

EFFECTS OF THE SHARED PRINCIPLES OF MIDDLE SCHOOL PHILOSOPHY
AND CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE EDUCATION ON THE ACADEMIC
ACHIEVEMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS

by

Tarra Denise Ellis

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of
The University of North Carolina at Charlotte
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
Curriculum and Instruction

Charlotte

2012

Approved by:

Dr. Jeanneine P. Jones

Dr. Chuang Wang

Dr. Susan Harden

Dr. Paula Goolkasian

©2012
Tarra Denise Ellis
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

ABSTRACT

TARRA DENISE ELLIS. Effects of the shared principles of middle school philosophy and culturally responsive education on the academic achievement of African American middle school students. (Under the direction of DR. JEANNEINE JONES)

This mixed-methods study investigated the overlapping principles of relevance, rigor, and relationships inherent in both middle school philosophy and culturally responsive education to determine their effects on the academic achievement of African American middle school students. The following research questions were probed: 1) Is there a significant difference in the academic achievement of African American students in middle schools that highly implement the shared principles of middle school philosophy and culturally responsive education and those in middle schools that do not? 2) Describe the implementation of the shared principles of middle school philosophy and culturally responsive education in an exemplary middle school. Quantitative data included EOG test results in *Schools to Watch (STW)* and non-*STW* schools. Qualitative data was gathered through a case study of an urban *STW* middle school. There was no significant difference in the academic achievement of African American eighth graders in the two cohorts. The exemplary middle school employed the shared principles via 1) A shared vision of high expectations for all, 2) Support for the diverse needs of students, 3) Empowerment for decision-making and risk-taking, 4) Assessment and modification, 5) Real-world application, and 6) Firm, proactive, and positive discipline.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am extremely thankful for the students and staff of Impact Middle School who welcomed me with open arms. I sincerely appreciate the Principal, Academic Facilitator, secretaries, and teachers who went out of their way to help me observe you doing what you do best. I am so grateful for the parents who saw value in this study and allowed me to interview their children. To the truly brilliant students of Impact, especially those who agreed to let me interview you, I am forever indebted to you and so very proud of you. Thank you, Ashley Parker, for your time and much-needed insight. Honorable mention should be made for Dr. Debra Smith who provided pointers on my early drafts. Last, but certainly not least, I declare that I had the absolute best dissertation committee ever: Dr. Chuang Wang, Dr. Susan Harden, and Dr. Paula Goolkasian. I do not take your patience, time, or thoughtful feedback lightly. Dr. Wang, the integrity of the work that follows is in large part a reflection of your careful guidance. Dr. Harden, your wisdom and expertise were invaluable. Finally, there are no words that could adequately express my gratitude to my dissertation chair and my long-time mentor, Dr. Jeanneine Jones. The way you challenge and inspire is simply amazing.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	x
LIST OF FIGURES	xi
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	xii
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Achievement of African American Students	1
1.2 Middle Schools	2
1.3 Culturally Responsive Education	4
1.4 Statement of the Problem	5
1.4.1 Schools in the Age of Accountability	6
1.5 Purposes of the Study	8
1.6 Research Questions	8
1.7 Relevant Definitions	10
1.8 Significance of the Study	11
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	13
2.1 Theoretical Framework	13
2.2 Achievement of African American Students	17
2.2.1 Relevance	18
2.2.2 Rigor	20
2.2.3 Relationships	22
2.3 Middle School Philosophy	24
2.3.1 Relevance	25

2.3.2 Rigor	26
2.3.3 Relationships	29
2.4 Culturally Responsive Education	31
2.4.1 Relevance	32
2.4.2 Rigor	33
2.4.3 Relationships	34
2.5 Shared Principles of Middle School Philosophy and Culturally Responsive Education	35
2.5.1 Relevance	35
2.5.2 Rigor	36
2.5.3 Relationships	37
2.6 Summary	37
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY	39
3.1 Research Design	39
3.1.1 Statistical Procedure	39
3.1.2 Case Study	40
3.2 Sample Selection	40
3.2.1 Quantitative	41
3.2.2 Qualitative	42
3.3 Data Resources	42
3.3.1 Quantitative	42
3.3.2 Qualitative	43
3.4 Instrumentation	44

3.4.1 Schools to Watch Criteria Rating Sheet	45
3.4.2 Case Study Observation Instruments	46
3.4.3 Interview Protocol	49
3.5 Data Analysis	50
3.5.1 Quantitative	50
3.5.2 Qualitative	51
3.5.3 Establishing trustworthiness	52
3.5 Reporting	53
3.6 Summary	53
CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS	55
4.1 Quantitative	55
4.2 Qualitative	64
4.2.1 General Observations and Contextual Background	69
4.2.2 Faculty Meeting Observations	70
4.2.3 Classroom Observations	70
4.2.4 Team Meetings Observations	71
4.2.5 Interviews	72
4.2.5.1 Interviewees	72
4.2.6 Themes	76
4.2.6.1 A Shared Vision of High Expectations for All	77
4.2.6.2 Support for the Diverse Needs of Students	81
4.2.6.3 Empowerment for Decision-Making and Risk-Taking	88

4.2.6.4 Assessment and Modification	97
4.2.6.5 Real-World Application	102
4.2.6.6 Firm, Proactive, and Positive Discipline	107
4.2.7 Schools to Watch Team Evaluation	113
4.3 Summary	114
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION	115
5.1 Discussion	115
5.1.1 Quantitative	115
5.1.2 Qualitative	117
5.1.2.1 A Shared Vision of High Expectations for All	118
5.1.2.2 Support for the Diverse Needs of Students	119
5.1.2.3 Empowerment for Decision-Making and Risk-Taking	120
5.1.2.4 Assessment and Modification	121
5.1.2.5 Real-World Application	121
5.1.2.6 Firm, Proactive, and Positive Discipline	122
5.1.3 Theoretical Framework	123
5.1.4 Quantitative Versus Qualitative Findings	125
5.2 Limitations of the Study	126
5.3 Implications for Further Research	126
5.4 Conclusions	127
REFERENCES	130
APPENDIX A: <i>THIS WE BELIEVE</i> EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	143

APPENDIX B: <i>SCHOOLS TO WATCH CRITERIA RATING SHEET</i>	147
APPENDIX C: <i>N.C. SCHOOLS TO WATCH SELF-STUDY AND RATING RUBRIC</i>	154
APPENDIX D: CLASSROOM OBSERVATION INSTRUMENT	168
APPENDIX E: TEAM MEETING OBSERVATION INSTRUMENT	177
APPENDIX F: FACULTY MEETING OBSERVATION INSTRUMENT	183
APPENDIX G: GENERAL OBSERVATION INSTRUMENT	188
APPENDIX H: STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL	196

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1: Correlations between variables	57
TABLE 2: Descriptive statistics	58
TABLE 3: Parameter estimates of difference between school and state in HLM	63
TABLE 4: Summary of observation ratings and evidence: academic excellence	65
TABLE 5: Summary of observation ratings and evidence: developmental responsiveness	66
TABLE 6: Summary of observation ratings and evidence: social equity	67
TABLE 7: Summary of observation ratings and evidence: organizational structures and processes	68

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1: Estimated marginal means of measure: STW	60
FIGURE 2: Estimated marginal means of measure: Time	61
FIGURE 3: Impact's implementation of the shared principles of middle school philosophy and culturally responsive education	77

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ANOVA	Analysis of Variance
AOI	Areas of Interaction
AYP	Adequate Yearly Progress
D.E.A.R.	Drop Everything and Read
EC	Exceptional Children
ELA	English Language Arts
EOG	End-of-Grade
ESL	English as a Second Language
ELL	English Language Learner
HLM	Hierarchical Linear Models
IB	International Baccalaureate
IEP	Individualized Education Program
NCDPI	North Carolina Department of Public Instruction
NCLB	No Child Left Behind
NCMSA	North Carolina Middle School Association
NMSA	National Middle School Association
PEP	Personalized Education Plan
PLC	Professional Learning Community
PTSA	Parent Teacher Student Association
SLC	Student-Led Conference
STW	Schools to Watch

TAC Teacher Advisory Council

TD Talent Development

CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

The crucial period of identity development in adolescence is a time of great potential—for triumph or failure. Physically, emotionally, morally, socially, culturally, and intellectually, these youth are facing many changes and life-altering decisions (Gay & Hanley, 1999). Their desire for independence often conflicts with their need for structure, guidance, and nurturing. During this critical stage in the lives of adolescents, underprivileged middle school students “stand to gain more and to lose more, depending on the quality of their school experience” (Shann, 1999, p. 393). In addition to this already challenging period, many African American students deal with higher instances of poverty and racism and their accompanying effects than their White counterparts (Anyon, 2005; Sirin, 2005; The Civil Rights Project, 2006). Their unique social location results in a different schooling experience for these students (King, 2005; Kozol, 2005; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). Thus, the role and influence of middle schools in their short- and long-term outcomes cannot be underestimated.

1.1 Achievement of African American Students

Contrary to popular portrayals, Black students and their families do value education and express its importance in their communities (Ford & Harris, 1992; Mickelson, 1990; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard III, 2003). Nevertheless, despite gains made over the past several decades, there remain significant gaps in the educational outcomes

of Blacks as compared to Whites (Bernard, 2003; Carter, Hawkins, & Natesan, 2008; Ferguson, 1998; Kuykendall, 2004; Mickelson, 1990; National Center for Education Statistics, 2009; Norman et al., 2001; Norman et al. 2006; Paik, 2004; Talbert-Johnson, 2004; The Civil Rights Project, 2006; Walton & Cohen 2007). According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), White students had average standardized test scores at least 26 points higher than Black students in both reading and math at grades four and eight across the nation (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). In the state of North Carolina, this gap was even wider at grade eight, with a 29-point difference in both math and reading, respectively. In addition, although the race gaps in SAT scores are not as large as they used to be, they are growing (Mickelson, 2006). There is still a 100-point gap between Black and White students on the verbal and math portions of the test. Blacks still trail whites in standardized test scores, graduation rates, college attendance, and, consequently, career opportunities, advancement, and success (Talbert-Johnson, 2004). Claims that African Americans simply do not value education do not explain these disparities, and middle schools that serve these students during one of the most defining periods in their lives are in a position to either help or hinder (Bandlow, 2001; Bunting, 2005; Lee & Smith, 1993; Powell, 2005).

1.2 Middle Schools

A middle school is “one that is specifically structured to meet the developmental needs of young adolescents ages 10 to 15” (Powell, 2005, p. 3). Middle school philosophy emphasizes a child-centered curriculum that allows students to discover and explore their interests. The earlier focus of the 1950’s and 1960’s on competition and individual accomplishment in junior high schools was replaced with a push for collaboration in

middle schools (Bandlow, 2001; Bunting, 2005). A shift was made to a developmentally sensitive, diverse, and relevant approach to academics, as opposed to uniform, rigid standards for all. Interdisciplinary teams, heterogeneous groups, advisory, cooperative learning, and inquiry are now the norm (Powell, 2005).

Interdisciplinary teams of teachers collaborate regularly to meet the needs of the students they share. These interdisciplinary teams foster relationships and make relevant connections across content areas. Heterogeneous grouping occurs within them, which involves assigning students to classes without consideration of academic abilities or achievements (Powell, 2005). This allows all students the opportunity to participate in an equitable, rigorous, and relevant curriculum. This is often accomplished by using such strategies as cooperative learning and inquiry lessons. Advisory is also important to the team's relationships and is a special time regularly set aside for a small group of students to meet with a specific school staff member. The premise is that relationships are strengthened as each student has at least one adult advocate in the school and a base network of peers with whom he or she may discuss issues of relevance to early adolescents (Powell, 2005).

