a whole. What would we have to know in order to operate and assimilate into this system?

The intent of case study work is, in contrast, outward looking. Through intensive study of a case, two schools in my research, the intent is to contribute to the understanding of a phenomenon. The phenomenon in this research is academic optimism (Cohen & Court, 2003).

Research Questions

This study attempted to discover and explore patterns, behaviors, and characteristics of a school that will assist in answering two main questions.

1. How does a low SES school with strong academic achievement trends for all of the tested core curriculum areas establish a school environment that is considered highly academically optimistic?

2. How does such a school maintain a school environment that is considered highly academically optimistic once that state is achieved?

In order to address the two central questions, this study will utilize some additional guiding questions.

1. What norms and behavior patterns exist in the academically optimistic school?

2. What strategies are employed in the school?

3. What physical characteristics exist in the school that may reflect and influence its level of academic optimism?

4. How do teachers validate the existence of academic optimism in their school environment, as self-reported?

5. How do teachers account for their status of high student achievement across the tested curriculum areas and their high levels of academic optimism?

Setting, Subjects, Access, and Sampling

A pool of schools was created by identifying Michigan elementary schools that are both high achieving and have low-SES status and are located in a reasonably accessible part of the state. SES was determined using the percentage of students receiving free or reduced-rate lunches.

Schools were identified using database resources from the Michigan State Department of Education. First, from a list of all Michigan public elementary schools, all schools with less than an 80% free and reduced lunch rater were eliminated. Using another database, I checked MEAP scores for these schools two consecutive years (2009/2010) in grades 3 through 5 in both math and reading. An average score for each school was calculated and schools below an 80% proficiency rate were eliminated. This left a remainder of 41 qualifying schools. Of these, the 30 schools with the highest

proficiency rates were all invited to participate in the Academic Optimism survey

constructed by Hoy et al. (2006).

Academic optimism level was determined using the scoring form as set by Hoy et

al. (2006). The criteria for inviting schools to participate were set in the following order:

highest level of free/reduced lunch rate, highest level of proficiency, highest level of

academic optimism, and distance to researcher. The researcher was looking for, ideally, a

school with a high level of academic optimism (no lower than 50%). The range of scores

on academic optimism is –15.28 (highly academically optimistic) to 20.18 (pessimistic or

very low academic optimism levels) as determined by the scoring guidelines of Hoy and

Miskel (2005). For this study, a very high level of academic optimism was considered

80% (or a score of –8.18) or above. No school was to be selected below the 50% (score of

2.45) mark of academic optimism. Priority was given to schools that were realistically

accessible to the researcher.

Permission was requested, via letter, from district superintendents to allow the

researcher access to schools. After receiving superintendent approvals, via an invitation

letter, the schools in the established pool were asked to complete a quantitative survey.

This survey is titled the School Academic Optimism Survey (SAOS) and uses a Likert-

scale system in asking participants to respond to thirty statements. The responses were

used to determine the level of each of the three elements of academic optimism present in

a school: academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust in students and parents.

Of the 41 schools that were invited to participate, six schools chose to do so. From the six

schools that responded to the survey, three schools were invited to serve as case study

sites. The schools were chosen because they had at least 50% of their faculty responding to the survey. Of the three that were invited to participate, two accepted.

The limited number of cases allowed the researcher adequate time for in-depth observation and immersion into the environment. Additionally, the study of two schools, as opposed to a singular case, provided some comparative data that was valuable in the data analysis portion of the research.

Invitation letters were then used to gain access to the cases that were studied. Once access was granted from district superintendents, a meeting was scheduled with building-level administrators and faculty in order to outline the research process. During this meeting, teachers were asked, via an interest form, to volunteer for focus groups, interviews, and observation. The researcher organized participants according to teacher availability and in a manner that allows for the greatest participation rate.

Data Collection

In order to address the research questions, multiple sources of data were compiled and analyzed. Essential to case-study research is the use of multiple sources of information to explore the system (or case) over an extended period of time (Creswell, 2007). The types of data collection used in this study were four-fold. Interviews, focus groups, observation of school areas, and document review were employed in order to thoroughly explore and better understand the issue.

The academic emphasis segment of the instrument consists of eight items scored on a six-point scale ranging from rarely (1) to very often (6). The survey measures the extent to which the school focuses on student academic achievement. One sample statement reads "Students respect others who get good grades" (SAOS, Hoy & Miskel,

2005). The instrument was derived from a subscale of the Organizational Health

Inventory which research has shown to be reliable and validated (Hoy & Miskel, 2005;

Hoy & Tarter, 1997; Hoy et al., 1991).

Collective efficacy is measured on the SAOS using twelve items, scored using a

six-point Likert scale with (1) at "strongly disagree" and (6) at "strongly agree."

"Perceived collective efficacy of a school is the judgment of the teachers that the faculty

as a whole can organize and execute actions required to have a positive effect on

students" (McGuigan & Hoy, 2006, p. 216). "Teachers in this school believe that every

child can learn" is an example of the types of statements respondents will be asked to

address. The instrument is a condensed version of the collective efficacy scale (Goddard

et al., 2000) and previous research has demonstrated the construct validity and reliability

of the scale (Goddard et al., 2000, 2004).

The third piece of the SAOS entails ten, six-point Likert scale items used to

determine to what magnitude a school's faculty trusts in parents and students. Survey

participants will be asked to respond to statements such as "Students in this school can be

counted upon to do their work." This portion of the instrument is a shortened version of

the Omnibus Trust Scale (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). The reliability and construct

validity of the scale have been supported in several factor-analysis studies (Hoy &

Tschannen-Moran, 2003). This survey was distributed to faculty via email using the on-

line tool of Survey Monkey.

Two schools were chosen for the case study based on the following criteria:

(a) 80% or higher of students at a proficient level on reading and math MEAP results;

(b) 80% or higher of students enrolled in free or reduced lunch program; (c) 50% or

higher level of academic optimism of the school as determined by the survey; (d)

accessibility of the school to the researcher. Three schools were invited to participate as

the case-study schools and two accepted.

Data Collection Approaches

Once two case-study schools had been chosen and had agreed to participate,

several research strategies were employed. Observation is one such fundamental method

in qualitative research. "It is used to discover complex interactions in natural social

settings" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 99). In addition, observations often allow the

researcher to gain firsthand experience with participants and can be useful in exploring

topics more naturally than in an interview (Creswell, 2007). In this study the researcher

spent at least 20 hours, between the two sites, engaged in observation that included

observation of classrooms, instructional periods, and common areas such as the staff

lounge, school office, in addition to student gathering areas such as the cafeteria,

hallways, and playground. Permission to observe common areas was requested from the

building administrator. Permission for classroom observations was requested from

individual teachers during the meeting outlining the research project. A field-notebook

was used to record observances and researcher reflections. The notebook was divided into

two columns. One column was used to record direct observations. The remaining column

was utilized for researcher comments and reactions or potential interpretations.

Focus groups are the second type of data collection technique used in this study.

Focus groups are typically a flexible way of engaging a small number of people in an

informal discussion focused around a particular topic (Silverman, 2004). "Focus groups

may encourage greater candour and may be more acceptable to participants reluctant to

take part in one-to one interviews" (Barbour, 2007, p.27). Furthermore, they may help to elicit responses that may be limited in interviews because respondents have not had time or opportunity to reflect on the issue. The discussion that takes place during the focus group allows each individual to express their own opinions, respond to others, and allow ideas to be shaped by one another (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

Three focus groups were conducted during this study. Each focus group centered on a different aspect of academic optimism. Focus groups were video-taped for later analysis. Groups of between 4 and 10 voluntary participants were gently guided in a comfortable environment with general topic guidelines. The request for participants in focus groups was made at the initial meeting. In this study the focus group topics included collective efficacy, academic emphasis, and faculty trust of students and parents.

Open-ended guidelines were used to engage teachers in discussion and activities designed to: determine how teachers define and perceive a particular aspect of academic optimism, determine how the teachers believe the school was able to attain this high level, and to determine how the teachers believe the school is able to maintain this level.

The third type of data collection to be used is open-ended interviewing. "It is a powerful way to gain insight into educational and other important social issues through understanding the experience of the individuals whose lives reflect those issues" (Seidman, 2006, p. 14). As this study pertains to educators' experiences with the topic of academic optimism, interviewing is an essential component to the methodological landscape of this study.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via telephone, one-on-one with teachers. Participants were chosen on a voluntary basis. Those participating in focus

groups were not interviewed and those interviewed were not asked to participate in focus groups. It was the intent of the researcher to use the two data collection methods as cross-references and validation for one another.

Staying true to the qualitative paradigm, interviews were used to garner the subject's perspective on the issue and the views unfolded naturally (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Questions were open-ended and only provided a general guide to direct the conversation on the discipline topic but the voices of the subject's dominated the time. "The data from interviews consist of direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge" (Patton, 1990, p. 10). The researcher used a recorder during these interviews in order to accurately record these types of subject responses. At the same time, the researcher added to field-notes regarding subjects' body language, tone of voice, expressions, and other possibly relevant emergent happenings.

The final data collection method for this study was document review. Reviewing relevant documents allows researchers to obtain language used by participants, is unobtrusive, and can be rich in portraying the values and beliefs of participants in a real-world setting (Creswell, 2003; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). In this study the types of documents that were reviewed for analysis were school improvement plans, discipline policies, school newsletters, and parent compacts. Participants were asked to furnish some of these documents. Others were obtained from published materials available to the public. The field-notebook was again employed to record pertinent information regarding any possible links between the various documents and the level of academic optimism established and maintained in the school.

Data Analysis

Unlike some forms of research in which data are analyzed only at the conclusion of a data collection process, case study research entails an ongoing examination and interpretation of the data. During the entirety of the study, the researcher engaged in a recursive process, interacting with multiple sources in order to reach tentative conclusions (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006).

In this study, field-notes were kept during observations, interviews, and focus groups. In addition, all recordings were reviewed and transcribed. The information was organized into appropriate charts and documents. After information was adequately organized, the researcher placed data into categories. These categories emerged from the data as central aspects of participants' meanings, feelings, and opinions. From these categories, the researcher extracted evident themes and patterns that exist in responses of subjects. These themes and patterns were organized to outline subjects' perceptions on the topic of academic optimism.

This led the researcher to interpret the significance of responses, make sense of the findings, offer explanations, draw conclusions, and make inferences. Essentially, the researcher used the data and respective analyses to "write" the emerged story, illuminate the answers to posed questions regarding the topic, and address the original research questions postulated (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

More specifically, the first step in analysis included transcribing interview and focus group data and looking for common or reoccurring themes. From there, that information was cross-referenced with observational and document review data to ascertain whether there was supporting evidence. Future observation times were directed

at determining whether themes from interviews and focus groups could be evidenced in observation. Conversely, field notes from observations were organized into categories and then, during interviews and focus groups, close attention was paid to whether teachers' comments fleshed out specific observational data.

Validity

Validity in qualitative research does not seek generalizability or reliability of results, but to determine whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, participants, and external audiences. "Reliability and validity are conceptualized in as trustworthiness, rigor, and quality in qualitative paradigm" (Golafshani, 2003, p. 605).

Several methods were used in this study to ensure validity: observations were conducted during an extended period of time, they took place in both locations multiple times, and the time and day on which they occur varied. This gives the researcher a more accurate portrait of these environments (Creswell, 2007).

Member-checking was utilized as well. Member-checking is the act of allowing participants to review specific descriptions, themes or statements to determine whether these subjects feel that they are represented accurately (Creswell, 2007).

Triangulation was employed. This includes using different data sources to build coherent justification for themes (interviews, focus groups, document review, observations). Observational data was compared with interview data which was also compared with focus group data. These were checked for consistency of viewpoints and were compared from perspectives of people from different groups: teachers and

administrators (Patton, 1990). All of these strategies allowed the researcher to obtain an accurate, in-depth, detailed, rich picture of the case concerning the given topic.

The remainder of this study includes Chapter IV which details the results of the study. Chapter V offers researcher insights and inferences, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study is to describe the work and characteristics of academically optimistic environments by conducting two case studies in Michigan low-SES and high-achieving elementary schools. This research identifies, describes, and categorizes elementary school level norms, behaviors, strategies, and building characteristics that may have contributed to the development of one or more of the three properties of academic optimism: academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust.

Unlike many case studies, this study does not describe the implementation of a policy or instructional program, nor does it describe the unfolding of a singular event. Instead, it details the overall culture of a school environment. A variety of people, instances, phenomena, and characteristics were involved in the establishing of the schools' academic optimism. It should be noted too, that the establishment of these environments was not necessarily intentional. There was no observed evidence that the schools made a determination to begin an agenda towards becoming academically optimistic. Through the implementation of the various activities and tasks, the establishment of the academically optimistic environment can be considered a positive and healthy by-product of what school staff knew to be good practice.

Case study methodology was chosen for this study, as opposed to ethnography, because of its intent. Although ethnographies aim to understand cultures, as this study

does, they are also inward looking. That is to say, there is intent to understand the entire operation of the culture being studied. What would an outsider have to know in order to operate and assimilate into this system? The intent of case study work is, in contrast, outward looking. Through intensive study of a case—in this research, two schools—the intent is to contribute to the understanding of a phenomenon. The phenomenon in this research is academic optimism (Cohen & Court, 2003).

It is important to note that I didn't directly learn about how teachers established these schools in large part because this wasn't an intentional decision on the part of the teachers to become academically optimistic. Most teachers, in fact, were not even aware of the term or concept. There was no one point in history that the staffs chose to take on this task. Instead, over time, with the implementation of various methodologies, pedagogies, and improvement practices, the cultures that resulted are currently academically optimistic in nature. Although the initial concept of the study may have included the specific establishment of this culture, it evolved to define establishment more loosely as the current state of the schools' culture as evidenced by relationship between the academic optimism surveys and current practices.

Data for the study were collected using four methods: observation, interviews, focus groups, and document review. Multiple data collection methods allowed for the exploration of the perspectives of various participants in the study. The variety in methods also allowed for triangulation of data and thus an increase in the study's validity.

This chapter includes emergent themes as evidenced through the various data collection methods. A description of each of the research sites is presented, offering context. Next, analysis of each site from the interviews, observations, focus groups, and

document review are introduced and categorized into themes. A comparison of the two sites is presented, as well as connections to academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust—the three elements of academic optimism.