Lee and Smith (1993) determined that the following elements needed to be present in a middle school for it to be considered restructured in a way that was faithful to the original concept: reduced or eliminated departmental structure, heterogeneously grouped instruction, and team teaching. The middle school has become a place where students are allowed to be adolescents who can reflect on what that really means. In *This We Believe*, the National Middle School Association (NMSA) (2010) explicates the characteristics of effective middle schools. For example, NMSA identifies the essential

attributes of educational programs for young adolescents as developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering, and equitable (See Appendix A).

In 1999, Schools to Watch was initiated by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, an alliance consisting of over 60 educators, researchers, and officers of national organizations committed to improving schools that serve early adolescents (Schools to Watch, 2010). Schools may nominate themselves to be evaluated on four standards: Academic Excellence, Developmental Responsiveness, Social Equity, and Organizational Structures and Processes (See Appendix B). With social equity so highly esteemed by middle school proponents, schools awarded the Schools to Watch distinction have taken careful steps to implement culturally responsive education.

1.3 Culturally Responsive Education

Like the NMSA and those who embrace middle school philosophy, supporters of culturally responsive education value social equity. Culturally responsive education recognizes, respects, and uses students' identities and backgrounds as meaningful sources for creating optimal learning environments (Nieto & Bode, 2008). Culturally responsive schools contextualize instruction and schooling practices while maintaining academic rigor (Burns, Keyes, & Kusimo, 2005). They exhibit the following traits, according to the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL) (2004):

- The curriculum content is inclusive, meaning it reflects the cultural, ethnic, and gender diversity of society and the world.
- Instructional and assessment practices build on the students' prior knowledge, culture, and language.

- Schoolwide beliefs and practices foster understanding and respect for cultural diversity, and celebrate the contributions of diverse groups.
- Classroom practices stimulate students to construct knowledge, make meaning, and examine cultural biases and assumptions.
- School programs and instructional practices draw from and integrate community and family language and culture, and help families and communities support the students' academic success.

In short, and like middle schools, culturally responsive schools prioritize relevance, rigor, and relationships.

1.4 Statement of the Problem

In contrast to the aims of middle school philosophy and culturally responsive education, from elementary school to high school, large segments of American student populations have essentially turned against school (Dillon & Grout, 1976; Finnan & Chasin, 2007; Smyth & McInerney, 2007; Talbert-Johnson, 2004). These marginalized learners are typically those of lower socioeconomic status who are disproportionately racial minorities and have increased chances of dropping out of school before graduating (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2006; Bryk & Thum, 1976; Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson 2007; Fine, 1991; Neild & Balfanz, 2006a, 2006b; Rumberger, 1995; Sirin, 2005; Talbert-Johnson, 2004; National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). For them, the experience of schooling is one in which the ideology of educating all students for success is far from reality. Although American schools cannot be cited as the sole source of the alienation of underprivileged children, their structure is certainly a contributing factor. The academic and social organization of schools has helped students of lower socioeconomic status to

become estranged from school, as indicated by their self-reported feelings of alienation, levels of absenteeism, and dropout rates (Balfanz & Boccanfuso, 2007; Bernstein, 1975; Carr-Chellman, Beabout, Almeida, & Gursoy, 2009; Coleman, 1988; Dillon & Grout, 1976; Ferguson, 2000; Fine, 1991; Finnan & Chasin, 2007; Gottfried, 2009; Juvonen, Le, Kaganoff, Augustine, & Constant, 2004; McLeod, 1995; Schoeneberger, 2012; Skinner, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Connell, 1998; Smyth & McInerney, 2007; Thomas, 2005; Willis, 1977). Structural features implicated include the formal curriculum, academic tracking and grade retention, the hidden curriculum, teacher-student relationships, disciplinary practices, and student-student relationships. Schools, particularly the increasing number of middle schools that are not faithful to the middle school concept espoused by the NMSA, will need to implement some major structural changes to help reduce or eliminate the alienation of underprivileged students. These features can be categorized within the shared principles of the middle school philosophy and culturally responsive education: relevance, rigor, and relationships.

1.4.1 Schools in the age of accountability.

Approved January 8, 2002, the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) became the most recent update to the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Its purpose “is to see every child in America—regardless of ethnicity, income, or background—achieve high standards” (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Based on the premise that high expectations and goal setting result in academic success for all students, NCLB demands that states assess students’ basic skills in order for them to continue receiving federal funding for schools. Not only are schools required to meet graduation and attendance standards, but their students are expected to demonstrate 100 percent

competence in math, reading, and language arts by the year 2014 (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). NCLB has been praised for bringing more accountability, higher standards, and increased attention to the needs of underprivileged students. However, to the contrary, NCLB has also been widely criticized for encouraging teachers to teach to the test, for relying too heavily on standardized tests deemed socioeconomically/racially/linguistically biased, and for usurping local control with mandates from the federal government (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Thus, many middle schools have been lured away from their initial purpose because of this environment of competition and sanctions.

As a result of pressures to meet NCLB testing mandates, some schools (more often those with high racial minority populations) have replaced relevant, personalized curricula with scripted lessons of rote drills and repetition (Delpit, 2006; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2004; Thomas 2005). School communities are individualistic, highly stratified, and competitive. Tracking is commonplace, and course offerings in schools with high racial minority populations are limited in comparison to those of their White counterparts. Empowering students with choices and opportunities for serious self-exploration and discovery of interests is rare. The attention is more directed towards performance on standardized tests than on the needs of the students. In short, some schools “have given up the rich meaningful education of our children in favor of narrow, decontextualized, meaningless procedures that leave unopened hearts, unformed character, and unchallenged minds” (Delpit, 2006, p. xiv). Relevance, rigor, and relationships are not high on the list of priorities. In order to increase student achievement in middle schools with large percentages of students from lower socioeconomic

backgrounds, reforms must be comprehensive and concentrated (Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2006). The structure of middle schools can either embrace African American students and foster their academic achievement by challenging them and facilitating their positive identity development, or alienate them and hinder their academic success by maintaining low expectations and disregarding their unique social location.

1.5 Purposes of the Study

With decontextualized schooling as its backdrop, the purpose of this study is to determine whether there is a significant difference in the academic achievement of African American students in middle schools that highly implement the shared principles of middle school philosophy and culturally responsive education, and African American students in middle schools that do not highly implement the shared principles of middle school philosophy and culturally responsive education. An additional intent of this study is to describe in detail how those shared principles are actualized in one exemplary middle school to try to further the success of its predominantly African American student body.

1.6 Research Questions

This study is situated within the larger body of educational research that seeks to better understand and meet the needs of traditionally underperforming, marginalized students and to identify strategies that lead to closing the academic achievement gap between the races. It is an attempt to investigate the overlapping principles of the middle school philosophy and the ideals of culturally responsive education and to determine their effects on the academic achievement of Black middle school students. These shared

tenets can be categorized as relevance, rigor, and relationships. Research questions to be addressed in this study are as follows:

- Is there a significant difference in the academic achievement of African American students in middle schools that highly implement the shared principles of middle school philosophy and culturally responsive education, and African American students in middle schools that do not highly implement the shared principles of middle school philosophy and culturally responsive education?
- How are the shared principles of middle school philosophy and culturally responsive education implemented in an exemplary middle school with a predominantly African American student population?

1.7 Relevant Definitions

- Academic Tracking: assigning students to classes based on academic ability and achievement
- Advisory: a special time regularly set aside for a small group of students to meet with a specific school staff member to discuss issues related to various aspects of adolescent social and emotional development (Powell, 2005)
- African American/Black: students of African descent who were born in the United States
- Culturally Responsive Education: recognizes, respects, and uses students' identities and backgrounds as meaningful sources for creating optimal learning environments (Nieto & Bode, 2008); involves every aspect of the school
- Heterogeneous grouping: grouping students without consideration of academic abilities or achievements (Powell, 2005)
- Middle School Philosophy: as defined by the National Middle School Association's (NMSA) *This We Believe* and translated into the North Carolina Middle School Association's (NCMSA) *Schools to Watch* criteria (See Appendices A and B.)

Note: As of 2011, NMSA is now the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE).

1.8 Significance of the Study

There is no shortage of studies regarding the academic achievement of African American students (Ferguson, 2002; Gutman, Sameroff, & Eccles, 2002; Mickelson, 1990; Norman et al., 2001; Ogbu, 2003; Slavin & Madden, 2006; Wiggan, 2009; Wilson-Jones & Caston, 2004). Likewise, there is research on middle schools and the middle school concept (Arhar, 1990; Balfanz & Boccanfuso, 2007; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2006; Dickinson & Erb, 1997; Erb & Stevenson, 1999; Felner et al., 1997; Juvonen, Le, Kaganoff, Augustine, & Constant, 2004; Lee & Smith, 1993; Lee, Smith, Perry, & Smylie, 1999; Mertens, Flowers, & Mulhall, 1998; Schoeneberger, 2012). Moreover, now much is available about culturally relevant pedagogy (Carter, Hawkins, & Natesan, 2008; Esposito & Swain, 2009; Hill, 2009; Kea, Trent, & Davis, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Mitchell, 1998; Pang & Sablan, 1998; Ware, 2006). This study is unique in that it specifically identifies and highlights the commonalities of middle school philosophy and culturally responsive education to determine their influence on the academic achievement of African American students. This study will add to the existing literature that seeks to understand and explain contributing factors to the academic achievement gap, particularly regarding Black students. It will present a new perspective by viewing middle schools serving African American students through a lens in which the middle school philosophy and culturally responsive education are overlapped and framed within a critical race theory of education. It will also begin to fill the gap in the literature about culturally responsive education as a whole, rather than focusing on culturally relevant pedagogy. Further, the proposed research utilizes a mixed-methods design, which takes

advantage of the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative paradigms. The majority of the previous studies have been solely quantitative or qualitative in design.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter two will begin with a description of the theoretical framework that provides the lens for this study. This chapter will also highlight the literature on African American student achievement, the middle grades philosophy, and then culturally responsive education. Studies on each of the three topics will be organized around the principles of relevance, rigor, and relationships.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Social reproduction theorists analyze how the social class structure is reproduced from one generation to the next (Bernstein, 1975; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Collins, 2011; Evans & Davies, 2011; Lareau, 2003; Teranishi & Parker, 2010; Willis, 1977). The dominant ideology that pervades American culture, including the schools, is that education is the key to success in life. Social mobility is directly connected to academic achievement. However, reproduction theorists have found that schools actually reinforce social inequality (Bernstein, 1975; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Collins, 2011; Evans & Davies, 2011; Lareau, 2003; Teranishi & Parker, 2010; Willis, 1977). The social, cultural, and financial capital possessed by middle- and upper-class families advantages their students in the school setting, which clearly rewards these forms of capital.

Furthermore, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to be surrounded by family, friends, and neighbors who, despite their levels of education, have been confined to low-paying jobs and/or intermittent unemployment (Mickelson, 1990). Thus, these students often display varying degrees of resistance to the dominant ideology in school. More often than not, they are minorities who are “more likely to live in low-income households or in single parent families; their parents are likely to have less education; and they often attend under-funded schools” (Sirin, 2005, p. 420). Consequently, because of their lived experiences, black youth from families of lower socioeconomic status often see little practical value in academic achievement. Conversely, white students from families of higher socioeconomic status tend to accept the ideology that connects social mobility to academic achievement.

Arising out of the modern era, critical theory is a social theory oriented toward critiquing and changing society as a whole. It is concerned with “deconstructing hidden assumptions that govern society—especially those about the legitimacy of power relationships” (DeMarrais & LeCompte, 1999, p. 27). Critical theorists scrutinize society in which dominant socioeconomic groups oppress secondary populations. Gramsci’s notion of cultural hegemony identifies complex systems of domination evident in everyday practices and beliefs that allow the ruling group or class to maintain their place of privilege (DeMarrais & LeCompte, 1999; Lemert, 2004). Despite the vast influence of oppressive social structures, critical theorists view human agency as the major catalyst for change.

Critical theorists assert that “schools are sites where power struggles between dominant and subordinate groups take place” (DeMarrais & LeCompte, 1999, p. 31). The

school is one of the everyday locations where the dominant group uses the permeation of its worldview and ideology to legitimate its authority. Thus, critical theorists identify the art and practice of teaching as being crucial to halting the impact of the dominant ideology prevailing in schools. Critical pedagogues, such as Paulo Freire, viewed teachers and students as key agents in changing a society characterized by oppressive state hegemony (DeMarrais & LeCompte, 1999). Giroux argued that teachers are called to be “transformative intellectuals,” armed with knowledge, self-awareness, and the courage to question social structure (p. 190). In turn, they will be able to engage their students and foster critical thinking and social activism in them as well.

To better explain, analyze, and understand educational disparities, many educators have adopted and adapted the ideas of critical race theory, an offshoot of critical theory. Critical race theory arose in the mid-1970s as lawyers and activists lamented the lagging momentum of the civil rights movement and the reversal of ground that had been gained (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). With New York University law professor Derrick Bell as its intellectual founder, the progressive legal scholars questioned the conventional strategies and underlying assumptions of human rights espoused by the civil rights movement. Critical race theory quickly spread to numerous other disciplines and was organized around three basic premises: 1) Racism is a normal, everyday part of society and the experiences of people of color; 2) Maintaining racism (i.e., white supremacy) serves the psychological and financial interests of Whites; 3) Race is socially constructed (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 7-8). Critical race theory assumes “that racism is so ingrained in our nation’s social and institutional structures as to be almost invisible, that the experiences of Whites should not be accepted as normative, and that racism affects

every aspect of education” (Gere, Buehler, Dallavis, & Haviland, 2009, p. 818). Critical race theorists not only analyze and critique the status quo but seek to transform it.

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) apply the principles of critical race theory to explain inequity in schools. Building upon the foundations of social reproduction theory and critical race theory, they posit that race is still a substantial factor influencing inequity in the U.S., that property rights (and not human rights) are foundational to American society, and that the intersection of the two, race and property rights, provide a revealing way to analyze school inequity. Critical race theory in education also recognizes the ingrained racism in American society. It challenges the prevailing notions of neutrality, objectivity, color-blindness, and meritocracy. Treating whiteness as property, the scholars explain its accompanying rights of disposition, rights to use and enjoyment, reputation and status property, and absolute right to exclude. First, they argue that the rights of disposition are at work when students are rewarded for acting according to White middle class norms and penalized for behaving otherwise. This, in turn, influences relationships between teachers and students as well as among students. It also has bearing on the relevance of the curriculum and school in general for students. Second, proponents of critical race theory in education relate the rights to use and enjoyment to the disparities in resources, facilities, and curricula between majority White and majority Black schools. The effects of these rights, or lack thereof, can be detected in the level of academic rigor in the schools. Third, these same schools gain or lose reputation and status depending on which student population is in the majority. Fourth, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) identify academic tracking as the manifestation of the absolute right to exclude. As previously noted in chapter one of this dissertation, racial minorities reap the

most detrimental consequences of tracking, severely limiting the rigor of their educational experiences.

Examining the potential effects of the shared principles of the middle school philosophy and culturally responsive education on African American middle school students through the lens of a critical race theory of education is most appropriate considering the unique social location with respect to class and race of many African American middle school students. The structure of the middle schools that they attend may indeed cause them to be sites of social reproduction that preserve the status quo, or they may be organized in a developmentally and culturally responsive way that promotes academic excellence and social equity. This study underscored the rights of disposition that reward behavior and values consistent with the dominant ideology and that penalize norms in the African American community. It also highlighted the rights to use and enjoyment and the absolute right to exclude as exhibited by the lack of a rigorous curriculum in predominantly African American schools or the academic tracking of Black students into lower tracks. The implicated structural features are at odds with the middle school concept and culturally responsive education.

2.2 Achievement of African American Students

It is a well documented and undisputed fact that there is an alarming gap in the achievement levels of Black students as compared to their White peers and has been for many years (Columbia College, 2005; Ogbu, 2003; Talbert-Johnson, 2004; Walton & Cohen, 2007; Wiggan, 2009). African American students are three years behind by eighth grade and trail their White counterparts by four years at the end of high school (Columbia College, 2005). They are placed in special education programs at three times the rate of

White students and are underrepresented in gifted programs by 30-50 percent (Columbia College, 2005). Although there is widespread agreement that the achievement gap exists, researchers have suggested several different influences that may contribute to the disparity. The most commonly associated factors can be categorized as relevance, rigor, and relationships (Burns, Keyes, & Kusimo, 2005; Fine, 1991; Gere, Buehler, Dallavis, & Haviland, 2009; Talbert-Johnson, 2004).

2.2.1 Relevance.

Students generally have little to no input into the school's formal curriculum. What and how they will learn is decided by teachers, administrators, and educational policy makers. The approved knowledge promotes middle class traits, values, and skills, which are sometimes foreign to poor and working class students (Bernstein, 1975; Lareau, 2003; MacLeod, 1995). The largely Eurocentric curricula often have minimal relevance for the lives of underprivileged students and effectively silence their critical voices (Fine, 1991; Giroux, 1996). The formal curriculum "ignores skills picked up on the street" and "denies and violates" the identities of these students (MacLeod, 1995, p. 208). The goal-centered learning prevalent in most schools is wholly designed by school officials and has been strongly linked to feelings of alienation among students (Dillon & Grout, 1976). It has been criticized for restraining students' natural inquisitiveness and promoting teachers' authoritarian practices. Curricula that do not account for the interests, backgrounds, or strengths of students contribute to the alienation of underprivileged students from school. This lack of meaningful learning has the effect of further distancing these students from educational institutions.

Embedded within the academic and social structures of schools is the hidden curriculum. This informal curriculum involves issues of power and privilege. For example, students whose parents have the professional, educational, and/or financial resources to prepare and support their children academically are at an advantage over those whose parents do not. In short, middle class students have access to capital that is not readily accessible by the poor and working classes. The cultural capital of middle class parents and their children is encouraged and rewarded by schools, while the ways of being and knowing of poor and working class parents and their children are devalued and penalized (Bernstein, 1975; Bourdieu, 1986; Bryk & Thum, 1989; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Coleman, 1988; Lareau, 2003; MacLeod, 1995; Rumberger, 1995; Smith, 2008). Students of lower socioeconomic status are often marked as “inferior, linguistically inadequate, and dangerous” (Giroux, 1996, p. 8). Any deviation from standardized English and the dominant culture’s styles of dress and expression is frowned upon. When the experiences of racial minority students are not properly acknowledged or respected in classes, these students are essentially silenced (Gere, Buehler, Dallavis, & Haviland, 2009; Smith, 2008). The marginalization and penalization of underprivileged students’ ways of being and knowing can only serve to further alienate them from school.

Moreover, students’ lack of cultural capital increases their chances of getting into trouble in school because of their mannerisms of communication, styles of dress, and ways of expressing themselves that stand in contrast to accepted mainstream protocol (Carter, Hawkins, & Natesan, 2008; Ferguson, 2000). Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, especially racial minorities, are the most likely to be labeled as troublemakers in the schools (Ferguson, 2000; Fine, 1991; Giroux, 1996; MacLeod,

1995). What is considered normal, preadolescent behavior for other students is adultified and hypersexualized for underprivileged students, particularly black males (Ferguson, 2000). This, in turn, justifies harsher punishments for them for breaking school rules, alienating them even more. There is a frequent clash between the unquestioning obedience to authority demanded in schools and the earning of respect required in many students' neighborhoods (MacLeod, 1995). Consequently, underprivileged students form countercultures to maintain their self-respect, rejecting the school's achievement ideology, subverting the authority of school officials, and disrupting classes (Cokley & Chapman, 2008; Ferguson, 2000; MacLeod, 1995; Ogbu, 2003). Cokley and Chapman (2008) found that self-concept, devaluing academic success, and anti-white attitudes directly affected the grade point averages of Black students. One major difference between those who excel academically and those who do not is their acceptance or rejection of the American ideology of achievement (Ford & Harris, 1992; Mickelson, 1990). The price of conformity to school rules is sometimes too great, so these students either leave school before graduating or "at least minimize their involvement with it" (MacLeod, 1995, p. 107). On the contrary, middle schools that implement such middle school concepts as advisory, teaming, heterogeneous grouping, community collaboration, self-expression, exploration, and personalized, relevant pedagogy seek to promote healthy identity development in their students.

2.2.2 Rigor.

Compounding the gap between the races is the fact that students are increasingly attending more racially segregated schools. In many school districts across the United States, second generation segregation, or academic tracking, is rampant (Kozol, 2005;

Rumberger, 1995; The Civil Rights Project, 2006). Racial minorities are disproportionately represented in remedial and lower tracks and grossly underrepresented in gifted and higher academic tracks (Ferguson, 2000; Ford & Harris, 1992; Mickelson, 2006; Talbert-Johnson, 2004; The Civil Rights Project, 2006). Poor and working class children are not exposed to the types of knowledge and skills required to do well on standardized tests and are placed into tracks which only prepare them for low-status jobs or for failure in diverse workplaces (MacLeod, 1995; Mickelson, 2006; The Civil Rights Project, 2006; Willis, 1977). Schools with academic tracking (i.e., grouping students in classes based on academic ability and achievement) have relatively higher absenteeism and dropout rates than truly integrated schools where students are not racially separated within the school by academic tracks (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Fine, 1991). Conversely, not only are absenteeism and dropout rates lower in schools where there is less differentiation in academic programs, but students learn more and learning is distributed more equitably across socioeconomic and racial groups (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Lee & Burkam, 2003). Thus, routine academic tracking is another culprit in the alienation of underprivileged students from school. Many schools are serving as instruments of social reproduction to allow privileged groups to maintain their status, while denying marginalized populations opportunities for advancement.

It would follow that lack of academic success only frustrates and discourages Black students. In fact, dropout and absenteeism rates are higher in schools with academic tracking than in schools without it (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Fine, 1991). One of the strongest predictors for dropping out of school before graduation is being below grade level in reading and math (Fine, 1991). Further, students who have been retained in a

grade are up to six times more likely to drop out (Rumberger, 1995). Thus, schools with rigid retention policies have relatively high dropout rates (Fine, 1991). Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are the most likely to be below grade level in reading and math and to be retained in a grade. Engerman (2006) found prior academic performance and socioeconomic status to be predictors of academic achievement of African American students. In the lower academic tracks where simple memorization and rote drill are the norm, these underprivileged students are exposed to minimal knowledge and skills far from what is expected on standardized tests (Mickelson, 2006; The Civil Rights Project, 2006). Performing below grade level and/or retained, they become even more resistant to formal education (Fine, 1991; MacLeod, 1995; Willis, 1977). Quite the opposite, those true-to-form middle schools encourage, expect, and reward collaborative, culturally relevant, personalized, and developmentally sensitive teaching within heterogeneously grouped classes, rather than rigid academic tracks. Those schools set their sights on greater student engagement and higher academic achievement.

2.2.3 Relationships.

Teachers' relationships with students are a central part of the school experience. Students' feelings of alienation have been shown to be related to the way a teacher's role is defined and also to patterns of school authority (Dillon & Grout, 1976; Talbert-Johnson, 2004). Schools are generally organized in such a way that encourages neutral, authoritarian teaching styles (Bidwell, 1965; Dillon & Grout, 1976). Additionally, the social class disconnection between underprivileged students and their middle class teachers can lead to a subtle class antagonism that exacerbates conduct problems and absenteeism (Cokley & Chapman, 2008; MacLeod, 1995; Talbert-Johnson, 2004).