Participant Overview

Forty-one elementary schools met the criteria for participation in this study. The eleven schools with the lowest achievement data were eliminated, leaving an initial pool of 30 schools. The superintendents of those 30 schools' home districts were contacted and approval was given by nine districts to contact school principals. Each principal of the nine schools was contacted to gain approval for the distribution of the survey (SAOS). Six of the nine schools participated in the on-line survey. The three schools with the largest number of teacher responses (at least 50%) were selected to be invited to serve as case-study sites in the second phase of the study. One of the schools declined participation. Meetings with faculty were set-up with the remaining two schools.

The Case of Cornerstone: "School of High Expectations"

The first school site was located in the western part of Michigan, approximately six miles outside of the nearest urban center. The area is considered a small suburb. The school was one of seven district schools, which serves 2,250 students. The elementary site in this study served 329 students in kindergarten through grade five with one principal and 20 teachers. The school employed teachers as general education instructors in kindergarten through fifth-grade, resource room teachers, literacy specialists, and enrichment course teachers in physical education, music, and library. Table 1 shows the demographic breakdown for students.

Table 1

Cornerstone Population Demographics

Cornerstone		
	Number	Percentage of Total Population
African-American	53	16
American Indian	2	<1
Asian	38	12
Caucasian	123	37
Hawaiian	1	<1
Hispanic	109	33
Multi-Racial	3	<1
Total minority (non-Caucasian)	244	74
Female	162	49
Male	167	51
Total Population	329	100

Source: Michigan Department of Education, Fall 2010 Headcount Report

Cornerstone met the criteria set forth within this research proposal by having 81.2% of students receiving free or reduced lunch, earning an average of 88.8% proficiency on the reading and math Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) assessments in grades three through five for the past two years (2009, 2010), and having a 72% level of academic optimism as indicated by staff responses to the School Academic Optimism Survey (Hoy et al., 2006). As a point of comparison, the other elementary

school in the same district would not have qualified for the study. Although they had a high enough MEAP proficiency rate at 90%, they did not meet the low-income criteria with only a 73% free and reduced-lunch rate.

Many, if not most, schools and school districts are directly associated with the city in which they are located. It is interesting to note, however, that Cornerstone was not part of an actual established city. The district was an entity unto itself located between two small suburbs, both adjacent to a large urban center. This fact may play into the feeling that the district itself was its own city, in a sense. All accomplishments and failures of each school are highly representative of the district and city politics play a lesser role than those of the school board. This was a school nestled in a small, suburban community that does not belong to the city itself. The vibe in the school was one typically associated with a suburb, though the school served a population typically found in an urban setting.

Despite the demographic statistics that indicate this school would be slated to fail, it did not. It not only succeeded but did so far beyond the rate of similar schools and those with much greater community wealth. The sense of high expectations in the school, as described further below, very well may account for the unexpected levels of student achievement.

The Building

The school building was rather small with only two main hallways each lined with traditionally sized classrooms. The ceilings were low, the floors are darkly carpeted, and the walls were constructed of brick and dark-stained wood. These attributes gave the school an older, but cozy feeling. In the classrooms many lamps were present—perhaps to

off-set what one teacher described as an artificial feeling of the overhead fluorescents. Everything in both hallways and classrooms appeared clean, neat, and well-organized.

Throughout the building walls were covered with student work and school-wide program information such as a current reading incentive program or school expectations. These expectations, or rules, were common throughout the school. Signs present listed, "Hallway Rules," "Computer Lab Rules," and "Headphone Rules." These types of reminders added to the overall sense of high student expectations and an orderly environment. The information posted on reading programs and incentives may have prompted thoughts regarding both a focus on academics and a celebratory feel of accomplishments.

Other areas in the school such as the computer lab and media center were also organized and up-to-date. The computer lab had nearly 30 modern computer stations with large monitors and headphones for each student. The media center was well-lit, colorful, and staffed. The staff lounge was also small but cozy. Tables were set-up allowing all teachers to eat with one another. A refrigerator, sink, and microwave were also available. The lounge also housed bulletin boards with personal staff mementos as well as a lending library of books for teachers to share.

Classrooms

Based on responses on volunteer forms, I was able to observe three different classrooms during the study: one reading room, a first-grade classroom, and a fifth-grade classroom. Each room was carpeted like the hallways, was very colorful, and appeared organized. The walls were full of both student work and instructional learning visuals. These included signs that listed both student and teacher expectations: "Students will…,"

"Teacher will…" descriptions were listed for various learning times such as literacy and choice time.

During each of my visits, students were highly engaged in the activities. Typically, the teacher would speak with students gathered together on the rug or sitting quietly at their seats. After brief periods of whole-group instruction, students were released to work independently or as a group. In many cases, students were allowed to choose their own activity from a given set. During these times, teachers worked with small groups or individuals in ability groups.

In all three classrooms similar artifacts were present. Students participated in an "All-Star Reader" incentive program, engaged in "Daily 5"—a choice-driven literacy time, "Café"—a school-wide writing program, and "Cornerstone Readers"—a support program to boost reading achievement. These programs, their associated language, and common assessments were all noted by teachers as keys to the school's success. In addition, the school utilized a common discipline rubric which a teacher cited as helpful to remaining focused on learning and not behavior issues.

During independent work time, students appeared engaged and on-task. Rarely was there a reminder from the teacher to re-engage.

Teachers

During the course of this research, I engaged with teachers in both formal and informal settings. The formal meetings took place in the form of an interview and focus group as well as indirectly during classroom observations. Informally, I spoke with teachers—including some that were not study participants—during their lunch and recess breaks.

My initial meeting with teachers, during their lunch hour, occurred in a polite yet reserved atmosphere. In addition to relying on a self-introduction to the staff, it was also clear that they had no prior knowledge of my impending visit or my research project in general. During my presentation, the teachers present listened politely and quietly as they continued their lunch. Upon request for questions, I received none. As teachers disbanded to return to classrooms, the few interested faculty members approached me and offered contact information as well as the areas of the study in which they were willing to engage. The overall mood of the visit was neutral in hospitality and friendliness.

My subsequent visits to the school were similar. I spoke only with a few teachers and those that were not participating in the study made no attempt to greet me. The faculty members that were participants were quite friendly and welcoming. They shared openly, offered opinions and information, and inquired as to what else I may need.

During discussion with teachers it became evident that teachers were an integral part of the leadership of the building. On several occasions the phrase "We decided to…" was used. There were very few references to mandates or other such "from above" type statements. It appeared that teachers were the driving force for school improvement efforts. Each of the participants in the study was a regular contributor to school committees and participant in professional development opportunities outside the scope of their required district obligations. They spoke frequently about collaborating with one another and relying on each other to ensure each student was receiving the best possible services.

Interestingly, on the same day as one of my observational visits, nearly 40 district employees had received lay-off notices due to budget cuts. During the day I observed

several teachers crying and hugging one another. Later that day, during an interview, the topic arose. The respondent said that, although teachers felt devastated right then, she felt confident they would rebound quickly and continue to focus on best serving the students. The focus group that afternoon reflected similar sentiments. They were concerned for colleagues and the potential loss of support staff. At the same time, however, they energetically shared with me many of the interesting academic, behavioral, and curricular activities the school was committed to. The level of dedication to students and the school was evident through their passionate discussion of education, learning, students, and colleagues—even in the face of significant lay-offs.

Administration

During the span of this research, I was able to meet two administrators. The district administrator was contacted at the outset of the project for approval to contact building level administrators. After prompt approval, the building level administrator was contacted with information on the research project and asked to consider participating with the staff. The principal asked to meet with me, via videoconferencing, before visiting the school. During this conversation we were able to discuss project details and coordinate a plan to move forward.

The initial request, on my part, was to address the staff at a general staff meeting. The principal was hesitant to approve this, citing loss of time to work on school improvement agenda items. It was suggested then, by the principal, that I visit the school during the teachers' common lunch time and present the information to them at that time. During this visit, the principal greeted me at the door and showed me to the staff lounge.

There was no further contact with the principal during that visit. I introduced myself to the teachers and saw myself out after the visit.

After securing some teacher participation, I set up individual appointments with the particular teachers involved. Before each subsequent visit to the school, I emailed the principal with information regarding my visit, people with whom I would be speaking, and what activities I was planning to engage in (i.e., school observation, interview, focus group). I was given permission each time.

During each visit I reported to the office and signed in. I was given a map of the building by the secretary and reported to each classroom at the time previously appointed. The principal saw me during observations and greeted me with a wave most times. On two occasions I was asked how things were going. Brief conversations ensued about the status of the research.

During one visit a district administrator was visiting the building and greeted me. It was mentioned that the principal had informed the board of education and community, via a board meeting, that the school was serving as a case study site. The tone of the conversation was positive and it appeared both the district and building administrators were proud that the school met the criteria I had set.

In general however, it appeared that the principal wanted little to do with the project. It was not promoted to staff and any personal participation was quite limited. Permission was granted, however, for me to visit the school and engage with teachers. These two points may seem disparate but my general understanding of the situation is that the principal saw this project as teacher-centered in nature and left it to the teachers to decide for themselves, through interaction with me, their desired level of participation.

Because I hoped to include an interview with the principal in the study, an invitation was given to participate on multiple occasions. The invitation was declined. This, most definitely, leaves the door open for further research concerning the connection between academic optimism and the role of the building administrator.

During the interview and the focus group, the topic of administration did not naturally come up. I prompted participants by specifically asking them to speak about building leadership. The interview respondent felt that the principal handled managerial issues efficiently and was receptive to new ideas that teachers presented. The focus group participants concurred that their ideas were valued but it was assumed that teachers would put in the leg work on any given initiative.

Although the principal did not participate in the study as an interviewee, and although teachers did not focus on the administrator, the issue of building leadership is still a valid discussion point. We do not know the perspectives of this principal on how he decided to lead. Perhaps the supported level of teacher autonomy (and my own freedom in the school, to a degree), or the reluctance to relinquish staff meeting time, is exactly the type of leadership the principal deems the school needs for success. In addition, this may be a reflection of the high standards and expectations the principal has for the faculty.

Analysis of Cornerstone

Emergent and Deductive Themes

The analysis of the case study site was both parallel and recursive in nature. I began my data collection with observation and thus, having nothing yet to compare to, I recorded generalities: things I could see and hear. Then I was able to conduct both an interview and a focus group at Cornerstone. After analysis of these two, described below,

I used that information to guide further observations. Further observations were utilized to search for supporting evidence of the ideas and themes brought to light during the interview and focus group.

The two main qualitative coding methods used in this analysis were word repetition and pawing, or handling (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). To employ the word repetition technique, I searched for commonly used words and their synonyms in interview and focus group transcripts and in the documents reviewed. To employ the pawing, or handling, technique I conducted a detailed review of all research-associated texts including transcripts, documents, and field-notes. I color-coded words and phrases, thus categorizing them into possible themes. Throughout the study, these themes were the reasons, given by teachers, to account for student success and to validate the school's establishment and maintenance of academic optimism.

Analysis began with the transcription of interview and focus group recordings. Based on the ideas that continued to re-emerge, I would focus observation on those areas looking for further evidence. When observation times preceded interviews or focus groups, I took more general notes on what could be seen and heard. Notes from interviews, focus groups, observations, and document review are organized into charts. From this organization, several primary and secondary themes emerged. A theme is considered primary if the same idea was evidenced in at least three data collection methods and at least 20 total times. A theme is considered secondary if it was evidenced in at least two data collection methods in at least 10 total occurrences.

Primary Themes

Five primary themes were highlighted: (a) alignment, (b) collaboration, (c) needs awareness and concern, (d) communication, and (e) expectations/goals. They were evidenced in a variety of ways and during multiple times.

Alignment. Alignment was referred to frequently in interviews and focus groups and was evidenced in observational time and in the documents reviewed. For the purposes of this study, alignment will be defined as any mention of the following ideas or words: curriculum alignment, mapping, "all on the same page," common vocabulary, or shared rubric.

Collaboration. Collaboration was evidenced throughout all four data collection pieces. Data points are coded under collaboration if they relate to teachers working together, or with parents, to address academic and emotional needs of students.

Needs awareness and concern. During many of the interviews and focus groups as well as in document review, a concern for students was present. Evidence coded in this theme includes needs assessments, love and care of students, understanding of community needs and issues, and initiatives to address non-academic matters.

Communication. A key theme, as evidenced throughout the study, was communication. Key ideas under this theme include newsletters, phone calls, meetings, notes, and the importance of clear and consistent information sharing.

Expectation and goals. Throughout the data collection, multiple references were made to expectations and goals. These goals and expectations regarded teachers, parents, administrators, and students.

Secondary Themes

Secondary themes included: (a) continuous learning, (b) data analysis, and (c) support staff all emerged as secondary themes. They were evidenced in a variety of ways and during multiple times but not as frequently as the primary themes.

Continuous learning. The data often allude to the idea of continuous learning. Strains under this theme include the presence of student teachers and pre-service teachers, professional learning communities, conferences, and professional development opportunities.

Data analysis. Data analysis refers to the application of data in order to inform decisions. Any mention or observation of the analysis of standardized assessments, needs assessments, and community surveys is coded under this theme.

Support staff. Support staff refers to those individuals who were not general education classroom teachers or enrichment teachers but served as resources to teachers and students. The specific individuals in the case-study schools included math specialists, literacy or reading specialists, and a behavior specialist. These faculty members collaborated with teachers regarding specific students and worked one-on-one or in small groups with students. References to trained and certified teachers who work in the areas of special education, literacy and math support, and behavior are coded for this theme.

It became clear, during analysis, that the establishment of academic optimism in each school was not an intentional or explicit decision. This study does not focus on a writing program, for example, that was chosen and implemented. There was no singular policy that faculty were responding to. There was no particular event that unfolded. Instead, these schools engaged in practices and activities that lead to an academically

optimistic climate, thus establishing it through the themes noted above. The daily

operationalization of these themes represents how the schools are able to maintain this

climate. This study describes these over-arching themes and details the more specific

daily practices associated with them.

The following discussion will serve to explain how the various data collection

methods revealed evidence of each theme. Data will be presented as teacher quotations,

observational anecdotes, focus group production, and document review examples.

Connections to one or more of the elements of academic optimism will follow.

Interview

One interview was conducted in Cornerstone, in a face-to-face meeting.

Participant A (Cornerstone). The first interview was with a resource room

teacher. She had been teaching for 17 years, all in the same district. She served 17

students on her caseload in a pull-out program, participated in the school's child-study

team, and the Response to Intervention (RTI) team.

Some of the key information gleaned from this first interview regarded staff

collaboration. Participant A discussed the school improvement team, the child-study

team, and the common occurrence of meetings between general education and resource

room teachers. She also mentioned the analysis of scores to assist in instruction, RTI, and

creating a common-core curriculum.