Moreover, the disempowerment of teachers correlates with their negative attitudes towards their students who are also disempowered and frequently drop out of schools (Fine, 1991). Teachers who feel powerless under federal mandates such as NCLB may transfer feelings of helplessness and frustration to already marginalized underperforming students. Likewise, dropout rates are relatively higher in schools where there is a lack of faculty interest, and students who leave school before graduating often indicate unconnected and uncaring teachers as a reason for doing so (Fine, 1991; Lee & Burkam, 2003). On the contrary, when faculty are interested and engaged with students, absenteeism and dropout rates are lower (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Lee & Burkam, 2003). Lee and Burkam (2003) found that the odds of dropping out decreased by 86% with a one-*SD* increase in average student-teacher relations ($p < .01$). Caring, respectful, and inclusive teacher behaviors tend to have the added results of higher student engagement and academic achievement (Bidwell, 1965; Talbert-Johnson, 2004). Other researchers documented increased motivation and improved academic performance of racial minority students who have caring relationships with their teachers (Talbert-Johnson, 2004). Schools that strip teachers of power and expect them to do their jobs objectively contribute to the alienation from school of their underprivileged students.

With silenced voices and no real economic or political power, students create their own social hierarchy within schools, social status groups (Bidwell, 1965; Dillon & Grout, 1976; Fine, 1991; Giroux, 1996; Milner, 2004). Students' social structures stress conforming to the norms of the group, which usually involves resistance to the norms and authority of adults who have created and control the school's formal structure (Bidwell, 1965; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; MacLeod, 1995; Milner, 2004). These social status

groups reward students who have access to the latest status symbols in fashion, technology, and the like. Students of lower socioeconomic status are the least likely to be able to afford the latest styles and gadgets and the most likely to find themselves at the lowest ends of the student social structure. They sometimes feel compelled to take on part-time jobs to keep up with their peers, and they are typically the ones who cannot academically afford to lose this valuable study time or to come to school after exhausting themselves in the workplace. Marginalized in the society, underprivileged students begin to psychologically and/or physically withdraw from school (Bidwell, 1965). In contrast, middle schools that implement the middle school principles of teaming, advisory, collaboration, and community-building may provide a caring atmosphere, increase students' sense of belonging, and combat the lure of gang involvement, divisive cliques, and other negative peer and mass media temptations.

2.3 Middle School Philosophy

The middle school concept varies from its predecessor, the junior high school, in its focus on an adolescent-centered, relevant, challenging, and exploratory curriculum. School structures, such as interdisciplinary teams, heterogeneous grouping, and advisory are implemented to support early adolescents in their academic, social and emotional development. Lee and Smith (1993) concluded that reduced or eliminated departmental structure, heterogeneously grouped instruction, and team teaching are the essential features of middle schools. In spite of the critique that "Middle schoolism is based on pseudo-scientific theories and downplays academic achievement" (Yecke, 2005, p. ii), middle school philosophy emphasizes relevance and relationships as integral parts of the rigor that leads to increased academic achievement. In *This We Believe*, the National

Middle School Association (2010) explicates the characteristics of effective middle schools. For example, NMSA explains that ideal schools for early adolescents have a curriculum that is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant; organizational structures that foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships; a school environment that is inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all (See Appendix A).

2.3.1 Relevance.

An integrated curriculum, which connects schooling to real-world application and provides opportunities for student input on what is learned and how it is learned (Pate, Homestead, & McGinnis, 1997) is of great importance for early adolescents who require authentic learning experiences and participation in decisions in order for meaningful learning to take place. Multiple studies have described well-designed integrated curricula and their positive effects on student learning (Bergstrom, 1998; Caskey, 2002; Daniels & Bizar, 1998; Five & Dionisio, 1996; Pate, 2001; Stevenson & Carr, 1993; Vars, 1997; Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1998). A curriculum that is relevant to what students are learning in other courses, as well as to what they see and experience in the real world, is critical for meaningful learning to take place in middle schools.

Relevance is also a key factor in how middle school students should be taught the knowledge, concepts, and skills they are expected to gain. There should be a direct link between the curriculum, instruction, and assessment. In particular, what students learn and how they demonstrate what they have learned should be a reflection of who the students are and how they learn best (Bransford et al., 1999; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Tomlinson & Eidson, 2003; Wiggins & McTighe, 1998; Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1998). Valuing, capitalizing on, and building upon students' prior knowledge is an

essential foundation for early adolescent learning (Bransford et al., 1999). Furthermore, the cultural, experiential, and personal backgrounds of middle school students must be accounted for if instruction is to be effective (National Middle School Association, 2010). Diversity in students calls for instruction that considers and targets various learning styles, strengths, and weaknesses (Andrews, 2005; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Tomlinson, 2003; Tomlinson, 2005). In short, curricula and their implementation at the middle level cannot be effective if students' unique developmental, cultural, and experiential characteristics and backgrounds are not significant influences in how it is designed and carried out. This type of relevant curriculum helps to neutralize the rights of disposition that traditionally reward students for acting according to White middle class norms. It further minimizes the penalties that students incur for conducting themselves otherwise..

2.3.2 Rigor.

Heterogeneous grouping can involve cooperative learning groups of students with varying abilities within the classroom or grouping whole classes of students with varying abilities together. It varies from tracking where students are assigned to classes with other students of similar academic ability determined by past academic achievement. The purpose of heterogeneous grouping is to help carry out the middle school component of high expectations of success for all students and to ensure that they all are exposed to rigorous, quality instruction. There has been very little research on heterogeneous grouping (NCMSA, 2009a), and the little there is has resulted in more questions than conclusions (Catsambis, Mulkey, & Crain, 2001; Gamoran and Weinstein, 1998). The opposite of heterogeneous grouping is tracking, or ability grouping, and it has rarely been shown to produce positive results (Gamoran and Weinstein, 1998; Slavin, 1990; Slavin,

1993). Schools with academic tracking have relatively higher absenteeism and dropout rates than truly integrated schools (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Fine, 1991). The most devastating effects of tracking are on students who are disproportionately represented in the lower tracks, racial or linguistic minorities and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Vang, 2005). Conversely, not only are absenteeism and dropout rates lower in schools where there is less differentiation in academic programs, but students learn more and learning is distributed more equitably across socioeconomic and racial groups (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Lee & Burkam, 2003; The Civil Rights Project, 2006). It should also be noted that middle schools that are considered exemplary have less tracking and more heterogeneous grouping than other middle schools (Burriss, Garrity, & ASCD, 2008; George, 1988; Datnow & Hirshberg, 1996; Hallinan, 1992).

Studies preceding this one have already documented increased academic achievement and other favorable effects associated with schools that implement key elements of the middle school concept (Arhar, 1990; Arhar, Johnston, & Markle, 1989; Backes, Ralston, and Ingwalson, 1999; Dickinson & Erb, 1997; Felner et al., 1997; Lee & Smith, 1993; Mertens & Flowers, 2006). Using a subsample of data from the National Longitudinal Study of 1988, Lee and Smith (1993) found moderate but significant increases in academic achievement and student engagement and greater equity of student outcomes in middle schools engaging in teaming, decreased departmentalization, and heterogeneous grouping. Attending restructured schools equalized these outcomes for students of varying socioeconomic backgrounds. Felner et al. (1997) concluded that students in middle schools highly implementing major components of middle school philosophy, such as interdisciplinary teaming, advisory, and consistent teacher norms,

outperformed students in all subject areas in schools with low or partial implementation. High implementation schools also had lower levels of behavior problems than partial or low implementation schools. Backes, Ralston, and Ingwalson (1999) found that middle schools employing the *Turning Points* (Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1989) recommendations have higher academic achievement. Those same benefits applied to high-poverty middle schools as well (Picucci et al., 2004). Likewise, achievement scores are higher for students in schools that engage in teaming with more common planning time, particularly in schools with higher numbers of students receiving free and reduced lunch (Mertens & Flowers, 2006; Mertens, Flowers, & Mulhall, 1998). Survey and achievement data was used by Lee, Smith, Perry, & Smylie (1999) to determine that sixth and eighth grade students in middle schools identified as having both high social support and academic press reported the greatest gains in reading and math. Other studies have found that middle grades certified teachers empowered with decision-making positively impact student achievement (Mertens, Flowers, & Mulhall, 2002; Sweetland and Hoy (2000). State assessment data of Kentucky *Schools to Watch* revealed higher overall academic achievement than other middle schools in the state (Cook, Faulkner, & Kinne, 2009). In sum, the aforementioned research indicates that middle schools that are structured according to the components of the middle school concept are more conducive to the rigor associated with high academic achievement. This in turn ensures that the rights to use and enjoyment (i.e., disparities in resources/facilities/curricula) and the absolute right to exclude (i.e., academic tracking) are not in operation to the detriment of Black students' academic achievement.

2.3.3 Relationships.

Relationship-building is a prominent feature of the middle school concept that has been shown to both strengthen students' sense of belonging and capacity for learning and support teachers in their endeavors to tailor instruction and assessment to the personalized needs of students (Goodenow, 1993; Tomlinson, 2003; Watson, Battistich, & Solomon, 1997). An interdisciplinary team consists of two or more teachers from different subject areas and the group of students they commonly instruct. Team teachers are housed in the same area of the building and utilize common planning time to improve instruction, discuss students' needs, and communicate with parents. There is a large body of research showcasing the benefits of teaming, from increased academic achievement, self-esteem, and academic efficacy to decreased depression and behavior problems (Arhar, 1990; Arhar, Johnston, & Markle, 1989; Dickinson & Erb, 1997; Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2000; Felner et al., 1997; Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 1999; George & Shewey, 1994; Lee & Smith, 1993). Learning environments are described as being more positive and conducive to learning on authentic interdisciplinary teams (Arhar 1990, 1997; Dickinson & Erb, 1997; Lee & Smith, 1993). As previously mentioned, high implementation schools (e.g., teaming, common planning time, advisory) were found to have higher levels of student achievement and fewer behavior problems than schools with low or partial implementation of the middle school concept (Felner et al., 1997). Further, student achievement scores improved dramatically in these buildings, and particularly for schools with more students from low-income families (Mertens, Flowers, & Mulhall, 1998).

Advisory programs are based on the assumption that every student should have at least one adult advocate in the school. When advisory emphasizes social and academic support, it contributes to a reduction of dropouts (Mac Iver, 1990). Connors (1986) found that these programs impacted students' emotional and social growth, fostered a positive school climate, taught students about school and getting along with their peers, and improved teacher-student relationships. Combined with other elements of middle school philosophy, advisory improves school climate and student self-concept and helps to decrease dropout rates (George and Oldaker, 1985). Ziegler and Mulhall (1994) documented improvement in students' decision making, sense of belonging to school, and teacher-student relations in a three-year longitudinal study. Well- implemented advisory programs enhance the potential for educators and students to develop strong relationships that support student learning (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Organizational structures such as interdisciplinary teaming and advisory significantly help to establish and maintain positive relationships within learning communities (Dickinson & Erb, 1997; George & Lounsbury, 2000). As teachers, students, and teams go above and beyond to establish healthy relationships across lines of difference, the pressure on students of color to gain the rights of disposition by behaving according to White middle class norms may be alleviated.

The studies cited above regarding the effects of the middle school concept in implementation demonstrate how exemplary middle schools prioritize relevance, rigor, and relationships. This dissertation study builds upon previous work that examines the effects of the middle school philosophy. However, this study deviates from prior studies in that, unlike the quantitative studies that dominate this line of inquiry, it makes use of

both quantitative and qualitative design. It further varies in that it specifically investigates the effects on African American middle school students. Moreover, the study examines the middle school concept and its shared principles with culturally responsive education through the lens of a critical race theory of education.