Participant A indicated that this school had a positive environment where teachers

enjoyed their jobs and "frustrations are taken in stride." She commented that teachers

typically adjusted to change well and saw challenges as new opportunities.

Observation

Observations were done on-site, during the school day while classes were in session. I was able to explore the building unescorted, per principal approval. Time was spent in the classrooms during instructional periods of those teachers who had given prior approval. In total, four different classrooms were visited with each visit lasting between 20 and 45 minutes. A good deal of time was also spent in the hallways surveying physical layouts, printed and posted materials, and building characteristics and structures. Additional observation time occurred on the school playground, in the staff lounge, in the school office, and in the school cafeteria.

Observations have been categorized into the three elements of academic optimism and then coded for the emergent themes. The "Behaviors" category refers to those comments or behaviors that faculty or students engaged in that were observable to the researcher. "Physical features" refers to pieces of text such as posters and displays. Finally, "Strategies/Norms" refers to normal daily practices that were observed.

Academic emphasis. Academic emphasis, of the three elements of academic optimism, was the most evident in observation. The observations—physical features, behaviors, and norms and strategies—coded under the topic of academic emphasis are those that were concerned with a focus on academics, high expectations and goals, and an orderly environment. These observations were then sub-categorized according to the eight themes. Recorded information can be found in Table 2.

Table 2

Observation of Academic Emphasis by Theme: Cornerstone

	Behavior(s)	Physical Feature	Strategies/Norms
Alignment	Teachers in each classroom use same behavior plan—teacher says "Card change" to student when expectations aren't being met	Same 'Learning Targets' charts in each classroom: 'What will I learn today?' and 'How will I learn it?'—get filled in by teacher and students	Every class uses the same behavior system: color-coded cards that flip when an expectation isn't met "Daily 5" literacy program used in each classroom
Communication	Other teachers in and out of rooms to speak w/classroom teacher		
Collaboration	Other teachers in and out of rooms to speak w/classroom teacher		
Needs Awareness	Principal speaking w/student about pumping up balls after school to take home Principal on phone asking parents about allowing child to have a behavior reward		Conflict managers meet monthly w/counselors
Continuous Learning		Large presence of intern and pre-service teachers	Lending library of professional resource in teacher lounge
Support Staff			Each group of students gets a reading time w/reading specialists

Table 2—Continued

Expectations	Teachers use high-level vocabulary even with young children (i.e., admire, gallery, fluent, descriptive, narrator) Students are highly engaged & on-task Teachers passing out 'Caught being good' tickets "47 stories in 47 days" : publishing student/staff writing each day on district website	"Be an All-Star Reader" poster on each classroom door. Reading Hall of Fame display Several rule signs throughout school: hallway rules, lab rule, headphone rules "Think Big" and "Be One in a Million, Not One of a Million" signs in office Lots of student work throughout school "Dog Gone Good Behavior": List of behavior statements such as, 'we work quietly' and 'we help each other'	"Daily 5" program used in each classroom—students choosing literacy activity

Collective efficacy. The idea of collective efficacy was best studied during this research during the interview and focus group. There was some limited observational evidence of the concept as well. The observations: physical features, behaviors, norms, and strategies coded under the topic of collective efficacy are those that were concerned with teachers' sense of capability to bring about desired outcomes related to student engagement and learning. These observations were then sub-categorized according to the relevant themes. Recorded information can be found in Table 3.

Table 3

Observation of Collective Efficacy by Theme: Cornerstone

	Behavior(s)	Physical Feature	Strategies/Norms
Collaboration	Teachers in lounge sharing success anecdotes about students		Teachers share students and teach in areas of expertise
Needs Awareness			Student study teams to determine best course of action to help individual students
Continuous Learning	Student teachers & pre-service teachers are highly visible and welcome in schools		Professional development both in and out of district
Support Staff	Support personnel are in and out of classrooms regularly speaking with classroom teachers		
Expectations		Signs in classrooms reading "Teachers will…" showing what teachers will be doing during specific periods of the day (helping students, guided reading, etc.)	

Teacher trust. Similar to collective efficacy, evidence of teacher trust was most prevalent in the interview and focus group. Several observations, however, also yielded data deemed relevant to the concept of teacher trust. These observations included physical features, behaviors, norms, and strategies that were all coded under the topic of teacher

trust because they exhibited elements of the school environment concerned with teachers'
willingness to be vulnerable to other parties (i.e., students and parents). Teachers
exhibited that behavior based on their confidence that the latter party will respect the five
facets of trust: benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, and openness. These
observations were then sub-categorized according to the relevant themes. Recorded
information can be found in Table 4.

Table 4

Observation of Teacher Trust by Theme: Cornerstone

	Behavior(s)	Physical Feature	Strategies/Norms
Communication	Teachers working in very close physical proximity to students. Principal called a parent to offer a special reward opportunity to student		Teacher use of descriptive praise with students: "That is really responsible."
Needs Awareness	Teacher comment about meta-cognition: "Figure out what kind of learner you are so you can be successful."		
Expectations	Teachers acknowledge to students when they made a mistake: "Oops, that was my fault."		During Daily 5 time, students are given the opportunity to choose their own learning activities Teachers allow students to decide whether to take study guide home or not

Focus Group

One focus group was conducted in Cornerstone. This focus group centered on one of the three elements of academic optimism: academic emphasis. Four participants engaged in this first focus group. None of the focus group participants were also interviewees. The group, according to the focus group protocol, was given a general definition for academic emphasis. Each individual was given time to brainstorm any idea related to the given topic. These ideas were written on provided paper.

Participants in the focus group were then divided into two groups. These groups discussed ideas and created one large poster with the compiled thoughts. Ideas that were similar were combined, some ideas were added to the original list over the course of the discussion, and examples were discussed amongst the group members.

After the small groups created their lists, the whole group once again gathered and reviewed the lists for similarities and differences and offered explanations to thoughts written. A modified Delphi method was used to ascertain teachers' opinions regarding which two ideas seemed most essential to them concerning the given topic. The Delphi method is a technique where a knowledgeable panel of experts offers assumptions on a particular topic based on their personal experiences (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007). For the purposes of this study, the technique was modified because the panel did meet face-to-face. In addition, the technique was used as a ranking exercise to assess participants' priorities (Barbour, 2007). Focus Group Chart 1, created by teachers, indicates the responses teachers compiled as well as those identified as most essential.

Focus Group Chart 1

Teacher Ideas Regarding Academic Emphasis: Cornerstone

Thought	Number of times noted as most essential
Common K-5 language & terminology	1
Curriculum alignment	3
Common assessments	
Professional Development (inside & outside)	
Grade level teams, PLCs	
Growth in comfort of sharing	
Certified support staff (writing coach, reading specialist, ELL)	
Data Analysis (NWEA, MEAP, DRA, DIBELS, MLPP)	
Communication & collaboration between teachers	2
Believing in all students	
Connection to school (heart and soul)	
High-level of MA degrees among teachers	
Veteran staff (5+ years)	
Common behavior standards/rubric	
Every student can learn	
School as community working together	
Meeting basic needs (teacher $ fund)	
Care for kids, character counts	1
Awareness of poverty & willingness to address it	
Teacher & student behavior training	

As evidenced in the chart, teachers in the first focus group spent a good deal of time centered on the ideas of alignment, communication, and collaboration. They indicated that they were able to focus on academics by employing these techniques. They relied on one another to use appropriate curricular vocabulary, to stay true to developed curriculum maps, to utilize the school behavior rubrics, and to collaborate with one another to improve instruction. Additionally, they were unanimous in noting that none of these efforts would be possible without a true love of the students. They believed that the majority of teachers feel a strong sense of unity and were highly motivated towards student success.

Document Review

The key documents reviewed for Cornerstone included school newsletters, school improvement plans, and parent compacts. The following discussion will highlight examples from the documents according to the various themes.

Alignment. As part of their school improvement plan, Cornerstone has instituted some strategies that require teachers to align their teaching and assessment practices. In Cornerstone, teachers and students are engaged in "The Daily 5" curricular program in all grades. Teachers indicated that by implementing the same programs in all grade levels, students are able to become more familiar with the common language and procedures, which led to more success.

Twice per month, teachers at Cornerstone met, per the school improvement plan, to "ensure horizontal alignment" and to discuss "curriculum maps and pacing," "scheduling of common assessment activities," and "common planning time."

Collaboration. For each goal set forth in the school improvement plan of Cornerstone, there was also a note on how teachers could collaborate towards specific efforts. For example, to ensure teachers were adequately implementing sound writing instruction, the school plan stated, "Our writing coach visits classrooms on a regular basis to provide embedded professional development in writing instruction."

Further mention was also given to teachers meeting at grade levels at least twice per month to discuss classroom issues, pedagogy, assessment, and the needs of at-risk learners.

Needs awareness and concern. Listed in the school improvement plans was the use of a Comprehensive Needs Assessment (CNA). The CNA allows faculty to examine the demographic data of the students and families they serve. Some of the questions asked on the CNA include: "Who do we serve?," "Where do we want to be?," and "How will we get to where we want to be?" Attention was also given to achievement gaps, possible root causes for the gaps, and strategies for overcoming gap challenges.

Communication. One central component of communication between home and school in Cornerstone was the teacher compact. It specifically stated that teachers will, "maintain open lines of effective communication with my students and their parents in order to support student learning."

Expectation and goals. Cornerstone has a Parent-Student-Teacher compact. Each party signs the compact and is expected to abide by the agreed upon measures. Parents agreed to the following statement:

I will encourage him/her (the child) by doing the following: see that my child

attends school regularly and is punctual, establish a time and place for homework

and check it regularly, read with my child daily and let my child see me read,

respect the diverse cultures of the school, stay aware of what my child is learning,

and maintain high expectations for my child.

Students agreed to the following statement:

I will do the following: come to school each day and be in class on time, have my

homework completed and turned in on time, have the supplies that I need, always

try to work to the best of my ability, finish my school work and participate in

classroom activities, follow all school rules, and believe that I can learn and I will

learn.

Finally, teachers agreed to the following statement:

I will do the following: provide an environment conducive to learning, maintain

high expectations for myself and my students, utilize a wide range of teaching

techniques to benefit the wide range of teaching styles, maintain open lines of

effective communication with my students and their parents in order to support

student learning, seek ways to involve parents in classroom activities, respect the

students, parents, and the diverse culture of the school.

Continuous learning. For each of Cornerstone's school improvement goals, there

was a corresponding professional development opportunity listed in the school

improvement plan. For example, as part of the goal to bring 100% of students to or above

grade level in reading and writing, teachers had the opportunity to visit other area

classrooms employing the same curriculum, to be trained in the Six Traits of Writing

program, to attend district professional development seminars, and to attend literacy

conferences at the Intermediate School District (ISD) and state level.

Another explicit goal of Cornerstone was listed as "Building the Capacity of the Staff." This specifically addressed the needs of the faculty to continue learning and progress towards delivery of high-quality educational programming for the students. The plan states, "Innovation without adequate support in the form of training and professional development is doomed to fail." Some strategies directed toward this subject were book studies, presentations, professional visits to area schools, and research reviews.

Data analysis. The school improvement plans of the school listed the most recent MEAP data for the school. From these results, several goals were generated. Cornerstone's improvement plan used kindergarten screening data to inform their decision to move to an all day, every day kindergarten schedule. The data revealed "a wide disparity of skills for students entering kindergarten programs." The evaluation of the all-day program would include student progress measures using quarterly summative assessments, MLPP, and formative classroom assessments.

Conclusion

The building and classrooms were highly organized, orderly, and had a strong atmosphere of focus and calm. The students were friendly, respectful, and nearly always engaged in the learning activities during my observations. Teachers, too, were highly engaged with students and treated them with a high degree of respect. Those that participated in the study were also quite friendly and respectful of me and the study. Teachers seemed to be the driving force behind many school-wide initiatives and spoke positively about the curricular path the school was taking. Although the participation of the building principal was nearly non-existent, a good relationship between administrators

and faculty appeared to exist, according to teacher comments. Teacher autonomy was valued hand-in-hand with high expectations and outcomes.

This school set high expectations and sought to be seen as successful to the public. During my observations, it was apparent that these expectations were high, success was expected and valued, academics were the focus, and accomplishments were celebrated.

The Case of Rose: Kinship

The second school site was located in southeast Michigan, approximately 15 miles outside of the state's largest urban center. The specific area in which the school is located is considered a large suburb. Rose had a high number of students enrolled as schools-of-choice students with a large number of students arriving from the surrounding urban areas. The district consisted of six schools and served approximately 2,350 students, while the site school served 605 students in pre-school through grade five with two principals and 50 teachers. The school employed teachers as general education instructors in pre-school through fifth-grade, resource room teachers, a behavior specialist, math and literacy specialists, and enrichment course teachers in physical education, Chinese, computers, music, and library. Table 5 shows the demographic breakdown for students in Rose.

Rose met the criteria set forth within this research proposal by having 85.3% of the student body receiving free or reduced lunch, earning an average of 86.9% proficiency on the reading and math MEAP assessments in grades 3 through 5 for the past two years (2009, 2010), and having a 70% level of academic optimism as indicated by staff responses to the School Academic Optimism Survey (Hoy et al., 2006). As a point of

comparison, the other elementary school in the same district would not have qualified for

the study. Although they too had a high free and reduced lunch rate at 83%, they did not

meet the MEAP criteria with only a 69% proficiency rate.

Table 5

Rose Population Demographics

Rose		
	Number	Percentage of Total Population
African-American	395	65
American Indian	0	0
Asian	8	<1
Caucasian	178	29
Hawaiian	0	0
Hispanic	23	23
Multi-Racial	1	<1
Total minority (non-Caucasian)	427	71
Female	285	47
Male	320	53
Total Population	605	100

Source: Michigan Department of Education, Fall 2010 Headcount Report

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(2009, 2010), and having a 70% level of academic optimism as indicated by staff responses to the School Academic Optimism Survey (Hoy et al., 2006). As a point of comparison, the other elementary school in the same district would not have qualified for the study. Although they too had a high free and reduced lunch rate at 83%, they did not meet the MEAP criteria with only a 69% proficiency rate.

The word *kinship* best describes Rose. The general impression given is that Rose was playing a part of an educational whole. The people that worked there felt a sense of kinship with their own community (e.g., colleagues, parents, and students) but also with the broader field as exemplified by their enthusiastic participation in my project.

The Building

The school building was set in a neighborhood of small residential homes. A main corridor of commercial property (e.g., strip malls, restaurants, bars, etc.) lay within a mile from the school as did several major highways. The school was brick and appeared very large from the exterior. Two large buildings, visible from the front, were connected with an indoor corridor. An external classroom housed the pre-school.

Upon entering the building was the office. Visible from the office were several off-shooting hallways, the cafeteria, and a stairwell that led to the second floor. This side of the building housed some special education rooms, the cafeteria, enrichment classrooms, the staff lounge, and third through fifth grade general education rooms. The staff lounge consisted of several tables as well as a microwave and refrigerator. Bulletin boards and walls were covered with teachers' personal effects as well as current school-improvement information (data analysis work), a lending library of teacher materials, and a good deal of storage space.

Past the lounge was the gym, which appeared to be the center of the building. Beyond the gym, there was a definite sense of entering another building despite not leaving the indoors—perhaps due to the length of the hallway. The second side of the building housed additional enrichment and special education classrooms, kindergarten through fifth grade general education rooms, and its own office. Outside of the building, there was a playground, basketball courts, and mid-sized playing field. The pre-school portable classroom lay approximately 100 yards outside of the main building.

The rooms and hallways all had tile floors, high ceilings, and cinder block walls. The walls were painted in a variety of colors. The building felt clean but in disrepair as illustrated by chipping paint, water-damaged or missing ceiling tiles, and a general sense of age and wear. With sensitivity towards stereotyping, the physical state of Rose might come to mind when one thinks of a movie or book depiction of a typical urban school.

I was given free rein to roam the building and always felt comfortable and safe. Despite the age of the building, the walls were colorfully decorated with student work, the lighting was bright, and there was a general sense of openness.

Classrooms

Over the course of the study, I had the opportunity to visit in 13 different classrooms. Three of these classrooms housed special education or reading intervention, one classroom housed a pre-school class, and the remaining nine rooms housed general education classrooms in grades one through five.

The classrooms all had a similar feel with tile floors, high ceilings, and many windows. The windows allowed for a good deal of natural light to flow in, offering a comfortable and bright environment. Like the rest of the school, classrooms did have an

old and worn look to them. Ceiling tiles were either missing or water-damaged; walls were cinder block and painted in a variety of chipping colors, and cabinetry was outdated.

Despite these physical flaws, the rooms had a positive and friendly feel. There were colorful and cheery spaces in the room with rugs, comfy student reading chairs, and computer stations. The walls were covered with student and teacher work. Unlike Cornerstone, the learning and instructional visuals were homemade rather than store-bought.

In approximately half of the rooms, I was introduced to the class. In the remaining rooms I slid in to the back to observe. Teachers were often engaged in whole class or small group instruction. Students were attentive and engaged in lessons. The occasional side conversation or off-task behavior was quickly met with friendly reminders from the teacher to re-engage. Similar to Cornerstone, in several classrooms student were allowed to select their own learning activity such as the computer station, independent reading or partner reading. The noise levels in the room were average and students appeared to be respectful of the teacher and one another.

Several common artifacts were displayed in each of the classrooms. Boards were present that listed the objectives for each lesson: "What Will We Learn" (objective) and the activity that the class would be engaging in related to the stated objective: "How We Will Learn It." Also present were posters concerning data—instructing the reader that the use of data in decision making is essential to educational success. Finally, each classroom had a student discipline chart. Each student had several colored cards in pockets above named labels. Teachers used the phrase "change your card" to indicate when a student must change from one color to another. Each color related to behavioral actions (i.e., a

reminder, a recess chat, principal visit, and call home). These charts were used consistently among the classrooms.

Teachers

My first encounter with the faculty of Rose came indirectly through the principal. I had received a list of several names of those teachers interested in participating in my study even before I had presented the project to the staff. They chose to engage in the study based on the information they had received from the building administrator. This choice reinforced the sense of kinship to the field of education.

During my first site visit I was greeted by a teacher and as requested by the principal, she escorted me to the teachers' lounge where I was to be presenting the study to the entire staff. The lounge held approximately 50 teachers and yet was not intimidating. Teachers presented themselves warmly with smiles and greetings. During my presentation teachers were already filling out the volunteer participation forms and many asked questions. Some questions concerned simple logistics such as dates and times. Others were deeper, and concerned the actual content of the study. The questions were enthusiastic in nature and indicated that many teachers wanted to participate in several areas of the study. After the presentation and questions, volunteer forms were collected. Over 90% of the teachers present returned the forms with agreements to participate in at least one portion of the project. Most forms indicated teachers were willing to engage in more than one area.

During the remainder of my site visits, I was always greeted by teachers in the hallways and lounge. Teachers were friendly and welcoming. One teacher commented

about pre-service and intern teachers that "they're everywhere." The common occurrence of hosting visitors in the school may help to explain the teachers' comfort with this study.

In individual classroom visits, I was greeted by teachers and many discussed classroom activities with me while students were working. Classroom activities often consisted of small group and partner work after a period of whole-group instruction. Teachers were friendly with students, spoke with respect, and worked in close proximity to them often joining a group at a table or on the floor.

In the lounge and hallway, it was common to see teachers chatting with one another about both personal and professional topics. During a focus group, one teacher offered an original adage to the conversation: "Teachers who play together stay together." The conversation then moved on to statements about how close the teachers felt to one another, how much they relied on one another, and how they felt that this sense of kinship affected their success in the classroom. In addition, teachers often commented on how crucial it was to have such a large network of support professionals. The school employs both reading and math specialists as well as a behavioral consultant. Teachers expressed their high-level of reliance on these colleagues to ensure student success.

Administration

I first contacted the superintendent for permission to contact the principal of the school. I was given approval and a name. I contacted this principal and was shortly presented with names of teachers interested in participating after she presented the request. My additional request to speak with the staff was met immediately with approval. Upon further research into the school, I quickly learned that Rose actually had two principals and quite a large staff.

Because the school has two principals and is split between two sides of the building (Pre-K through second grade on one side, and third through fifth grades on the other) I assumed I would be speaking only to the upper elementary staff as that was the principal I had been in contact with. Upon arriving, I was met with the entire Pre-K through fifth grade staff (nearly 50 teachers). Although only half of the staff was meeting that particular day, the rest of the staff joined in solely to hear my presentation. I was warmly greeted by both principals and a teacher. After giving the presentation on the project, the lower elementary principal strongly encouraged everyone to participate. The principal reminded staff that "we are all part of the educational community and this is your chance to give back. Who knows who this may help and when it could come around again to help us?"

There was a clear sentiment expressed that my project was not far removed from their work there. In other words, we were all part of the same educational family.

For the remainder of my visits, I was greeted politely in the school lounge but had no further in-person contact with either principal. Before each visit, I would email my day's agenda and received immediate permission each time. At the end of the project, I received a thank-you note from one principal for the treats I had provided the staff at the conclusion of the study.

Initially I was surprised at not seeing the building administrators during my time in the school. It is possible, though, that the size of the school could account for that. Similar to Cornerstone, the role of administration did not naturally present itself during my interviews or focus groups. After probing, I was greeted with a variety of responses concerning the role of the principals in the life of the school. All interviewees agreed that

the principals were highly engaged in managerial aspects of the school, were organized, and presented the school well to the outside community. One interview respondent focused on student behavioral issues, citing that the principal was very quick to handle any issues that arose. Another respondent said that she wished the principals would play a greater instructional role.

During focus group discussions, the teachers reported that their principals were highly engaged in what the teachers were doing, supportive of ideas, respectful of teacher autonomy, and thoroughly committed to student well-being.

Invitations to participate as interviewees were given to both principals and both were politely declined. Like in the case of Cornerstone, the role of the building administrator in these buildings is still open to much research potential. Are they setting the stage for success? Is the trust they display for teachers enabling teacher and student success? Does their close attention to managerial details permit for a successful school environment? These are questions to which a greater deal of attention should be paid in an additional research project.

Analysis of Rose

The same eight themes as described above were used in analyzing Rose as well. The commonalities between the schools were abundant and the emergence of these themes was shared between the two cases. The step-by-step analysis of Rose occurred a bit differently than that of Cornerstone due to the amount of time and participation variations. My study at Rose began with observations which, again, consisted of recordings of general things I noticed. From there, I was able to conduct interviews and a focus group. These were analyzed for common themes between the two. Those themes

were then used to guide both further observations but also the following interviews. I looked for supporting evidence from each of the focus groups while conducting interviews and engaging in observation.

Interviews

Four teachers were interviewed in Rose. All interviews were held face-to-face, on site, except that of Participant E who preferred a telephone interview.

Participant B (Rose). The second interview was conducted with another resource room teacher. She has been teaching for ten years and had 18 students on her caseload at the time of the interview. She pulled students out for some lessons but spent most of her time in general education classrooms helping both caseload and non-caseload students with general education work.

Participant B focused on the positive nature of the school. She remarked that teachers and students liked being there, faculty have positive attitudes, and there are very few parent complaints. She commented that the school had a close-knit environment and both teachers and students "feel like a part of a family." She said teachers were highly aware of students' needs and genuinely cared for them; they made the necessary accommodations to ensure student success.

Much of the interview centered on data analysis, curriculum alignment, and professional development. She noted that there was heavy data-analysis of the MEAP. That analysis was used to identify focus areas that led to direct classroom instruction. She discussed curriculum days (where grade level staff met), scope and sequence efforts, and team meetings. Participant B also said that her pull-in instruction of students in the general education classroom was reflective of the collaborative efforts of the school.

Participant C (Rose). The third interview was held with an early intervention specialist who also had a caseload of students that had qualified for special education services. She worked with 12 different students who were close to grade-level in reading and/or math, with the hopes of boosting them to grade-level as opposed to referring them for special education.

Participant C commented on how much the staff cares about the kids and works well with one another to collaborate. She mentioned that teachers regularly talk over concerns, offer suggestions, provide one another constant updates, and conference on student progress. She suggested that the school's main focus was to "bring students to grade level" and that faculty wanted students to say, "I was loved and cared for" in regards to their experience at Rose.

The interviewee noted that students received a lot of specialized attention in the school and differentiation efforts are high. She indicated that "the MEAP is analyzed like crazy" and results were directly used in instruction.

Participant D (Rose). The fourth interview was with a literacy specialist for grades three through five. She worked with small groups of students two to three times per week for 25 minutes. She also visited classrooms to model writing instruction and co-teach alongside the general education teacher.

The fourth interviewee mentioned the high expectations in the building. She said the principals set high goals for both students and teachers. Teachers consistently responded to these expectations with collaborative efforts. She indicated, however, that the level of collaboration differed among the grade levels.

She also discussed relationships with parents. She said the school did a superior job of communicating with parents but parental involvement was low nonetheless. According to Participant D, parents were generally happy with the school but for various reasons, such as bussing and work schedules, they did not spend much time in the school. Participant D sensed that students liked being at Rose, enjoyed the daily routines, and had a strong grasp of what was expected of them. She said the main emphasis of the school was "definitely an academic focus on kids getting a strong education." She followed by reiterating that kids were well cared for and teachers focused on general well-being. She thought that students asked about their school experience would respond with, "I had a lot of teachers who cared about me."

A portion of the interview was also spent on the topic of alignment. The participant said that both curriculum and behavior were closely aligned within the school and teachers followed through on plans. She indicated that this was, at least in part, what allowed the school to have such high expectations for the students.

Participant E (Rose). The fifth interview was with a pre-school teacher who had been at Rose for two years and in education for 10. She worked with a class of 12-18 full-day pre-schoolers.

The fifth participant focused on several key areas: communication, continuous learning, and collaboration. She noted that the school, using newsletters, phone calls, notes, and progress reports, was in constant communication with students' homes regarding student progress. According to participant E the school was well aware of student needs and worked hard to differentiate instruction in order to meet those varied needs.

Participant E also attributed the school's success to professional development, curriculum alignment, and grade level meetings where "teachers could share ideas and collaborate on how best to meet student needs."

Observations

Observations were done on-site, during the school day while classes were in session. I was able to explore the building unescorted, per principal approval. While class was in session, I visited the classrooms of those teachers who had given prior approval. In total, 14 different classrooms were visited with each visit lasting between 20 and 45 minutes. A good deal of time was also spent in the hallways surveying physical layouts, printed and posted materials, and building characteristics and structures. Additional observation time occurred on the school playground, in the staff lounge, in the school offices, and in the school cafeteria.

Observations have been categorized into the three elements of academic optimism and then coded for the emergent themes. The "Behaviors" category refers to those comments or behaviors that faculty or students engaged in that were observable to the researcher. "Physical features" refers to pieces of text such as posters and displays. Finally, "Strategies/Norms" refers to normal daily practices that were observed.

Academic emphasis. Academic emphasis, of the three elements of academic optimism, was the most evident in observation. The observations—coded under the topic of academic emphasis are those that were concerned with a focus on academics, high expectations and goals, and an orderly environment. These observations are then sub-categorized according to the eight themes. Recorded information is in Table 6.

Table 6

Observation of Academic Emphasis by Theme: Rose

	Behavior(s)	Physical Feature	Strategies/Norms
Alignment	Teachers in each classroom use same behavior plan—teacher says "Card change" to student when expectations aren't being met	Chart in lounge about how each grade level will tackle MEAP strategy (by each benchmark)	Every class uses the same behavior system: color-coded cards that flip when an expectation isn't met "Daily 5" literacy program used in each classroom
Communication	Other teachers in and out of rooms to speak with classroom teacher		
Collaboration	Other teachers in and out of rooms to speak w/classroom teacher		
Needs Awareness		Lounge Sign: "We, the caring staff of Rose believe that all students can learn and achieve according to their individual learning potential, regardless of previous academic performance, background, socio-economic status, race or gender. In partnership with the home, we accept the responsibility of fostering positive behaviors and attitudes which promote academic, social, and emotional growth."	Peer mediation program for problem solving

Table 6—Continued

Data Analysis		MEAP chart in lounge—each benchmark broken down by success rate and grade level Charts in each classroom: "Teach, monitor, adjust—data drives it all."	
Continuous Learning	Teacher comments that student teachers are "all over the place"	Large presence of intern and pre-service teachers	Lending library of professional resource in teacher lounge
Support Staff	Resource room teacher working w/kids in general education class		
Expectations	Teachers use phrases like "What do scientists do?," "Why did we read this?" and "Figure out what type of learner you are so you can be successful" Students are highly engaged & on-task Teachers passing out 'Caught being good' tickets	Lots of student work throughout school Charts in each classroom for every subject matter: 'Students will be able to…' Expectation posters w/ 'Students will…' and 'Teachers will…'	"Daily 5" program used in each classroom—students choosing literacy activity Writing center in each room, even pre-school

Collective efficacy. The idea of collective efficacy was best studied during this research during the interviews and focus groups, but there was some limited observational evidence of the concept as well. The observations coded under the topic of collective

efficacy are those that were concerned with teachers' sense of their own capability to bring about desired outcomes related to student engagement and learning. These observations are then sub-categorized according to the relevant themes. Recorded information is in Table 7.