2.4 Culturally Responsive Education

Culturally responsive education recognizes, respects, and uses student identities and backgrounds to create optimal learning. Culturally responsive schools contextualize instruction and schooling practices while maintaining academic rigor (Burns, Keyes, & Kusimo, 2005). The context in which teaching and learning occur have a powerful impact on students' learning (Cotton, 1995; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nuthall, 2005). This context would include "the procedures, routines, and protocols a school uses to support and implement its instructional program and interact with students, family members, and the community" (Burns, Keyes, & Kusimo, 2005, p. 4). Elements of the context become so routine that they are often invisible to those who employ them. There is a void in the literature specifically pertaining to the implementation of culturally responsive education in schools as a whole; however, the practices of schools that have proven to be successful with low-income minority students have been fairly well documented. Schools such as the 90/90/90, Comer Process, and Effective Schools have demonstrated success with all students, regardless of racial or socioeconomic background (Cotton, 1995; Joyner, Ben-Avie, and Comer, 2004; Reeves, 2003).

These successful models just noted are also organized around relevance, rigor, and relationships. First, students have choices in the curriculum based on their interests, needs, and strengths (Joyner, Ben-Avie, & Comer, 2004; Reeves, 2003). Teachers build

on the prior knowledge, the cultural, and experiential backgrounds of students. Second, there is a strong emphasis on achievement (Cotton, 1995; Reeves, 2003). 90/90/90 schools have 90% of students on free or reduced lunch, 90% minority, and 90% at or above grade level on standardized tests (Reeves, 2003). The Comer Process trains and supports all stakeholders to deal with negative forces in students' lives and replace them with positive ones that will foster their development and, consequently, their learning (Comer, 2004). Effective Schools debunk the notion that schools do not impact whether or not children learn by identifying the characteristics of schools where all children learn (Cotton, 1995). Exemplary test scores are preceded by frequent assessments and opportunities to demonstrate growth and mastery (Cotton, 1995; Reeves, 2003). School faculty members are committed to ensuring educational equity for all students. Third, these successful models are characterized by positive relationships (Cotton; 1995 Joyner, Ben-Avie, & Comer, 2004). Faculty cooperates to set clear goals and efficiently use planning time together. Enhancing relationships with students, as well as with parents and community members, is a priority.

2.4.1 Relevance.

One important aspect of culturally responsive education is culturally relevant pedagogy, or culturally responsive pedagogy. There is a growing body of research on the topic (CREDE, 2004; Darling, 2005; Irvine & Armento, 2001). Culturally relevant pedagogy is a way of teaching that acknowledges, values, and builds upon the various cultural experiences and ways of knowing of all students. It is built upon a foundation of fostering students' academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Lessons are practical and validate students' prior knowledge,

languages, and experiences (Bowers, 2000; Delpit, 2006; Gay & Hanley, 1999; Irvine & Armento, 2001). Teachers know their students well enough to be able to use personally and culturally relevant examples (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 2000). Culturally responsive teaching has been found to have many benefits in schools. For example, it has been used to reduce disproportionate minority representation in special education programs for students with emotional disorders (Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenberg, 2006). Similarly, it can be utilized to manage diverse classrooms in culturally competent ways to promote equal access to learning (Weinstein, Curran, & Thomlinson-Clarke, 2003). The rights of disposition associated with whiteness are neutralized by the relevance in culturally relevant pedagogy.

2.4.2 Rigor.

Culturally relevant pedagogy has been implemented to support a culture of achievement for students of color (Smith & Ayers, 2006; Ware, 2006). It situates learning in familiar contexts, which is important for the academic success of these students (Hefflin, 2002; Lee, 2005). In addition, it encourages teachers to provide and use relevant and meaningful learning materials, create learning environments inclusive of cultures, customs, and traditions that are different from their own, and include lessons that assist students in making meaningful connections between their lives and school-related experiences (Hefflin, 2002; National Education Association, 2005). Culturally responsive pedagogy enables minority students to both manage academic success and bolster their identities (Cummins, 2003; Duarte, 1998; Wortham & Contreras, 2002). Further, it ensures sensitivity to and responsibility for all students as learners (Huber, 1996). High expectations for all students permeate the classrooms of teachers who practice culturally

relevant pedagogy. The rights to use and enjoyment and the absolute right to exclude afforded to whiteness are disarmed by the rigor inherent in culturally relevant pedagogy.

2.4.3 Relationships.

An important obligation of culturally responsive teachers is to instill in students the realization that we are all interconnected and interdependent (Gay & Hanley, 1999; Traoré & Lukens, 2006). The fact that minority students from low socioeconomic groups are more motivated by their need for affiliation than for achievement has been supported by research (Delpit, 2006, p. 141). Students need to feel valued by and connected to their teachers and their peers in school. Teachers should know their students well enough to be able to make personal and cultural connections (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 2000). They should prioritize relationship building with students and their families (Diero, 2006; Gay, 2000). Schools that provide a caring atmosphere and increase students' sense of belonging may combat the lure of gang involvement and other negative peer and mass media temptations. When teachers make a concerted effort to know their students, families, and school communities, they diminish the rights of disposition privileged by whiteness.

The literature regarding the positive effects of culturally relevant pedagogy is increasing and demonstrates how teachers who implement culturally relevant pedagogy prioritize relevance, rigor, and relationships. This dissertation uses the foundation of prior studies on culturally relevant pedagogy and adds to that body of literature. It employs a mixed methods design, whereas most of the previous work utilized a qualitative design. In addition, this study explores the effects of culturally responsive education, which goes beyond culturally relevant pedagogy in classrooms and includes schoolwide structures

and procedures as well. Its emphasis on African American middle school students, in particular, also sets it apart from most of the existing literature. Furthermore, using a critical race theory of education framework to examine the shared principles of culturally responsive education and the middle school concept presents a new perspective to consider.

2.5 Shared Principles of Middle School Philosophy and Culturally Responsive Education

2.5.1 Relevance.

The need to nurture positive identity development is intensified in middle schools with large African American populations. Gay and Hanley (1999) assert that civic, personal, and social progress can be made by embracing one's race, culture, ethnicity, and gender. They further define multicultural empowerment as a strategy that "involves ethnically diverse students exercising genuine control over their own learning processes; incorporating personal experiences into their formal learning; critiquing current society for social injustices; and imagining and constructing a more just society" (p.364). Racial trust is edified and stereotype threat is diminished in these types of school climates (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). Middle schools that implement such middle school concepts as advisory, interdisciplinary teaming, heterogeneous grouping, community collaboration, self-expression, exploration, and personalized, relevant pedagogy may advance their efforts to engage African American students in learning and promote their healthy identity development. Capitalizing on Black students' cultural and experiential knowledge and allowing them to grow in their personal and cultural identities enables them to reclaim the rights to disposition usually rewarded solely for mainstream norms and values.

2.5.2 Rigor.

Furthermore, establishing a true culture of caring and belonging should set the stage for good teaching and high academic achievement (Shann, 1999). An examination of what quality, effective teaching might entail in a diverse middle school is necessary. First, instruction has to take the developmental and cultural needs of young adolescents into account. Classrooms that allow for and provide opportunities for movement and interaction are particularly complementary to the learning and social styles of African-American students (Carter, Hawkins, & Natesan, 2008; Delpit, 2006). This becomes even more important during the sometimes uncomfortable physical changes brought on by puberty. Also, lessons that include the necessary skills and practical application of problem-solving and decision-making are essential (Bowers, 2000; Gay & Hanley, 1999). To be sure, the demand for these skills increases during the early adolescent years, and cooperative group settings provide optimal conditions in which to hone them. In addition, lessons should be practical, culturally relevant, and should validate students' prior knowledge, languages, and experiences (Bowers, 2000; Delpit, 2006; Gay & Hanley, 1999). Field trips and community involvement are also part of the regular curriculum (Bowers, 2000; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2004). This type of teaching requires a keen awareness of self, individual relationships with students, deep content knowledge, and creativity. Middle schools that encourage, expect, and reward collaborative, culturally relevant, personalized, and developmentally sensitive teaching communicate high expectations for all and reverse the effects of the differential rights to use and enjoyment and the absolute right to exclude bestowed upon middle class Whites.

2.5.3 Relationships.

Moreover, multicultural empowerment should also help to enhance community-building efforts and a culture of caring in middle schools. Theresa Perry contends that African-American students in particular thrive in environments with a strong sense of group membership in which there is an explicit and regularly communicated expectation that everyone achieves (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003, p. 107). Minority students especially need to feel valued by and connected to their teachers and their peers in school. Middle schools that implement the principles of teaming, advisory, collaboration, and community-building with integrity can provide a caring atmosphere, increase African American students' sense of belonging, and may combat the lure of negative influences. Again, the relationships formed and nurtured across cultural boundaries empower Black students with the rights of disposition typically given for exemplifying what is deemed to be White middle class behavior and beliefs.

2.6 Summary

Numerous studies have found disparities in the academic achievement of African American students and their White counterparts. Three contributing factors that repeatedly show up in the literature are the lack of relevance of school curricula, the lack of rigor in academic programs, and the lack of positive relationships between students and teachers and from student to student. Studies of the middle school concept and culturally responsive education support the notion that when school is relevant to students' lives, when academic expectations are high for all, and when strong relationships are emphasized in schools, students benefit in multiple ways. Chapter three will outline the methodology of this study to further investigate the shared principles of

the middle school concept and culturally relevant pedagogy using a critical race theory of education framework.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study used a non-experimental mixed-methods design. Data were collected to compare eighth grade North Carolina End-of-Grade (EOG) test passing rates of African American students in schools that highly implement the middle school concept and those in schools that do not. The exemplary middle school group included eighth grade African American students in *Schools to Watch (STW)* schools. The comparison group included African American eighth grade students in non-*STW* schools located in the same school district when possible, or in close proximity to the *STW* schools when not. A case study of an exemplary middle school allowed for rich contextual data through student interviews and observations of classes, a faculty meeting, team meetings, and the school as a whole.

3.1.1 Statistical procedure.

Statistics “refers to a set of mathematical procedures for organizing, summarizing, and interpreting information” (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2007, p. 4). They are useful for taking large amounts of information, organizing and summarizing them, and presenting them in a few figures. They help the researcher to establish what conclusions can be accurately supported and defended. Gathering the EOG passing rates of eighth grade African American students in the *STW* and non-*STW* schools and analyzing them via

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) assisted in determining if there is a significant difference in the academic achievement of African American students in middle schools that highly implement the shared principles of middle school philosophy and culturally responsive education and those in schools that do not.

3.1.2 Case study.

Case study is an empirical study that investigates a real-life phenomenon within a bounded system (Merriam, 1998). It involves an in-depth investigation of an event, group, or individual and may be explanatory or descriptive (Shepard & Greene, 2003). Case study is an extremely useful supplement to statistical data in order to address the questions of how and why. The African American middle school students are members of a culture-sharing group with experiences unique to their age and social location, while also existing in a bounded system as eighth graders in a *STW* setting. Therefore, utilizing case-study methodologies allowed this research to focus on the embedded experiences of a specific culture. While the EOG test results provided statistical data in an attempt to determine whether or not there is a significant difference in the academic achievement of African American students in *STW* schools as opposed to their counterparts in non- *STW* schools, the case study of one particular *STW* school provided insight that expounded on the numbers through rich contextual data.