Table 7

Observation of Collective Efficacy by Theme: Rose

	Behavior(s)	Physical Feature	Strategies/Norms
Alignment			Teachers' use of benchmarks on a regular, consistent basis
Collaboration			Teachers share students and teach in areas of expertise
Needs Awareness		Sign in lounge: "all students can learn…regardless of previous academic performance, background, socio-economic status, race, or gender."	Student study teams to determine best course of action to help individual students
Continuous Learning	Student teachers & pre-service teachers are highly visible and welcome in schools		Professional development both in and out of district
Support Staff	Support personnel are in and out of classrooms regularly speaking with classroom teachers		
Expectations		Signs in classrooms reading "Teachers will…" showing what teachers will be doing during specific periods of the day (helping students, guided reading, etc.)	

Teacher trust. Similar to collective efficacy, evidence of teacher trust was most prevalent in interviews and focus groups. Several observations, however, also yielded data deemed relevant to the concept of teacher trust. Those observations coded under the topic of teacher trust exhibited elements of the school environment concerned with teachers' willingness to be vulnerable to other parties (i.e., students and parents). Teachers exhibited behaviors based on their confidence that students and parents will respect the five facets of trust: benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, and openness. These observations are then sub-categorized according to the relevant themes. Recorded information is in Table 8.

Table 8

Observation of Teacher Trust by Theme: Rose

	Behavior(s)	Physical Feature	Strategies/Norms
Communication	Teachers working in very close physical proximity to students.		
Collaboration			Teacher use of terms like "good teammate" to describe student/teacher relationship
Expectations			During Daily 5 time, students are given the opportunity to choose their own learning activities

Focus Groups

Teachers from Rose participated in two focus groups. Each of these focus groups centered on one of the three elements of academic optimism: collective efficacy and teacher trust of students in parents. Nine participants engaged in the focus group on collective efficacy while ten participated in the focus group concerning teacher trust. None of the focus group participants were also interviewees. The groups, according to the focus group protocol, were given a general definition for either collective efficacy or teacher trust. Each individual was given time to brainstorm any idea related to the given topic. These ideas were written on provided paper.

Participants in the focus group were then divided into two groups. These groups discussed ideas and created one large poster with the compiled thoughts. Ideas that were similar were combined, some ideas were added to the original list over the course of the discussion, and examples were discussed among the group members.

After the small groups created their lists, the whole group once again gathered and reviewed the lists for similarities and differences and offered explanations to their written thoughts. Using the modified Delphi method again, teachers were asked to choose two ideas that seemed most essential to them concerning the given topic. Focus Group Charts 2 and 3, created by teachers, indicate the responses teachers compiled as well as those identified as most essential.

The second focus group consisted of nine teachers. Much of the conversation was dominated with the ideas behind collaboration. Teachers said that a great deal of time was spent working with one another. They said the staff tended to brainstorm ideas

collectively, follow-through efforts were high, and levels of faculty ownership allowed for greater implementation of ideas.

Focus Group Chart 2

Teacher Idea Regarding Collective Efficacy: Rose

Thought	Number of times noted as most essential
Collaborative efforts: conversation, email, meeting, notes	4
Grade level curriculum time	
Materials to support new faculty	
Support staff for behavior/academic struggles	1
Staff plays together	
Open door policy with colleagues	
Strong communication between school and home	
Share ideas, resources, discipline plan	
No judgments of one another: safe environment	1
Strong understanding of community and their needs	1
Love students	

Teachers felt that they were working in a safe environment where resources were readily shared and where teachers were not being judged by peers. Support personnel, such as the math and literacy specialists, behavior specialists, and resource room teachers, were highly regarded. The group felt a definite sense of community with one another;

each student was the responsibility of the faculty as a whole, and the teachers were

genuinely working as a team.

Focus Group Chart 3

Teacher Idea Regarding Faculty Trust: Rose

Thought	Number of times noted as most essential
Students are reliable at school	
Parents trust teacher—don't question	
Line of communication between parents and teachers	4
Involved parents are supportive	
Relationships between teachers and parents are important	3

The final focus group included ten teachers. Faculty trust was, as deemed by the

teachers, the most challenging of the three elements of academic optimism to realize in

the school environment. Most of the focus group time was spent in discussion about

communication. Teachers said that relationships with home were essential for student

success but these relationships were not always easy to establish. The school, therefore,

had instituted a number of plans in order to keep the lines of communication open.

For example, one teacher mentioned that progress reports were sent home every

three weeks, for every child. In addition, each child had a tracker, or assignment book,

where assignments and other important information were noted. Teachers and parents

signed the trackers each day. Part of the communication strategy also included a parental

compact that outlined the expectations the faculty had for the partnership between home and school (see Document Review).

Document Review

The key documents reviewed for Rose included school improvement plans, parent compacts, and behavior plans. The following discussion will highlight examples from the documents according to the various themes.

Alignment. As part of their school improvement plan, Rose instituted some strategies that required teachers to align their teaching and assessment practices. For example, all teachers (K-5) used the same summative assessments to evaluate student growth. In addition, the plan requested that all teachers implement specific activities into the daily routine such as "Everyday Counts Calendar" and math calendar games.

Needs awareness and concern. The use of a Comprehensive Needs Assessment (CNA) was listed in the school improvement plans. The CNA allowed faculty to examine the demographic data of the students and families they served. Some of the questions asked on the CNA included: "Who do we serve?," "Where do we want to be?," and "How will we get to where we want to be?" Attention was also given to achievement gaps, possible root causes for the gaps, and strategies for overcoming gap challenges.

Communication. One central component of communication between home and school in Rose is the "Tracker." Students were expected to write their assignments and other important notes in the book. Parents and teachers then signed it each day. Written on the information sheet is the slogan, "Let's keep the lines of communication open between home and school!"

Expectation and goals. Rose had official compacts with both parents and students, which were created by a committee of staff, parents, and community members. Each was expected to sign the compact and abide by the listed components. The parental expectations included: "Establish a time for sharing daily school experiences," "Strive each day to make my child's education my number one priority," and "Stay aware of what my child is learning."

Student expectations included: "Always try to work to the best of my ability," "Believe that I can learn and will learn," and "Show respect for myself, my school and others."

Rose's behavior plan was also distributed to the entire parent population. The plan addressed seven key expectations and the school-wide consequences for not meeting the expected level of success.

The vision statement, mission statement and a set of corresponding beliefs of Rose were highly illustrative of the expectations for teachers, staff, parents, and students. The vision statement stated that "all students have the ability to learn." The belief statements include ideas such as "high expectations lead to high achievement for all" and "students learn best when they are actively engaged in meaningful and challenging work."

Continuous learning. As part of the parent compact, Rose included a provision for staff that addressed professional development. It stated that the school will, "Provide the necessary technical, research, staff and administrative support to schools in the planning and implementing of effective parent involvement activities to improve student academic achievement and school performance."

Data analysis. The school improvement plans of the school listed the most recent MEAP data for the school. From these results, several goals were generated. For example, the writing goal for Rose stated "all students in grades 3-5 will increase writing performance on MEAP by the fall by 5%" with a rationale listed as "low scores on past MEAP" and "review of scores on MLPP (Michigan Literacy Proficiency Profile) writing." To address this area, the school chose to implement a writer's workshop strategy. The improvement plan detailed professional development activities, resources, and assessments to improve writing instruction. Success will be determined by the following year's MEAP and MLPP writing scores.

Conclusion

My time in Rose was enjoyable and interesting. Despite its old appearance and worn surfaces, one could sense the community spirit that the school embodied. The vibe of the people there was friendly and positive. In the short time I had to engage with the school's staff, I felt welcome and comfortable. The aura of the school was dynamic with a sense that good things were happening here.

Teachers appeared well-organized and although the classrooms had a sense of wear, they were covered with work reflecting the academic emphasis of the building. Teachers relied on one another, felt connected to each other, and displayed a strong sense of unity and dedication to the school community.

Comparison

General Impressions

Despite so many commonalities between the two case-study sites, the largest area of difference came in an implicit impression of the buildings and their culture. As a

visitor in both schools, I found Rose to be friendlier, more welcoming, and more open to and engaged in the work I was doing. In fairness, however, it must be noted that more on-site time was spent in Rose and that could potentially play a role in this impression.

The building of Cornerstone was more comfortable in terms of maintenance and lighting; it had a warm, cozy feel. Rose was a bit colder, much brighter, and showed many more signs of wear. In general, Rose had a much more urban atmosphere while Cornerstone had a quiet, suburban air to it. Both schools, however, served similar populations, in terms of racial and income demographics, and they were in comparable locations (i.e., near a large urban center).

Despite these small and general differences, the schools had a great deal in common. The discussion below serves to compare the schools by the three areas of academic optimism with the eight themes interwoven.

Academic Optimism

One common thread among all five interviews (one in Cornerstone and four in Rose) was the setting of high student expectations in the schools. High expectations, one element of academic optimism, are a central component of academic emphasis and one of the emergent themes of this study. Numerous efforts were taken among the staffs of both schools to ensure that these expectations were met including data analysis, and curriculum alignment. The weight of each of these differed somewhat between the Cornerstone and Rose. For example, both schools were focused on alignment. It appeared, however, that Cornerstone's alignment focus centered more on academic programming, language, and assessment, while Rose included a greater emphasis on alignment in utilizing data analysis and student behavior. Cornerstone was more

concerned about unit alignment within grade levels and curricular mapping between grade levels. Rose seemed to have a greater interest in aligning instructional practices to the specific needs of students, as evidenced by disaggregated assessment results.

Another key element of academic emphasis is an orderly environment (Hoy et al., 2006). Several of the teachers referred to the schools' discipline plan or rubric. They indicated that the success of the plan lay with the teachers' commitment to it. Students were aware of behavioral expectations and thus more often able to focus on academic matters. Common discipline plan and classroom management schemes were consistently utilized to assist in creating the orderly environments. Both schools developed and used common behavior plans. Cornerstone's plan was directed school-wide with the use of a common-discipline rubric shared between classrooms and the office. At the classroom level, however, there was more diversity in how each individual teacher implemented the behavior modification plan. Rose, on the other hand, appeared to employ the same discipline from classroom to classroom without much variance between teachers.

Collective Efficacy

Collective efficacy, another facet of academic optimism, was also evidenced during the study. One participant clearly stated, "teachers here just keep trying." Several mentioned that teachers felt confident in their abilities and relied on the abilities of colleagues as well. Teachers felt valued in the school and believed others were there to act as resources. In both schools, resource personnel were heavily utilized to assist in student learning. In School 1 reading specialists and special education faculty was the core of instructional support. Rose, which was larger than Cornerstone, had numerous support staff. In addition to reading specialists and resource-room teachers, the teachers

there also relied on mathematics and behavior specialists in the daily pursuit to adequately serve the student body.

Teachers in both schools reported a strong network of communication and collaboration between staff. Evidence of this emerged during the site visits as well. Teachers were often seen discussing students with one another and openly sharing information about teaching. The interview and focus group participants in both schools weighed their work with one another as a heavy component directly related to student success.

In addition to their work with one another, teachers at Cornerstone and Rose emphasized the continuous learning that took place. There were student teachers at Cornerstone and Rose with the addition of pre-service teachers at Rose. The proportional number of teachers-in-training at Rose was greater than what was present at Cornerstone. The teachers in Cornerstone seemed to have a different perspective on the student teachers, however. They shared freely with them and viewed the school as a teaching school. The teachers in Rose, however, alluded to how much the veteran staff uses the novice professionals to continue to grow, stay fresh, and be motivated towards improvement and innovation.

Other than the learning that took place when working with student teachers, both schools reported a belief in the power of professional development. Cornerstone appeared to have more district-wide and external opportunities such as conferences and seminars. Rose hosted many in-school opportunities with teacher-led information directly related to school improvement initiatives and instructional practices.

Teacher Trust

The final component of academic optimism, parent and student trust was also an integral part of both schools. In other research, the focus of trust revolves around teacher trust of one another, teacher trust of their leaders, or parent trust of teachers. The trust on behalf of faculty towards parents and students is the focus in this study.

In both school sites, teacher trust scored the lowest of the three elements of academic optimism. Although trust levels were not as high, teachers did note school efforts to foster an environment of trust. Communication between school and home was deemed essential. Teachers in Cornerstone called student homes and sent home progress reports, newsletters and informational notes on a regular basis. Similarly, faculty in Rose commented on sending home progress reports every month for every student. Both sets of faculty reported that this type of communication with home helped foster the sense of trust that parents were involved, informed, and invested in the students' educational growth and achievement.

Rose teachers frequently referenced trackers, or assignment books, and the parental compact as tools to ensure that everyone is working as a team. The compact lists expectations of parents to help ensure a focus on student academic success.

The largest difference between the two sites regarding teacher trust centered on location. Cornerstone is located within a residential community. Most students attending the school live within close proximity. Rose, on the other hand, has many schools-of-choice students who are bused in from further locations. Teachers suggested that this was an issue for school events, like parent-teacher conferences and volunteering in the classroom, because it was more difficult for parents to attend.

Finally, both staffs emphasized a heightened needs awareness of their demographic. In Cornerstone, teachers contributed to a fund to ensure students were provided with essentials like winter coats, eyeglasses, and books. Rose teachers stated that staff members, particularly counselors, stayed informed on what students needed particular items and how to best go about seeing that those needs were met. In both schools, teachers referenced the need to accommodate and adjust lessons, plans, and units to ensure all students could participate regardless of access to supplies or project materials.

Conclusion

Analysis of all four data collection methods yielded a total of eight themes: five primary themes and three secondary. These themes—alignment, collaboration, communication, needs awareness, data analysis, continuous learning, support staff, and expectations of goals—are central to teachers in explaining the current academically optimistic environment.

It is clear that the emergent themes were present in both schools in various ways. Although located in vastly different areas of the state and in different types of communities, it is interesting to note the similarities of the two schools. The types of academically optimistic behaviors and the themes themselves were consistent between the two schools. Each school took a slightly unique spin on a particular theme or idea but the general sentiment remained consistent. In summary, with respect to academic emphasis, teachers expressed a strong desire to affect student growth by setting high expectations and creating an effective and orderly environment. They described their ability to do this through the utilization of data, professional development efforts,

collaboration with colleagues, the assistance of support personnel, and creating open lines of communication.

With regard to collective efficacy, both faculties conveyed a robust sense of confidence in their respective schools' abilities to enact necessary changes and to maintain the current positive attributes in order to ensure student success. This feeling of confidence was ascribed, in large degree, to collaboration efforts, reliance on support personnel, and the outcomes of professional development with a keen eye toward continuous growth.

Finally, with respects to faculty trust, teachers expressed the importance of establishing relationships with both students and parents. Teachers had a genuine sense of concern about students and their general well-being and were highly aware of the needs of the surrounding community. Particular emphasis was placed on communication to ensure that teachers and parents were best able to express needs and meet expectations.

Chapter V will expound on each of the eight themes and provide further information on current research in the given areas. This study, combined with previous research, will assist in suggesting implications and possible insights for schools and faculties. In addition, attention will be paid to further areas for research that address these and other relevant topics.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Introduction

The first four chapters have presented a case-study of two schools that are low-income, high-achieving, and have established environments with a high degree of academic optimism. Through multiple forms of data collection, eight key themes became apparent in describing the contexts in which these schools are operating. It is my belief that these themes are accurate depictions of Cornerstone and Rose and other schools could potentially learn from examples in these case sites. Chapter V will offer some additional information, based on current literature, about these eight themes as well as my recommendations for schools. Finally, suggestions for further research will be presented.

Purpose of Study

This research, via two case studies in Michigan low-SES, and high-achieving elementary schools, described the work and characteristics of an academically optimistic environment. This research identified, described, and categorized elementary school level norms, behaviors, strategies, and building characteristics that may have contributed to the development of one or more of the properties of academic optimism: academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust.

Summary of Major Results

The eight inductive and deductive themes were present in both schools in a variety of ways. Although located in different areas of the state and in differing types of

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communities, the similarities of the two schools are noteworthy. The types of activities, as evidenced within each theme and the themes themselves were consistent between the two schools. Each school may take a slightly unique spin on a particular theme or idea but the general outlook remained consistent. Analysis of all four data collection methods yielded a total of eight themes: five primary themes and three secondary. These themes— alignment, collaboration, communication, needs awareness, data analysis, continuous learning, support staff, and expectations of goals—are central to teachers in explaining the current academically optimistic environment.

In broad summary, with respect to academic emphasis, a theme that was a part of my original framework, teachers expressed a strong desire to affect student growth by setting high expectations and creating an effective and orderly environment. They described their ability to do this through the use of data, professional development efforts, collaboration with colleagues, the assistance of support personnel, and establishing open lines of communication.

With regard to collective efficacy, also a part of my original framework, both faculties conveyed a vigorous sense of confidence in their respective schools to enact the changes necessary and maintain current positive attributes to ensure student success. This feeling of confidence was ascribed, in large degree, to collaboration efforts, reliance on support personnel, and the outcomes of professional development with a keen eye toward continuous growth.

Finally, with respects to faculty trust: the third component of my original framework, teachers expressed the importance of establishing relationships with both students and parents. Teachers had a genuine sense of concern about students and their

general well-being and were highly aware of the needs of the surrounding community. Particular emphasis was placed on communication to ensure that teachers and parents were best able to express needs and meet expectations.

Relationship of Results to Existing Studies

All of the central themes in this study have support in the literature and in previous research. There are some inductive themes, however, that emerged during this study that I had not previously encountered in the research. Table 9 highlights the themes, support from research, and new findings.

Additions to Body of Literature

The themes highlighted in my study have a good deal of supporting evidence from previous research and educational literature. There are, however, several points where this study highlights new information or adds to the body of knowledge on the themes from a new perspective.

In discussing alignment, for example, most of the research and literature focuses on alignment between state standards and curriculum materials. My research was able to draw attention to the importance of horizontal and vertical alignment with the schools. Teacher comments focused heavily on the value of K-5 alignment. The case study sites used common vocabulary, common behavior plans, common assessments, and consistent curriculum materials from the time students entered the building in kindergarten through their completion of fifth grade.

Although one might question whether this degree of alignment hinders teacher autonomy, the participating teachers expressed that these areas of alignment allowed for greater student success. Due to the common behavior plans, for example, less time was

Table 9

Top Findings of the Study and Comparison to Previous Research Findings

Theme (Van Hof, 2012)	Findings Supported From Previous Research	New Findings
Alignment	William & Kirst, 2006: alignment between state standards and curriculum materials more often found in high-achieving schools. Hoy et al., 1999; Licata & Harper, 1999; Wang, 1995: a focus on academics is a leading factor contributing to student success. Hoy et al., 2006: academic emphasis is marked by an orderly environment.	In addition to alignment with standards, teachers attribute success to alignment between classrooms and grade levels. Common vocabulary, curriculum materials, and behavior management plans are used K-5. The alignment within each grade includes common units, assessments, materials, & timing. The common discipline plans allow for an orderly environment.
Collaboration	Seed, 2008: collaboration is essential for improving teaching. Collaboration fosters a sense of ownership towards school improvement initiatives. Marzano, 2001: Cooperation cited as key variable essential to school success.	
Needs awareness/concern	Klem & Connell, 2004: students who perceive teachers as caring are more engaged in school Hoy et al., 2006: faculty who trust parents/students are more optimistic	Teachers attribute success to a genuine care/concern for the students. Systems are put in place to ensure that students' needs are being met (i.e., food, clothing, safety), often at personal financial expense to the teachers.
Communication	Padak & Rasinski, 2011: effective communication can lead to positive relationships and greater academic progress. Hoy, 2002: Faculty trust of students/parents can be built through effective communication Marzano, 2001: Parent involvement cited as key variable essential to school success.	

Table 9—Continued

Expectations & goals	Stronge, Ward, Tucker, & Hindman, 2007: effective teachers hold higher expectations for students than ineffective teachers. Boonen, Van Damme, & Onghena, 2009: high expectations of teachings related to reading gains. Edmonds, 1979: high expectations is one of five essential components of school reform. Hoy et al., 2006: High, yet attainable, goals are set for students as part of academic emphasis.	
Continuous learning	Vogrinc & Zuljan, 2009: quality performance of a teacher requires continued growth and learning. Darling-Hammond, 1998: Professional development causes teachers sense of efficacy to rise. Bell & Fidishun, 2009: cooperating teachers found that they use technology more after hosting student teachers.	There were large numbers of pre-service teachers at the case study sites: both those completing field work and those completing student-teaching requirements. Teachers reported the presence of these individuals as beneficial to improving teaching and in addressing student learning.
Data analysis	Henning, 2006: use of data to decipher effectiveness of any given program or by sub-group to address strengths/weaknesses of students. Information can be used in instructional decision.	
Support staff	Klem & Connell, 2004: Personalized learning environments offer the students the most effective schooling experience.	Teachers in the case study site schools cited the support staff as an invaluable resource in high quality instruction. The support staff includes certified personnel who work closely with students: behavior, math, and reading specialists. Research was not found regarding the effects of the presence of these specialized teachers.
Administration	Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005: Student achievement is correlated with effective school leadership.	Teachers reported positively on the managerial prowess of the building leaders. Current research is focused on administrators as instructional leaders. This study highlighted the importance of the managerial side of administration.

spent on classroom management allowing more time for academics. Similarly, when students were exposed to common vocabulary terms in lower elementary, they were able to build on these throughout their elementary career, develop deeper understandings, and more sophisticated ways of demonstrating learning.

In turning to needs awareness or concern, there are points that my research is able to highlight. Previous research does support that student engagement is increased when students perceive teachers as caring. The literature, however, very rarely focuses on the sentiments teachers express regarding students personal well-being and welfare. The connection between these sentiments and student academic achievement was not found in searching through previous research.

Moving to the continuous learning theme, previous research focuses heavily on professional learning communities and professional development opportunities that teachers engage in. The angle that my study is able to bring to light concerns the presence of pre-service and student teachers in the case study schools.

A good deal of previous research examined the relationship between novice teachers and mentors. The focus, however, is typically on how the novice teacher can best be served by a mentor. My study features how the student teachers might benefit teachers and students. The case study teachers commented that having so many student teachers in their midst, they were continuously evolving teaching practices and reflecting on best practices. In addition, it was generally thought that the pre-service teachers brought new and innovative ideas into the classrooms and schools. Where students are concerned, teachers thought that the pre-service teachers were a benefit because they were able to

provide individualized attention to students. They brought a new energy and enthusiasm into the classrooms that may play a role in student progress.

Turning to the theme of support staff, my examination of the literature underscored the importance of individualized learning environments for students. This focus centered primarily on differentiation within the classrooms. Not found, however, was discussion on the existence of certified support personnel on the faculty rosters. Both case study sites employed several specialists including those in the areas of math, literacy, and behavior.

Participating teachers frequently commented on how crucial it was that they could collaborate with support personnel to best address specific academic and behavioral needs of each student.

Finally, my research highlighted a different perspective on the role of administration in a successful school. Most of the current research and literature on building leaders focuses on instructional leadership. My study, however, underscored the importance of building principals to serve as effective managers as well.

Teachers reported that the building principals in the case study sites were efficient handlers on necessary paperwork, thorough building managers, and consistent resources in handling student behavior issues. They also provided school reform support, showed value for teachers, and served as liaisons between the school and the rest of the community. My study emphasizes the need for research and literature to focus on every role that a building administrator might serve in.

Implications for Future Research

The scope of this study was broad and exploratory in nature. Each of the given aspects of academic optimism could be studied on their own as well as each of the themes that emerged. As the study progressed, it became evident that there are dozens of additional avenues of potential research. In general, this study could be replicated in various settings and on a larger scale in order to compare data and themes.

In addition, I would like to see the study completed from the perspective of school administration. The matter of administration was essentially absent during the course of this study. As discussed earlier, discussion on the topic did not organically materialize from the teachers during interviews or focus groups. Rather, input was given only when prompted by the researcher. This input was generally positive and focused on several points: school administrators were effective at dealing with school management, principals were open to new ideas, and principals were respectful of teachers' autonomy and leadership. The same variety of statements, regarding building principals, was recorded in both schools.

Current educational research focuses heavily on school leaders, leadership styles, and the importance of the leader in school improvement efforts. A large-scale meta-analysis of research completed over the past four decades has revealed a positive correlation between student achievement and effective school leadership (Marzano, Waters, McNulty, 2005). Further work continues to outline leadership strategies that best affect student achievement (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, & Orr, 2007). I was notably surprised then, that the topic of administration did not present itself, in this study, in a more obvious manner.

Given the highly credible and validated research on the importance of school administrators, the question arises: why was it not a more pertinent topic in this study? There are two possibilities I explore here. The first postulate I present is simply that the school administrators at these sites have set the stage for success. Teachers, upon prompting, did indicate that the principals were supportive of new initiatives and ideas. This indicates that principals were informed, engaged, and working alongside teachers towards student achievement and school improvement goals. Further, several teachers commented that the school principal was efficient in handling managerial-type tasks as well as those relating to student behavior. It then stands to reason that teachers, supported in these managerial and behavioral areas, are afforded more time in dedication to implementing effective classroom instructional practices, concentrated professional growth, and teacher-led reform.

Spanneut (2010) states that principals must realize they cannot provide all the leadership that is necessary to a school. They must appreciate and solicit teacher input and "actively foster the development of their teachers as leaders" (Spanneut, 2010, p. 100). This submission embodies my second impression regarding building leaders: the teachers in these successful schools have risen to leadership status. School reform efforts are teacher led, student success is a shared goal, autonomy is respected, and improvement efforts have a high degree of faculty buy-in and ownership. It is clearly within the realm of possibility that the actions, albeit unseen, of the school principals led to or significantly contributed to these circumstances.

Ultimately, it has become my contention that the lack of discussion on the school principals, can in itself, be deemed positive. If, as the scholars indicate, one of the

fundamental components of effective leadership is to develop others, then it would seem these leaders have been thriving. The teachers do not present signs of dependence on administrative mandates as calls to action. Further, no indication was given suggesting resentment regarding the intense levels of time and effort demanded by the schools' continued initiatives.

These are but two possibilities, supported by the results in my study and my own experiences and observations. Moving forward, research could be completed focusing specifically on building administrators. What are principals doing that positively affect academic optimism? Do they share the same sense of optimism as teachers? Correlating student achievement, academic optimism, and effective leadership traits may add beneficial results to the current body of educational research.

In addition to the above suggestions, questions surfaced relevant to each of the eight themes. The following discussion offers some potential research areas as well as questions that arose during this study.

Data Analysis

Research could be dedicated to the topic of data analysis to help determine how this enterprise is helping our schools. Does the money spent justify student improvement? Are sub-groups improving and if so, what methods of data analysis are being used in any given school? Finally, a comparison of schools that rely heavily on data analysis could be done with those schools that haven't employed large-scale analysis endeavors. Similarly, a comparison could be completed between schools that collect data and those that are authentically integrating results into daily practices.

Continuous Learning

The most notable questions that arose in relation to continuous learning are in relation to the presence of student teachers in the classrooms. Is there a correlation between student achievement and the presence of student teachers in a school? What are the effects on the classroom teacher on collaborating with student teachers—are instructional practices changed? We often think of student teaching as simple career preparation before entering the profession. On the other hand, research may be able to highlight or discover what effects the student teacher has on the school, student success, or the collaborating teacher.

Alignment

This study defined alignment from several angles. Discussion included alignment between classrooms regarding both academic and social curricula. Teacher in the case study sites were teaching from the same program materials, using common and consistent vocabulary between grade levels, and utilized common behavior and classroom management systems. This broad topic of alignment begs for further research. Teacher autonomy, for example, comes to mind. What is the experience of incoming teachers to the culture of a school with so many structures in place? Is the level of teacher autonomy and creative freedom affected?

It may also prove enlightening to study possible correlations between specific types of alignment and student achievement? For example, is there a correlation between common vocabulary use and student achievement in English language arts?

Support Staff

In both case study sites, a significant emphasis was placed on the role of professionally trained support personnel in the school. Future research could be dedicated to determining the correlation between these specialists and student achievement or school success. During turbulent economic times, why is it that these positions are often the first to be cut? Are schools causing downturns in student achievement by undervaluing these positions and people?

Needs Awareness and Concern

This area is one of more intangible themes that emerged during this study. Professionals certainly can anticipate caring about students when they enter into teaching. But, what about when it comes to providing financial offerings to take care of students' personal needs? How do teachers experience this as part of their professional duty? Could there be a correlation between what is expected of teachers, personally, and the retention rates of the teaching force?

Further research could explore the issue of how families' needs get determined. To what extent to parents play a role in this process and how common is it for schools to have an official manner of ascertaining needs? The case sites in this study clearly focused on the more personal needs of the students and the community at large. Further research, however, could be done to more acutely pinpoint any possible correlation between the fulfillment of these needs and student success.