3.2 Sample Selection

It is clearly understood and acknowledged that African American students are not part of a monolithic group. They are a reflection of the African American population at large, which is diverse in many ways, such as gender, physical appearance, aspirations, religion, and socioeconomic status. The decision to target African American eighth grade students

3.2.1 Quantitative.

Cohort sampling was initially used to select participating schools for the EOG results comparison. Schools identified as having a high degree of middle school philosophy implementation were those selected by the North Carolina Middle School Association as *Schools to Watch*. There are 33 such schools in N.C. Within this group, only those schools with grades six through eight that are on a standard 10-month operating schedule were eligible for this study. Year-round schools, grades kindergarten-eight schools, and grades seven-eight schools were excluded. Any schools that did not have a large enough African American student population to report data for the 2009-2010 or 2010-2011 school years were excluded as well. The 25 remaining *STW* schools were included.

The comparison group consisted of 25 one-to-one matched North Carolina middle schools. They were matched with the 25 *STW* schools based on location (urban, rural, suburban), racial make-up of student body, and students' socioeconomic status (as indicated by percentages of students receiving free and reduced lunch). Every effort was made to match schools within the same school district, but this was not always possible. For example, in one school district, every middle school has been awarded the *STW* designation. In other instances, the school demographics were unique in their district or schools with similar demographics had already been matched with *STW* schools in their district. In those cases (6), schools with similar demographics in a neighboring school district were selected. These schools could not be *STW* schools. Publicly available information on individual school websites, school districts' websites, North Carolina

School Report Cards, and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction's (NCDPI) website (2011) were used to select matching schools.

3.2.2 Qualitative.

Purposive sampling was used to select the case study school where observations and interviews were conducted. It was designated as a *Schools to Watch* school in 2011. This particular *STW* school was selected due to its demographics. It is an urban school with a predominantly African American student body, the target population for this study. Nearly half of its students qualify for and receive free or reduced lunch. It is also conveniently located in the same city as the university through which the study was conducted. The interviewees came from a selection of forty African American eighth grade students who were identified by a school counselor with the intention of getting a representative sample (12 students) of the gender, socioeconomic, & academic diversity in the school. These students must have attended the case study school continuously since sixth grade. The counselor sent the cover letter and parental consent forms home with students. The first 12 (of 16) African American eighth grade students who returned signed parental consent forms were interviewed.

3.3 Data Resources

3.3.1 Quantitative.

Eighth grade reading and math EOG passing percentages for African American students were obtained from NCDPI's website of disaggregated test data (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2011). Reading and math, in particular, were chosen because one of the strongest predictors for dropping out of school before graduation is being below grade level in those two content areas (Fine, 1991). Eighth grade was

selected because most of the students would have been at the same middle school for three years at that point. The EOG passing percentages were the most recently available (2009-2010 and 2010-2011 school years), and $\alpha = .05$.

3.3.2 Qualitative.

Case study data were collected via observations and student interviews. After undergoing formal Schools to Watch training offered by the North Carolina Middle School Association (NCMSA), the principal investigator used the four observation instruments (See Appendices C-G) adapted from the Schools to Watch Criteria Rating Sheet (See Appendix B) to guide observations. Observation instruments, which emphasize the four standards of *STW*, were marked after the completion of observations. During each observation, detailed notes were taken of what took place. Classes, team meetings, a faculty meeting, and the school as a whole were observed.

Twelve African American eighth grade students were purposively selected to participate in individual interviews based on diversity in gender, socioeconomic status, and academic achievement. These one-time interviews lasted approximately 15 minutes. Interview questions were designed to gain student perspectives on the four *Schools to Watch* standards (See Appendix D). It was expected that student responses would either corroborate or contradict *STW* ratings and observation notes. After parental consent was obtained, the principal investigator worked with a school counselor to arrange interviews during school hours at a time that would not be detrimental to the student's academic program. Interviews were recorded via a digital tape recorder and transcribed verbatim. Data collected from the *Schools to Watch* evaluators, African American eighth grade

students, and the principal investigator allowed for triangulation of data for increased validity.

3.4 Instrumentation

The *Schools to Watch (STW)* criteria to recognize exemplary middle schools are the basis for the instruments used in the study: *Schools to Watch Criteria Rating Sheet*, *North Carolina Schools to Watch Self-Study and Rating Rubric*, classroom observation instrument, team/department meeting observation instrument, faculty meeting observation instrument, general observation instrument, and interview protocol. *STW* is a collaborative effort by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, the North Carolina Middle School Association (NCMSA), and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI). Middle schools awarded with this distinction are featured in state and national publications, participate in professional development, and serve as models for other schools. Approximately 200 U.S. schools have earned the title of “*Schools to Watch*,” with 33 of them currently in North Carolina. Schools may nominate themselves to be evaluated on these four *STW* standards (NCMSA, 2009b):

1. Academic Excellence (The school prioritizes and supports academic success. It challenges all students to use their minds well.)
2. Developmental Responsiveness (The school is sensitive to the unique developmental challenges of early adolescence.)
3. Social Equity (The school is socially equitable, democratic, and fair. It provides every student with high-quality teachers, resources, learning opportunities, and supports. It keeps positive options open for all students.)

4. Organizational Structures and Processes (The school is a learning organization that establishes norms, structures, and organizational arrangements to support and sustain the school's trajectory toward excellence.)

Schools receive a score from 1-4 on each descriptor under the four standards:

- 4 = High quality, complete, mature, and coherent implementation – Nearly perfect, little room for improvement
- 3 = Good quality, incomplete, maturing, or not fully implemented by all – Still room for refinement and improvement
- 2 = Fair quality, mixed implementation, immature practice, sporadic by some – Significant improvement needed
- 1 = Poor quality, low level of implementation, new program, by a few – Considerable strategic planning, consensus building, and improvement needed

3.4.1 Schools to Watch criteria rating sheet.

Assessment of the four standards is formally documented using the *Schools to Watch Criteria Rating Sheet*. Prior to undergoing the official nomination process, schools may do a self-evaluation on the four standards using the *North Carolina Schools to Watch Self-Study and Rating Rubric* instrument, which mirrors the *Schools to Watch Criteria Rating Sheet*. The following are examples of descriptors that are evaluated under each standard:

1. Academic Excellence: Instructional strategies include a variety of challenging and engaging activities that are clearly related to the grade-level standards, concepts, and skills being taught.

2. **Developmental Responsiveness:** Students are provided multiple opportunities to explore a rich variety of topics and interests in order to develop their identity, learn about their strengths, discover and demonstrate their own competence, and plan for their future.
3. **Social Equity:** All students have equal access to valued knowledge in all school classes and activities.
4. **Organizational Processes and Structures:** A shared vision of what a high-performing school is and does drives every facet of school change (See Appendices B & C for full instruments).

In this study, particular emphasis was placed on the third standard, Social Equity, in order to highlight the tenets of culturally responsive education. Standard three reflects culturally responsive education with supporting descriptors such as the following:

- To the fullest extent possible, all students, including English learners, students with disabilities, gifted and honors students, participate in heterogeneous classes with high academic and behavioral expectations.
- Students have ongoing opportunities to learn about and appreciate their own and others' cultures.
- The school's reward system is designed to value diversity, civility, service, and democratic citizenship.

3.4.2 Case study observation instruments.

The case study observation instruments are comprised of the general and detailed criteria of the *North Carolina Schools to Watch Self-Study and Rating Rubric*. Each guide for observations leaves an "Evidence" space for observers to record such things as

examples, explanations, and details. At the end of the observations, the observer completed an overall classroom, team/department meeting, faculty meeting, and general observation form to give an overview of observations in each setting. First, the classroom observation instrument served as the guide for observers in eighth grade core content and elective classrooms of the case study school. It includes such criteria as the following:

- Academic Excellence: Students know what high quality work should be like.
- Developmental Responsiveness: Students talk about daily issues in their own lives, their community and their world.
- Social Equity: Teachers differentiate instruction in order to give each student equal opportunity to comprehend the standards-based curriculum.
- Organization Structures and Processes: Teachers get professional support to improve instructional practice (i.e. classroom visitations, peer coaching, demonstration lessons, etc.)

Second, relevant criteria from the *Rating Rubric* were selected to guide the team/department meeting observations. The following are examples of detailed criteria on the team meeting observation instrument:

- Academic Excellence: Teachers make connections across the disciplines to reinforce important concepts and assist students in applying what they have learned to solve real-world problems.
- Developmental Responsiveness: Students take an active role in school-family conferences.
- Social Equity: The faculty is always seeking ways to improve programs, curriculum, and assessment to better meet student needs.

- **Organization Structures and Processes:** The faculty and administrators see barriers as challenges, not problems.

Third, the faculty meeting observation instrument was used to guide observations in the faculty meeting. Examples of the detailed criteria on this instrument follow:

- **Academic Excellence:** All teachers use common, frequent assessments to benchmark key concepts and the achievement of their students.
- **Developmental Responsiveness:** The school houses a wide range of support—nurses, counselors, resource teachers—to help students and families who need special assistance.
- **Social Equity:** The school values knowledge from the diverse cultures represented in the school, community, and our nation.
- **Organization Structures and Processes:** The shared vision drives constant improvement.

Fourth, a general observation instrument was created to cover what may not be evident through classroom, team/department meeting, and faculty meetings. This instrument was applied to what was viewed on school literature, the school website, special programs, or general observations as observers walked through and spent time in the school. The general observation instrument also pulls criteria from the *Rating Rubric*:

- **Academic Excellence:** Flexible scheduling enables students to engage in academic interventions, extended projects, hands-on experiences, and inquiry-based learning.

- **Developmental Responsiveness:** Every student has a mentor, advisor, advocate, or other adult he/she trusts and stays in relationship with throughout the middle school experience.
- **Social Equity:** The school recruits a culturally and linguistically diverse staff.
- **Organization Structures and Processes:** Principals insist on having teachers who promote young adolescents' intellectual, social, emotional, physical, and ethical growth.

These instruments were piloted in a local N.C. *STW* middle school prior to being used in the case study school. The pilot school was selected based on convenience of location and access. It is located in the same school district as the case study school. Eighth grade language arts classes, an eighth grade team meeting, and the school as a whole were observed. As a result of the pilot observations, a decision was made to take detailed notes during observations, rather than completing the observation ratings after each one as originally planned. After all observations were concluded, then the ratings would be completed.

3.4.3 Interview protocol.

The interview protocol used with 12 African American eighth grade students in the *STW* case study school is an instrument designed by the principal investigator. The first few questions served the purpose of rapport-building. For example, students responded to questions like “How long have you attended Impact Middle School?” and “What kind of things do you like to do in your spare time?” Fifteen other questions solicited data about the implementation of the four *STW* standards in the exemplary middle school from the students' perspectives.

The following four examples of these additional questions are provided with their corresponding *STW* standards indicated:

1. Academic Excellence & 2. Developmental Responsiveness: What do you like about your teachers? What could your teachers do to improve?
3. Social Equity: As an African American student, explain why you do or do not feel valued at your school.
4. Organizational Processes and Structures: How would you describe your school's discipline policies?

This instrument was piloted in a local N.C. *STW* middle school prior to being used in the case study school. The pilot school was selected based on convenience of location and access. It is located in the same school district as the case study school. Only eighth grade students who had been in the pilot school for all three years were interviewed. The result of the pilot interviews was rewording and/or breaking down of some questions to increase clarity.

3.5 Data Analysis

3.5.1 Quantitative.

EOG passing percentages of African American students from the *STW* and non-*STW* schools were compared via ANOVA. ANOVA is a procedure for testing a hypothesis in order to evaluate differences in the means of two or more populations or treatments (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2007). Its ability to compare two or more treatments gives it an advantage over *t* tests, which are limited to two. In order to further explore possible explanations of the comparison results, ANOVA was used to control for variables such as school racial make-up, student socioeconomic status (SES), and teacher qualifications.

Data were further analyzed using Hierarchical Linear Models (HLM), also called multilevel models. Data often have a hierarchical structure in research, particularly within education (Raudenbush et al., 2004). The subjects themselves can be grouped by characteristics/qualities that may influence the study. Requiring specialized software, final analyses using HLM were performed to determine if the percentage of African American students in a school district had any bearing on the EOG passing percentages of eighth grade African American students.

3.5.2 Qualitative.

Interviews, observations, and prior *STW* team feedback allowed for triangulation of data. Data from the *Schools to Watch Criteria Rating Sheet* and student interviews were analyzed using thematic coding in order to categorize, synthesize, search for patterns, and interpret the qualitative data. Thematic analysis involves coding and then segregating data by codes into clumps for further analysis and description (Glesne, 2005). The inductive coding involved the creation of categories in relation to the data by grouping data together under an umbrella term that distinguished them as being of the same type. Themes enabled the investigator to identify, label, interpret, describe, and organize. The *Schools to Watch Criteria Rating Sheet* and *North Carolina Schools to Watch Self-Study and Rating Rubric* were used to help analyze data. Key factors and relationships were identified. Then the data were revisited, scrutinized, and systematically explored to generate meaning. By repeatedly reading the rubrics, notes, and transcripts, the principal investigator became immersed in the data and went through a continuous process of applying and developing codes, refining, elaborating, defining, rejecting, and splitting.

3.5.3 Establishing trustworthiness.

Along with the triangulation of data (EOG percentages, observations, interviews) and sources (observers, students, *STW* evaluation team), peer debriefing, and member checks were used to establish trustworthiness. Two researchers, one of whom had undergone *STW* training (principal investigator) and one who had not (graduate assistant), conducted observations at the case study school. The second observer was a graduate assistant/student in the same doctoral program as the researcher. A native of North Carolina, her previous professional experience included four years teaching science at an inner-city Miami middle school, professional learning community leader for first- and second-year middle school science teachers, and science department chair. She received her B.A. in Exercise and Sports Science, followed by an M.S. in Educational Leadership.

The two observers made use of peer debriefing at the end of each day of observations. Peer debriefing is a “process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytical sessions and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). It helps uncover the researchers’ assumptions, biases, and perspectives.

Finally, member check is a technique used by researchers to increase accuracy, credibility, and validity by testing their own meaning making against feedback from study participants (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006). It provides an opportunity to summarize preliminary findings, correct errors and challenge misinterpretations, and minimize personal bias. Two faculty/staff members present during observations who

were identified as having a good rapport with the principal investigator, and therefore deemed most likely to respond openly and honestly, were asked for feedback on summaries, descriptions, interpretations, and conclusions drawn by the researcher. Likewise, two of the 12 students interviewed who were viewed as being the most open and honest were asked to do the same. They were be asked to confirm, dispute, or clarify the reflection of their views or experiences.

3.6 Reporting

Electronic copies of the dissertation have been made available to participating schools and school districts by request. The principal investigator has offered to personally share the results of the study with school/school district personnel in an abbreviated format, such as a summary and multimedia presentation. This may take place in faculty meetings, professional development sessions, or district level meetings. Finally, the principal investigator has secured consent to present this information via published articles, books, professional development workshops, and conference presentations or papers.

3.7 Summary

This study used a non-experimental mixed-methods design. The quantitative data was collected in the form of EOG test passing percentages of African American students in *STW* and one-to-one matched non-*STW* middle schools. This data was analyzed for patterns and significance via ANOVA, *t* test, and HLM. Qualitative data was gathered from a case study of an urban *STW* middle school with a large African American student population. It involved student interviews and observations of classes, faculty and team meetings, and the school as a whole. Thematic coding was used to analyze qualitative

data. Trustworthiness was established by triangulation of data and sources, peer debriefing, and member check. The findings of this study will be shared in chapter four.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS

Chapter Four begins with a presentation of the quantitative results. Summaries of the analyses via ANOVA, *t* test, and Hierarchical Linear Models have been provided. Next, the qualitative findings are shared, beginning with overviews of the observations and interviews. Then each student who was interviewed is introduced. After this, themes that emerged during observations and interviews are shared. Finally, a synopsis of the *Schools to Watch* evaluation team's site visit has been rendered.

Quantitative.

Statistical data were collected to address the first research question: Is there a significant difference in the academic achievement of African American students in middle schools that highly implement the shared principles of middle school philosophy and culturally responsive education, and African American students in middle schools that do not highly implement the shared principles of middle school philosophy and culturally responsive education?

The level of significance was set at .05 for all statistical analyses. Students receive scores of Level I, II, III, or IV on EOG tests. Scoring at level III or higher is considered passing. Students within the range of Level III are deemed to be performing at grade level in the tested content area. A student scoring at Level IV is identified as being above grade

level in the tested content. Eighth grade African American student passing percentages in this study include students who scored at level III or IV on both the reading and math EOG tests.

Whether or not the school had been awarded the STW designation was the independent variable (0 = No; 1 = Yes). The percentage of the eighth grade African American students passing both reading and math (2009-2010 and 2010-2011) was used as the dependent variable, as opposed to using all six dependent variables: 1) percentage passing math 2009-2010 school year, 2) percentage passing math 2010-2011 school year, 3) percentage passing reading 2009-2010 school year, 4) percentage passing reading 2010-2011 school year, 5) percentage passing reading and math 2009-2010 school year, and 6) percentage passing reading and math 2010-2011 school year (See Table 1.). The decision was made to only use the percentage passing both reading and math variables based on the Pearson correlation coefficients. The coefficient ($r = .59$) for passing both reading and math in 2009-2010 and for passing both reading and math in 2010-2011 was an indication that these variables were related but not similar, in contrast to other coefficients that were either almost the same as one another and/or different across the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 school years ($r = .33, .36, .45, .54, .61, .65., .66, .68, .69, .80, .97, .98$). It is interesting to note that there was a high correlation between passing both reading and math tests and passing the reading test in 2009-2010 ($r = .98$). In other words, if a student passed the reading EOG, he or she was more likely to have passed both the reading and math EOGs. However, the same relationship was reduced to .54 for the 2010-2011 academic year. On the other hand, the correlation coefficient between passing the math EOG and passing both the reading and math EOGs was .69 in the 2009-

2010 school year but .80 in the 2010-2011 academic year. This unstable relationship between one-subject EOG and two-subjects EOG confirmed the use of passing both reading and math EOG tests as the dependent variable.

Table 1: *Correlations Between Variables*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Schools (n = 50)					
Passed math 2009-2010		.47**	.61**	.45**	.69**	.47**
Passed math 2010-2011			.33*	.68**	.36*	.80**
Passed reading 2009-2010				.61**	.98**	.54**
Passed reading 2010-2010					.66**	.97**
Passed reading & math 2009-2010						.59**
Passed reading & math 2010-2011						

Note. *p < .05, **p < .01

Table 2: *Descriptive Statistics*

		M	SD	N
Passed reading & math 2009-2010	Non-STW	.62	.16	25
	STW	.62	.14	25
	Total	.62	.15	50
Passed reading & math 2010-2011	Non-STW	.59	.15	25
	STW	.60	.16	25
	Total	.59	.15	50

There was no statistically significant difference between STW schools and non-STW schools on the combination of the dependent variables using Wilk's Lambda criterion, $F(2, 47) = 0.02, p = .98, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .001$. Additionally, there was no statistically significant differences between STW and non-STW schools on the percentage of passing both reading and mathematics in 2009-2010 academic year, $F(1, 48) = 0.002, p = .96, \text{partial } \eta^2 < .001$. There was no statistically significant interaction between time and STW status across schools on the combination of dependent variables using Wilk's Lamda, $F(1, 48) = 0.04, p = .85, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .001$, which means that the change of scores across years followed the same pattern in STW schools and in non-STW schools. There was no statistically significant change of scores from one academic year to the other in each type of school either, $F(1, 48) = 1.90, p = .17, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .04$.

Additional analyses were completed to determine if there were any significant differences between the two cohorts, relative to their EOG passing rates. A repeated

measures analysis using passing percentages in both reading and math in 2009-2010 as the pre-test and passing percentages in both reading and math in 2010-2011 as the post-test was conducted. Again, there was still no significant difference between *STW* ($M = .62, SE = .03$) and non-*STW* ($M = .62, SE = .03$) in 2009-2010 or *STW* ($M = .60, SE = .03$) and non-*STW* ($M = .59, SE = .03$) in 2010-2011.

Figures 1 and 2 below depict a decreasing trend for both *STW* and non-*STW* in the percentages of African American eighth grade students passing both reading and math EOG tests over two school years. Figure 1 also shows a decreasing trend in the gap between both cohorts across the same time span. In Figure 2, the *STW* slope is smaller, denoting a slower declining passing rate than the more rapidly declining passing rate for the non-*STW* cohort.

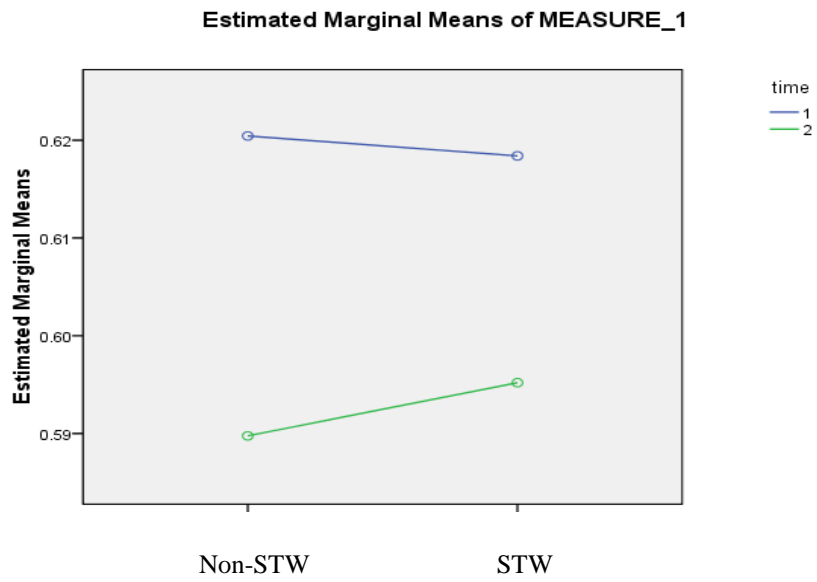


Figure 1. Estimated marginal means of measure: STW

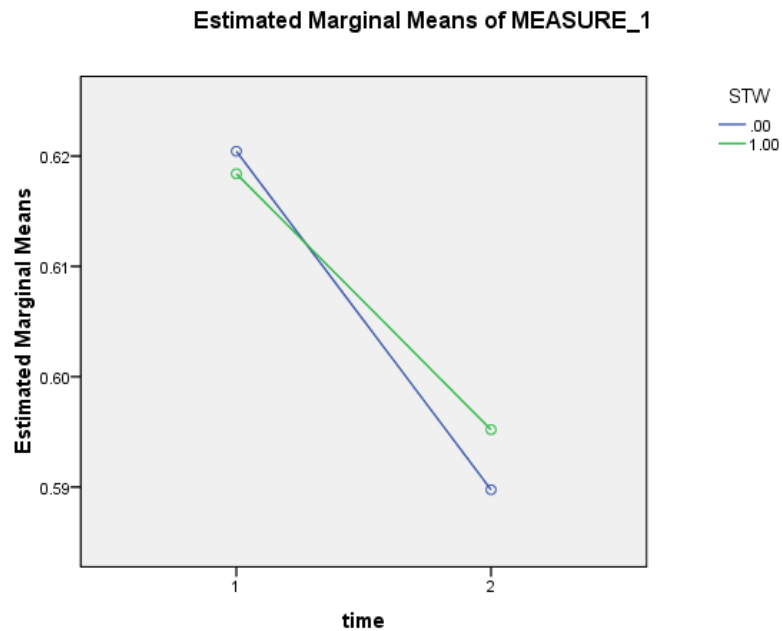


Figure 2. Estimated marginal means of measure: Time

Final analyses using Hierarchical Linear Models (HLM) were performed to determine if the percentage of African American students in a school district had any bearing on the EOG passing percentages of eighth grade African American students. The outcome variable was the difference of EOG passing percentages of eight grade African American students between the school and the district. The independent variables at Level 1 were STW status and the number of years of STW designation (dosage). The independent variable at Level 2 is the percentage of African American students at each district. The two-level HLM model is as follows:

Level 1:

$$Y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}X_{1ij} + \beta_{2j}X_{2j} + r_{ij}$$

where Y_{ij} is the predicted difference between school and state on the passing percentage of eighth grade African American students. β_{0j} is the predicted difference for non-STW schools. β_{1j} is the gap between STW schools and non-STW schools, β_{2j} is the relationship between dosage and the passing difference between school and state, and r_{ij} is the residual that was assumed to be normally distributed with a mean of zero.