Communication

In most successful systems and organizations, schools included, it is perceived that clear lines of communication aid in fostering an orderly environment, increased

stakeholder participation, and understandable sets of expectations. The schools in this study, as earlier detailed, utilized a number of strategies to communicate with one another, parents, students, and the surrounding educational community.

Further research may help to isolate which specific communication strategies are most effective. Is strong communication between teachers more or less correlated with student success than communication between teachers and parents? What types of communication mediums do parents have the greatest access to or deem the most useful? Answers to these types of inquiries may help schools to identify where communication efforts are most constructive and where others could be improved.

Expectations

As previously mentioned, past research has shown a link between high expectations and student progress. The emergence of the theme in this study is further support. Moving forward, however, there is still room for research on this topic. How, for example, does school faculty come to consensus on appropriate school goals? Do schools/districts with faculty buy-in outperform those working only under central office mandates? Further, when goals and expectations are being set, to what degree are students and parents involved? Schools may find that goals set in the academic setting differ vastly than those set at home. Research may serve to uncover what occurs when school personnel and families are working towards the same explicit goals for students.

Collaboration

Evidence from the case study sites as well as literature on the topic, indicates that collaborate efforts in schools can promote in student learning. Collaboration occurs between student and teacher, between teachers, and between school faculty/staff and the

home. Many schools have formal means of collaborating such as common planning periods and after-hours sessions dedicated to working together. Other schools find that teachers and parents are collaborating in more informal, less explicit ways.

A research focus on collaboration could center on the effectiveness of such efforts as common planning time. Do schools experience a swell in student achievement when teachers meet during planning periods? How are these collaborative being used and what tasks or activities are most beneficial?

Discussion and Other Implications by Theme

Alignment

When alignment is discussed in regards to schools, we are often referring to the alignment between state standards and classroom practice, between state standards and curriculum, or between standardized assessments and state standards. William and Kirst (2006) found that teachers who reported that classroom instruction guided by state standards and curriculum materials aligned with state standards were more often in high-achieving schools. An inductive theme was found, however, as the alignment in this study goes to a deeper level: that is the alignment between classrooms. In both Cornerstone and Rose teachers reported a variety of areas that involved alignment. For example, the same curricular programs were being used and teachers and students utilized common content-specific vocabulary from grade to grade. Complimentary to that, students in the same grade but different classrooms were engaged in the same units of study at the same time.

Opponents of classroom to classroom alignment might site the loss of teacher autonomy in teaching how and what they want. Teachers, in the site schools however, reported that this type of curricular alignment was important to student success. Students

spent less time each year grappling with new vocabulary or material-related procedures. This allows for increased instructional time for higher-level thinking and in-depth study. In addition, the cross-grade-level mapping lessened the amount of overlap in topical themes and allowed for a wider range of topics to be studied. The teachers reflected on the idea of teacher autonomy by discussing the amount to which teachers were actively involved in selecting curriculum, unit materials, and fleshing out yearly plans.

In addition to curricular alignment between and within grades and common vocabulary use, Cornerstone and Rose also employed a common behavior management plan between classrooms. As described in Chapter IV, students were given cards and were asked to "change cards" when an unwanted behavior was displayed. The cards served as warnings and represented possible consequences if the behaviors continued (i.e., a call home, loss of recess time, a visit to the principal). One may argue the philosophies behind a behavior modification approach such as this. Teachers in the schools, however, felt that the systematic use of the same procedures each year was useful. Re-teaching a new system each year was eliminated, students responded to behavior prompts quicker, and expectations were clear.

Given that much research has been devoted to all sorts of school-related alignment and state standardized tests are aligned with state standards. Like it or not, schools are evaluated using the tests. It seems reasonable then that consideration is given to aligning both curricular materials and instructional practices (i.e., mapping, common-vocabulary, etc.) in hopes of boosting student success.

Collaboration

Collaboration was a deductive theme as it is a topic heavily supported in the research. The evidence in this study serves to support past research rather than supposing new findings. Teachers in the case study schools reported that working closely with one another was essential to successful teaching. Observations of teachers meeting to discuss students as well as curriculum support these claims. During focus groups, teachers emphasized the value placed on being able to rely on colleagues for professional support. These types of activities repeatedly appear in current educational research.

Seed (2008) research and my research suggest that collaboration is essential and stresses that educators must go beyond the prescriptive nature of NCLB and focus on what directives will more accurately reflect themselves in a high-quality teaching force. In regards to collaboration, he suggests that collaboration is essential for improving teaching and that through collaboration teachers establish learning communities that helps to minimize the isolating nature of the profession. Further, collaboration can foster a sense of ownership in relation to school improvement initiatives. Seed advises regular meetings to discuss planning and implementation as well as to review pedagological practices and curriculum materials (Seed, 2008).

Spanneut (2010) uses the forum of professional learning communities as a viable form of collaboration. He suggests that during collegial conversations, teachers can reflect upon and develop a deeper understanding of current educational practices. As this focus continues, teachers can work together to assess instructional improvement strategies that are best suited for students' individual needs (Spanneut, 2010).

Needs Awareness/Concern

Teachers in both schools denoted the importance of staff concern for the students. In addition, faculty was well aware of the needs of the student population. Efforts were made and systems put in place to address student well-being. In Cornerstone, for example, a monetary fund was established to be used for items such as student coats, eyeglasses, and school supplies. In Rose, the schedule of the school day was altered to allow time for every student to eat breakfast at school.

The needs-awareness theme is deductive in that previous research suggested the importance of this topic. The research, for example, of Klem and Connell (2004) support the idea that this kind of teacher support is important to student engagement in school. "Students who perceive teachers as creating a caring, well-structured learning environment…are more likely to report engagement in school" (p. 268). Further, Cohen (2006) stresses the importance of creating safe and caring school climates, informed by social-emotional and ethical concerns as a way of preparing students for healthy participation in a democratic society. The theme of needs awareness and concern is also inductive as I found something I had not previously encountered in the research. As noted above, teachers were willing to make personal sacrifices of time and money to ensure the needs of the students were being met.

Many schools may not be adequately assessing the needs of the student population or school community. Comprehensive plans can assess these needs, present calls for action to address them, and evaluate the effectiveness of those actions. There may be indication that when personal and community needs are satisfied, students are better able to focus on the academic expectations of schooling.

Communication

"Effective communication can lead to positive relationships and easier resolution to problems that may arise. In turn, students make greater academic progress" (Padak & Rasinski, 2011, p. 295). Communication is a deductive theme in this study as I had expected its presence due to previous research. Like collaboration, teachers in Cornerstone and Rose relied heavily on teacher-to-teacher and school-to-home communication practices. Faculty members suggested, during interviews and focus groups that clear communication aided in clearer expectations, increased parental involvement, high-levels of collegial support, and ultimately greater student success.

Teachers communicated, in person and via email, with one another daily regarding students, lessons, and curriculum materials. Support teachers especially, such as those in special education resource rooms found that communication was essential between themselves and the general education classroom teacher. These exchanges allowed for a unified plan of action to specifically target individual students' needs.

In addition, communication between the home and school was cited often as a key to success. The case study sites used progress reports, frequent phone calls, email, newsletters, websites, blogs, and student trackers or planners to ensure that parents were well-aware of both academic and non-academic progress at school. Teachers remarked that these forms of communication often led to more involved parents and additional academic support in the home as well as a generally more organized student.

My study suggests that school personnel can devote time to evaluate current communication practices. As with collaboration, leaders can ensure that faculty have adequate time to communicate with one another and engage in meaningful dialogue

geared toward student growth. In conjunction with the community needs assessment, schools should ascertain whether current home-to-school communication practices are effective. Are non-English speakers being served? Are communications clear and comprehensible to all parents? Clear and open communication lines among all stakeholders may increase the chances that efforts are centered on increased student performance and well-being.

Expectations/Goals

In both schools, high expectations and clear goals were set. As evidenced by statements in both interviews and focus groups, and by physical examples in the buildings, teachers expected students to succeed. Goals for each lesson were clearly displayed in each room and several incentive programs were utilized, denoting goal achievement.

After reviewing the research, it could clearly be deduced that setting high-expectations and clear goals may be present in successful schools. A 2007 study of nearly 2,000 elementary students revealed some key differences in the relationship between student achievement and teacher quality. Findings indicated that effective teachers generally held higher expectations for students than ineffective teachers (Stronge et al., 2007). The following year, Palardy and Rumberger, in studying first graders, found that one teacher attitude variable—high expectations—was associated with reading gains (as cited in Boonen et al., 2009).

Unfortunately, in many urban and/or low-income schools, a large degree of emphasis is placed on behavior. Teachers and staff are first faced with the challenge of keeping students safe and orderly before academics are prioritized. Although the case

study sites had set high behavioral goals, academic ones were equally important. Schools, especially those with behavior challenges, can reevaluate priorities. Perhaps the emphasis on academic expectations, rather than only behavioral goals, will lead more directly to increased academic performance. Similarly, my study suggests that schools might consider assessing the climate of the workplace—are teachers expecting enough from students and offering the appropriate supports for success?

Continuous Learning

"Quality performance of the increasingly important professional role of the teacher requires a continued learning and professional growth of every individual" (Vogrinc & Zuljan, 2009, p. 53). As discussed in Chapter IV, Cornerstone and Rose study participants often mentioned the importance of the continued learning that takes place within their school environments. References were made to both internal and external professional development opportunities provided by the district as well as commitments teachers have personally made in returning to school for advanced degrees and training. Teachers repeatedly mentioned their reliance of continuous learning to stay fresh and innovative in the classroom. Darling-Hammond (1998) suggests that high quality professional development makes teachers feel better about themselves as educators (efficacy) and helps to meet the demands of high-standard learning for students.

My study suggests that it is not simply any professional development opportunity, however, that will have the desired effects on student and teacher growth. It is crucial that teachers engage in learning that is experiential, inquiry-based, collaborative, sustained and intensive, and connected to other aspects of school improvement and curriculum (Darling-Hammond, 1998). Hearing faculty in Cornerstone and Rose discuss these types

of opportunities and the role they play in the instructional lives of students and teachers convinces me that each and every school ought to give this area top priority. Too often professional development is disengaging, unconnected to school improvement initiatives, and fleeting. District leaders need to create comprehensive plans that include the types of learning listed above as well as how each piece of acquired knowledge can best be utilized to maximize student achievement. In addition, assessment pieces should be established to determine to what extent the continuous learning is showing positive gains.

This research induced another side of this theme, perhaps a less obvious form of continued learning in the sizeable presence of pre-service teachers in each school. These included both student teachers completing an internship as well as those earlier in their school experience. Faculty members felt comfortable having these novice educators working alongside them. Teachers commented that having pre-service teachers around helped them to continue questioning their own teaching pedagogies and encouraged them to "keep up with the trends" in education. This notion is supported, in a more specific field, by the research of Bell and Fidishun (2009) which found that cooperating teachers reported having been influenced by student teachers when it came to the use of and competence in technology.

My study suggests that continuous learning can be fostered when building administrators can seek out cooperative agreements with area teacher education programs. In addition to the positives presented above, it could serve as a step toward opening up the field of teaching. Professionals should not be faced with a solitary existence behind a classroom door. Working with novice and pre-service teachers can

serve as a bridge to preparation programs, motivate teachers to reflect on their own

practice, and encourage continuous instructional growth and change.

Data Analysis

The use of student achievement data continues to reside at the forefront of

educational reform and school improvement initiatives. Teachers and administrators are

called upon to use appropriate data to inform instructional practices and to improve daily

school operations. Cornerstone and Rose in this study engaged in multiple forms of data

analysis. Henning (2006) described two common approaches: analysis of data to

determine the effectiveness of some implemented program or initiative and

disaggregation of data by sub-group to determine where strengths and weaknesses lie.

Further, there are arguably, both effective and ineffective uses of any set of

collected data (Popham, 2001). When using data effectively, Popham suggests that

"teachers profit from identifying their own students' comparative strengths and

weaknesses" (p. 24). In addition, these results can be shared with parents as points of

information, used to determine which students may need remedial attention, and in the

distribution of districts' financial resources.

In addition to the types of information data can yield, Anderson, MacDonald, and

Sinnemann (2004) argue that schools must manage data in a fashion that is

understandable, timely, and accurate. Based on this study, I agree with these thoughts and

could see their implementation during the course of my study in the case sites. Schools

may consider a thorough investigation on data analysis, its uses, and how to best manage

the results. Many districts have gone so far as to create data warehouses and personnel

positions solely dedicated to the collection and management of data. Clearly, this issue

goes beyond collecting or looking at a few test scores. An entire framework for collection, analysis, and use needs to be created by schools and districts in order to get the most effective use of data sets.

Support Staff

Support personnel, for the purposes of this study, referred to those certified teachers that offer instruction or assistance to students and other teachers outside of a general education classroom. In Cornerstone these faculty members include special education resource room teachers and reading specialists. At Rose, in addition to special education teachers and reading specialists, there are also math and behavior specialists. Classroom teachers reported a close-working relationship with these support personnel and indicated that student success was positively impacted by their work with students.

Klem and Connell (2004) ponder whether schools have awarded enough urgency to the idea of a personalized learning environment. Particularly in schools where finances are especially tight, district decision-makers may look elsewhere when deciding on yearly budget expenditures. Research suggests, however, that students who feel personally involved with teachers tend to show a more positive attitude toward school and learning and are more academically engaged. "In turn, high levels of engagement are associated with higher attendance and test scores…" (Klem & Connell, 2004).

Specialists in Cornerstone and Rose provide this type of support for students and for teachers and parents as well. There are times that specialists will co-teach or co-plan with classroom teachers and often, it is a specialist that can provide specific academic data to parents about their child.

During hard economic times, it may prove difficult for district administrators and school boards to continue the high expenditures of hiring and retaining trained, support professionals. Given the key roles they play, however, in the lives of students and teachers, it is imperative that they remain as central faculty in school communities.

Discussion Synthesis

Citing the work of Marzano (2001), many of these themes are consistent with the key variables Marzano emphasized as most essential to school success. His variables: time, pressure to achieve, parent involvement, school climate, and cooperation are directly reflective of the themes: collaboration, communication, needs awareness, and setting of expectations. It is evident that both case study sites are engaging in practices that are supported by years of validated research regarding best practices in education.

Although all of the themes presented in these case studies appeared to contribute to the schools' successes, I also sensed that each of these fell under a greater umbrella. The general sense of the schools was one aimed at the greater good, regardless of other factors. The ultimate goal was student success and each action taken was always aimed towards this objective.

One of the first areas this is evident is in the classroom and concerns the theme of alignment. Teachers focused heavily on this element as a contributor to student achievement. This alignment dictated that teachers use common language in their teaching, common behavior rubrics, common curriculum materials and assessments, and common unit planning. Immediately I was surprised by how this might discount teacher autonomy. The teachers in these schools showed a willingness to forego some individual decision-making in order to conform to the plans set-forth by the team of teachers and

administrators. While it might seem teachers would resent this, the case study participants expressed a greater sense of ownership over these decisions made as a team.

Another area that highlights this idea of the greater good focuses on students' personal well-being. Not only did the teachers' sentiments express a care and concern of students' personal needs, but these were backed by action. For example, the school had recently rearranged the entire school day schedule, including bussing, to ensure that every student ate breakfast at school. Clearly this presented logistical challenges and most definitely scheduling adjustments. Both the school faculty and the district, however, felt that the greater good was to ensure students were well-fed and ready to start the day.

Similarly, teachers reported making accommodations regarding homework and school projects. When parents expressed a difficulty in completing assignments or projects at home with their children, the school faculties put a framework in place. More homework time was allotted at school, projects were completed in class, and take-home materials were made available to students. Once again, although these accommodations may make planning more difficult for teachers, they remained steadfast in the pursuit of student success.

The focus on student success was also evident at the district level. The employment of several teaching specialists speaks to the strong emphasis on individualized student progress. Many districts facing budgeting issues have eliminated these "non-essential" positions. The staffs of both Cornerstone and Rose expressed a deep commitment to collaborating with these specialists and furthermore, a need at having these resources available. Although these funds could obviously be spent elsewhere, the districts clearly thought this was what was best for student success.

Finally, a sentiment expressed by one of the principals helps to illustrate the common good argument made here. When I first visited Rose to recruit study volunteers, the principal strongly encouraged teachers to participate. The principal eloquently reminded teachers that we, from the elementary school to higher education to government offices, are all a part of a greater educational community. It is our duty and obligation to contribute to that community in the pursuit of bettering education and student experiences. This encouragement was followed by a sizeable volunteer showing among the staff. Teachers readily welcomed me into classrooms, volunteered for more than one part of the study, and expressed excitement and engagement even when staying late after school for focus groups. The principal suggested that the work done through this study had the potential to help a teacher or a student in the future, either at Rose or elsewhere. This outlook, once again, points to the foundation of each school: student success above all else and in the face of obstacles or inconveniences.

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

Chapter I offered a detailed description of the framework of academic optimism and its place in the current context of educational accountability and school reform. Moving forward, Chapter II offered a literature review delineating the path of previous research and thus supporting the need for further research in the field. The methodology employed in this study was detailed in Chapter III, while Chapter IV presented the findings of the case study. The final chapter offered further theme-based information, recommendations, and areas where further research may be warranted.

This study contributes to the body of educational research in several ways. First, it clearly outlines the need for research in times of increased school accountability and

reform. The findings from this study offer a broad but dynamic look into many of the daily operations of two schools that are both low-income and high-achieving, an atypical occurrence. The eight key themes that emerged accompanied by physical evidence feature the norms, practices, and strategies these schools have implemented towards reaching school improvement goals. Optimistically, these practices carry positive implications for other school communities as each continues with the challenge and opportunity of discovering and following avenues to increased school success and student achievement.

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Appendix A

School Academic Optimism Survey

SAOS (School Academic Optimism Survey)

Directions: Please indicate your agreement with each of the statements, about your school, from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6). Your answers are confidential.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Teachers in this school are able to get through to the most difficult students.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Teachers here are confident that they will be able to motivate their students.	1	2	3	4	5	6
If a child doesn't want to learn, teachers here give up.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Teachers here don't have the skills needed to produce meaningful results.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Teachers in this school believe that every child can learn.	1	2	3	4	5	6
These students come to school ready to learn.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Home life provides so many advantages that students are bound to learn.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Students here just aren't motivated to learn.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Teachers in this school do not have the skills to deal with student disciplinary problems.	1	2	3	4	5	6
The opportunities in this community help ensure that these students will learn.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Learning is more difficult at this school because students are worried about their safety.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Drug and alcohol abuse in the community make learning difficult for students here.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Teachers in this school trust their students.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Teachers in this school trust the parents.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Students in this school care about each other.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Parents in this school are reliable in their commitments.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Students in this school can be counted upon to do their work.	1	2	3	4	5	6

Teachers can count upon parental support.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Teachers here believe that students are competent learners.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Teachers think that most of the parents do a good job.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Teachers can believe what parents tell them.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Students here are secretive.	1	2	3	4	5	6

Directions: Please indicate the degree to which the following statements characterize your school from Rarely Occurs (1) to Very Often Occurs (4). Your answers are confidential.

	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
The school sets high standards for performance.	1	2	3	4
Students respect others who get good grades.	1	2	3	4
Students seek extra work so they can get good grades.	1	2	3	4
Academic achievement is recognized and acknowledged by the school.	1	2	3	4
Students try hard to improve on previous work.	1	2	3	4
The learning environment is orderly.	1	2	3	4
The students in this school can achieve the goals that have been set for them.	1	2	3	4
Teachers in this school believe that their students have the ability to achieve academically.	1	2	3	4

(Hoy, 2005)

Please indicate the name of your school:_____

Appendix B

School Academic Optimism Survey Scoring Guide

I. Collective Efficacy (CE) of the School (items 1-12)

1. First, reverse scores on the following items: 3, 4, 8, 9, 11, 12, that is, score 1=6, 2=5, 3=4, 4=3 5=2, 6=1.
2. Next, compute the average score for each individual on the first 12 items; that is, for each person, sum all the scores on the first 12 items and divide by the number of items for which you have responses.
3. Finally, sum the average individual scores for all teachers and divide by the number of teachers in the school who responded; this is the average collective efficacy (CE) score for the school and will be between 1 and 6.

II. Faculty Trust (FT) in Parents and Teachers (items 13-22)

1. First, reverse scores on item 22, that is, 1=6, 2=5, 3=4, 4=3 5=2, 6=1.
2. Next, compute the average score for each individual on the items 13 through 22; that is, for each person, sum all the scores on those 10 items and divide by the number of items for which you have responses.
3. Finally, sum the average individual scores for all teachers and divide by the number of teachers in the school who responded; this is the average Faculty Trust in Parents and Teachers score (FT) score for the school and will be between 1 and 6.

III. Academic Emphasis (AE) of the School (items 23-30)

1. Score all the items with a score from 1 to 4.
2. Next, compute the average score for each individual on the items 23 through 30; that is, for each person, sum all the scores on those 8 items and divide by the number of items for which you have responses.
3. Finally, sum the average individual scores for all teachers and divide by the number of teachers in the school who responded; this is the average Faculty Trust in Parents and Teachers score (AE) score for the school and will be between 1 and 4.

Compute Academic Optimism Score - Secondary Schools

1. 1. Create standardized (Std) scores for each component as follows:
    o Std for Collective Efficacy (Std CE) = (3.96-CE)/.33
    o Std for Faculty Trust (Std FT) = (3.65-FT)/.39
    o Std for Academic Emphasis (Std AE) = (2.75-AE)/.26
2. 2. Then compute an Academic Optimism Score as follows:

Academic Optimism = [.99X(Std CE)] +[.92X(Std FT)] +[.75X(Std AE)]

Appendix C

Protocols

Focus Group Protocol (Three 45-minute sessions):
Academic Optimism in the Elementary School

Date:	Session (/3):
Facilitator:	No. of participants:
Site:	Topic:

The meeting site will be set-up by facilitator at least ten minutes prior to the arrival time set for participants (via invitation). Facilitator will greet each subject as they enter and direct participants to refreshments and seating.

Stage Scripts

Stage 1: Greeting, introductions, norms (3 minutes)
- Welcome everyone and express appreciation for attendance
- Introduce facilitator and background on project
- Allow participants to introduce themselves (name, position)
- Detail norms of group work [i.e. respect others who are speaking by listening, use informal mode of speech, call out thoughts spontaneously (no need for hands)]

Stage 2: Confidentiality and recordings (2 minutes)
- Review definition of confidentiality and explain how participants will be referred to in work (i.e. participant 1, participant 2, etc.)
- Indicate that the focus group will be recorded (either audio or video recording) and why – purpose for study

Stage 3: Individual thinking (5 minutes)
- Ask participants to write down (paper and pens provided on tables) things they think of when considering academic emphasis (or collective efficacy or teacher trust) when it comes to their particular school
- Facilitator can offer areas to think about: environment, in the classroom, in the common areas, at home, instruction, leadership, etc.
- Request that participants be as specific or broad as they deem fit (no answer is too big or too small)

Stage 4: Small table meshing (7 minutes)
- Ask participants (working in two small groups) to combine their individual ideas with table mates
- Instruct subjects to combine ideas that are similar, eliminate repeats, add details as arise, and create a single list of ideas that represents their group

Stage 5: Whole group (8 minutes)
- Taking turns between groups, ask groups to read out their list of ideas
- Facilitator will record ideas on large chart paper
- Repeated ideas (those exact) will be eliminated, some ideas may be added to or edited with ideas from other group

Stage 6: Prioritizing (4 minutes)
- Ask participants to take two minutes to think through this: "In thinking about all of your ideas regarding _____(academic emphasis, collective efficacy, or teacher trust) and your school, which three ideas stand out the most. That is, which three elements do you think most effect the everyday operation of _____ (academic emphasis, collective efficacy, or teacher trust of students and parents)?"
- Ask participants to indicate which they have prioritized as most critical

Stage 7: Discussion (13 minutes)
- Elicit responses as to why these particular ideas seem to have been prioritized over others
- Elicit responses as to more particularly detail how these highly prioritized ideas play out in the daily operations of the school (i.e. what does this 'look like' here?)

Stage 8: Feed-back, thank you, and farewell (3 minutes)
- Ask participants if they have anything to share regarding their experience at the focus group that day
- Thank participants for coming, repeat assurance of confidentiality
- Bid farewell
- Facilitator will collect all materials and return room to original condition

Interview Protocol (at least 3)

Invitations will be given to subjects who volunteered, via interest form.

- Introduce self to interviewee (if necessary) and describe the reason for the interview
- Explain confidentiality and recording devices (tape recorder, notebook)
- Begin with questions and prompt as needed
- Possible prompts: Can you give me details of that? How does that work? How do you feel about that? How might that change? Who is involved in that? How did that come to be? What does that look like? How do people respond to that?
- Reminders for facilitator: take notes unobtrusively, allow participant to respond to prompt and to elaborate, reserve any and all judgments, be mindful of body language, phrase questions/prompts in an un-evaluative manner

Interview questions:
1. Can you describe your role here in this school?
2. What are the primary responsibilities of teachers/administrators/parents/students in this school?
3. How do you feel about others in this building (professionally)?
4. How do others feel here?
5. How do you feel about your abilities in this position?
6. What are some tools, if any, used in this school that might be pertinent to the environment/climate?
7. What would people in the community (not parents, teachers, or students) say about your school?

Observation Protocol

Observations will take place at school for at least twenty hours. Effort will be made to ensure that observations take place during different days of week and different times of day. Spaces that will be observed include classrooms, school offices, common areas, lunch rooms, lounges, and faculty meetings. The researcher will:

- Take detailed notes about what is happening, what can be seen, what is being said (table below will be used for each observation setting)
- Be as unobtrusive as possible
- Will reserve all outward signs of judgment
- Will be mindful of presence and body language
- Will inform those concerned of presence (i.e. introduce self to secretary and explain presence in office)
- Will obtain permission from teachers for classroom observations

Date:	Time (of day):
Duration:	Others present:
Site (school):	Location:

Document Review Protocol

Date:	Title of document:
Site (school):	Obtained from:

Documents will be obtained in the following manner:
- Requested from teachers
- Requested from administrators
- Found on school web sites

Types of possible documents:
- Classroom newsletters
- Faculty/staff newsletters
- School improvement plans
- School mission statement

Questions to consider regarding documents:
- Why was this document created?
- Who is the intended audience?
- Who created the document?
- Do parts of the document relate to the three elements of academic optimism? If so, which ones?

Appendix D

Superintendent and Principal Invitation Letters

Dear Superintendent:

My name is Jill Van Hof and I am a doctoral candidate at Western Michigan University. As part of my dissertation research, I have proposed to study elementary schools that are classified as both low-income and high-achieving. X (number) of the schools in your district has met this criteria: X. This type of achievement is something to be celebrated and shared with the wider educational community.

I am asking your permission to contact the principal at this school with the possibility of including the school in either one or two phases of my research study. The first phase consists of a short survey that would be given to faculty. The second phase is an on-site case study. Of course, it would be at the principal's discretion as to whether they would like to participate.

If you would kindly grant me the approval to contact this principal, please read below and sign and date where indicated. You may also contact me with any questions at 517-664-xxxx.

Thank you for your time and consideration in this matter.

Educationally yours,

Jill B. Van Hof

By typing my full name below, I give permission to Jill Van Hof, doctoral candidate, at Western Michigan University, to contact the building administrators at schools in the district at which I am a central office administrator. I understand that Mrs. Van Hof will outline the entire research process in detail to the principals and possibly teachers. I also understand that principals' and teachers' participation in any part of Mrs. Van Hof's research is completely voluntary.

Name   Date

Dear Principal,

My name is Jill Van Hof and I am a doctoral candidate at Western Michigan University. As part of my dissertation research, I have proposed to study elementary schools that are classified as both low-income and high-achieving. Your school has met these criteria. This type of achievement is something to be celebrated and shared with the wider educational community.

I am asking your permission to include the school in phase one of my research study. The first phase consists of a short survey that would be given to faculty. Details of the second phase would be provided upon necessity.

If you agree to participate please forward the consent form below and the survey link to your certified faculty. You may also contact me with any questions at 517-664-xxxx.

Thank you for your time and consideration in this matter.

Educationally yours,

Jill B. Van Hof

Appendix E

Participant Interest Form

Participant Interest Form

Name:	E-mail:	Phone:
Please check each box to show interest in participating in that portion of the research project.		
Research portion:	**Check if interested:**	
Focus Group 1 (Date TBD)		
Focus Group 2 (Date TBD)		
Focus Group 3 (Date TBD)		
Interview		
Classroom Observation		

Appendix F

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board Approval

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

Date: August 20, 2010

To: Sue Poppink, Principal Investigator
         Jill Van Hof, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number: 10-07-22

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled "The Establishment and Maintenance of Academic Optimism in Elementary School: Qualitative Case Studies" has been **approved** under the **expedited** category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you may **only** conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: August 20, 2011