Level 2:

$$\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}W_{1j} + u_{0j}$$

$$\beta_{1j} = \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11}W_{1j}$$

$$\beta_{2j} = \gamma_{20} + \gamma_{21}W_{1j}$$

Where γ_{0j} , γ_{1j} , and γ_{2j} are the intercepts, respectively, W_{1j} is the percentage of African American students in the district, γ_{01} , γ_{11} , γ_{21} are the influence of the percentage of African American students in the district on β_{0j} , β_{1j} , and β_{2j} , respectively in each school. β_{1j} and β_{2j} were assumed to be fixed, and β_{0j} was assumed to be random. The results of the HLM models are presented in the table that follows.

Table 3: *Parameter Estimates of Difference Between School and State in HLM*

	Coefficient	SE	t	df	p
Initial Difference(ID)	0.10	0.04	2.28	15	.04
Gap between STW and Non-STW schools (Gap)	-0.004	.07	-0.05	44	.96
Relationship between dosage and the difference (Rel)	-0.009	0.01	-0.63	44	.53
Impact of District African American Percentage on ID	0.002	0.003	0.74	15	.47
Impact of District African American Percentage on Gap	0.0005	0.004	0.11	44	.91
Impact of District African American Percentage on Rel	0.0007	0.0008	0.88	44	.39

The HLM results in the table above showed that no statistically significant difference was found between STW and non-STW schools in their African American eighth grade EOG passing rate difference with the state passing rate, $t(44) = -0.05$, $p = .96$. This result is consistent with that of the independent samples t test, $t(48) = 0.12$, $p = .90$, Cohen's $d = 0.03$ (small effect size). Similar results were found for the relationship between the length of STW program (dosage) and the difference between school and state on the passing rate, the impact of district percentage of African American students on the three

parameter estimates: (a) initial difference, (b) gap between *STW* and non-*STW* schools, and (c) the relationship between dosage and the difference between school and state on the passing rate of eighth grade African American students.

4.2 Qualitative.

The case study was designed to address this research question: How are the shared principles of middle school philosophy and culturally responsive education implemented in an exemplary middle school with a predominantly African American student population?

The case study site, Impact Middle School (pseudonym), is located uptown in a thriving metropolis in the southeastern United States. The city is a major financial center that draws diverse groups of people to relocate there from across the U.S. and abroad. Impact is one of almost 160 schools in the large school system of which it is a part. Over the years, this district has seen waves of major transitions from segregation, being part of pivotal court cases concerning desegregation, turnovers in educational leadership, and an overall about-face to second generation segregation, or resegregation, based on neighborhood schools. This school system is currently responsible for educating over 140,000 culturally diverse students.

After each complete set of observations (faculty meeting, classrooms, team meeting, and general), the principal investigator used the instruments for each (See Appendices D-G) to record ratings and evidences for the four *STW* standards: Academic Excellence, Developmental Responsiveness, Social Equity, and Organizational Processes and Structures. After all observations had been completed, a table was created for each standard which provides a summary of what was recorded in the observation instruments.

Since the number of meetings and classrooms observed was limited, the principal investigator hesitated to enter a rating of “4” unless there was substantial evidence to do so. See Tables 4-7.

Table 4: *Summary of Observation Ratings and Evidence: Academic Excellence*

Standard and rating	Evidence	Not/rarely observed
Academic excellence 4	Principal’s article; Health teacher example; Rubrics; IB learner profiles; AOI; Opportunities to revise and resubmit assignments; Quarterly assessments—disaggregated data; Parent Assist; Wiki pages; Real-world examples; IB curriculum; Critical thinking; Interdisciplinary themes; 5 th block Socratic seminars, D.E.A.R., study halls; Cooperative learning; Project-based learning; Hands-on; Integrated technology; Mock EOG; Data notebooks; Student-led conferences; 75-minute blocks; Tutoring; Pull-out/remediation; Algebra; Inclusion classes with EC teacher; Data notebooks; PEPs; Field trips; IB report cards; Parent workshops; TD meetings; School website; PTSA; ESL teacher; 92% passing reading/math; Data-driven decisions; Narrowing achievement gap	Coaching; Peer observation; Examples/models of high quality work shown to students

Table 5: *Summary of Observation Ratings and Evidence: Developmental Responsiveness*

Standard and rating	Evidence	Not/rarely observed
Developmental responsiveness 4	<p>Teams; Grade level building wings; Content PLCs; Trainings on diabetes, asthma, homelessness; Transportation for homeless students outside district; 504 mandates; Nurse; 2 counselors; EC teacher; Routines and procedures; Organization for interactive and data notebooks; 5th block advisory/clubs; Community service; Health Day; College memorabilia and stories; Group work; Parent Assist; Student-led conferences; Websites; 9 sports; 7 electives; Fitness Gram; School-wide projects—Veterans Day, Grit soldiers; Parent involvement in field trips, PEPs, community service, conferences; Priority conferences for Ds/Fs ; ESL teacher; “Liar” play and resources; Parent workshops; TD meetings; College pennants; School news broadcast; Student Council; Parent involvement via PTSA, IEPs, school leadership team, community service</p>	<p>8th grade pure team; Career planning; Student voice/representation in what happens at school</p>

Table 6: *Summary of Observation Ratings and Evidence: Social Equity*

Standard and rating	Evidence	Not/rarely observed
Social equity 3	504 accommodations; Homeless student accommodations; No negative labels; Discipline plan collaboration; Field trip scholarships; Tutoring before/after school and during lunch; 5 th block flex; Computer lab open hour before and after school; Pull-out remediation; All students get IB curriculum; 6 th grade learning styles assessment; Experimentation with varied approaches to national math standards, skills-based in math, technology in ELA; Research; Labs; D.E.A.R.; Inclusion classes; Sports; Clubs; Electives; Multiple problem-solving approaches allowed; Positive reinforcement; Multicultural materials in Spanish and ELA; Quarterly awards assemblies; Team meetings; Discipline assemblies; Building supervision; 89% African Americans, 95+% Asian, 95+% Hispanic passed reading/math EOGs; Data-drive decisions; EC policy; EC teacher; Language policy; ESL teacher; PTSA reflections contests; Principal advocate for all students; High expectations for all	Awards other than sports or academics; Analysis of referral and suspension data; Differentiation within classes; Families sharing beliefs and traditions; Teacher allowing questions (2 teachers); Peer coaching; Demonstration lessons; Multicultural materials outside of Spanish and ELA; Transportation for families to school events; Staff reflective of student population

Table 7: *Summary of Observation Ratings and Evidence: Organizational Structures and Processes*

Standard and rating	Evidence	Not/rarely observed
Organizational structures and processes 3.5	School-wide discipline plan; Training by principal, counselor, assistant principal; Mentors and team leaders plan lockdown; Teams; PLCs; Counselors; Nurse; Trainings relevant to needs of students; School leadership team; Grade level team leaders; Department heads; PLCs; TAC; Solution-oriented; Quarterly assessments; Data notebooks; IB Approaches to Learning chart; Alignment of assessments with grading; Data-driven instruction; Parents informed via student-led conferences, wiki pages, PEPs, PTSA; Flexible scheduling; Academic Facilitator; Word walls in every class; 5 th block; Team meetings; PLC meetings; Faculty meetings; School Improvement Plan; Ruby Payne poverty training; STW training; Feeder elementary schools; partial IB destination high schools; Open houses; 5 th grade visitors; AYP goals; district pacing guides; Middle grades licensed teachers	Current professional development; Student voice/representation in school governance

4.2.1 General observations and contextual background.

The school's website, time spent waiting in the front office, walks throughout the school, and an eighth-grade assembly all were used to gather additional data over a period of three months. Well over 900 children attend Impact Middle School and are 70 percent African American, 16 percent White, 7 percent Asian, and 5 percent Hispanic. English Language Learners (ELLs) make up 1 percent of the student population, and about 45 percent of its attendees qualify for and receive free or reduced lunch. Considered an underperforming school just six years ago, Impact went from being a School of Progress to a School of Distinction to an Honor School of Excellence over the past three years. The school and its principal have received state and national awards that recognize its success in narrowing the achievement gap. A magnet school, Impact made the transition from open school to Impact Open IB (International Baccalaureate) World School in recent years. Students are admitted to Impact either from feeder elementary schools or through the school system's choice lottery.

Overall, general observations of the school depicted the academic growth of Impact over the past few years as well as its commitment to providing support for its students. Collaboration and relationships were key features as evidenced by the organization of grade levels into teams and content departments into professional learning communities (PLCs). The school's website was a major resource for parents and students. Through it, they could be more informed, get involved, and receive further academic assistance. General observations provided evidence for all four STW standards. See Tables 4-7 above.

4.2.2 Faculty meeting observation.

Faculty meetings at Impact Middle School usually took place every second and third Wednesday at 7:30 in the morning. Meetings were not held in the afternoon because of the new later dismissal time of school that year. To make up for asking teachers to report to school early on these days, a light breakfast was provided by each team or by the Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA). This particular meeting was held in the health teacher's classroom and took place prior to any classroom observations.

The faculty meeting showcased the training of Impact's staff to be more responsive to its diverse student population. The principal led by example with a brief presentation of a teaching strategy. Other staff leaders shared valuable information pertaining to asthma, diabetes, homelessness, and the school's discipline plan. Evidence for all four STW standards was obtained via the faculty meeting. See Tables 4-7 above.

4.2.3 Classroom observations.

The principal investigator observed three math, two English language arts, two social studies, two science, and three elective classes (Spanish and drama) once over a period of two months (with the exception of one of the elective classes, which was observed twice at the request of the teacher). Three observations were in sixth grade classrooms, seven were in seventh grade, and two were in eighth grade. Classes were observed in no particular order for an entire block of approximately 75 minutes. The second observer was brought in for one day of peer debriefing to bring accountability, balance, and a different lens through which to view the school. In most cases, the teacher whose class was observed had volunteered at the email invitation of the school's Academic Facilitator. In a few instances, to get a more balanced picture of classrooms,

either the principal investigator requested to observe particular teachers or the Academic Facilitator asked individual teachers directly. Every effort was made to observe a variety of content areas, grade levels, academic ability levels, and teaching backgrounds.

Classroom observations also yielded evidence for all four STW standards. See Tables 4-7. The importance of the IB Areas of Interaction and learner profile became clear. Interdisciplinary learning was another key evidence that was emphasized. Allowing students to assess themselves and modeling organization skills via notebooks were commonplace. Cooperative learning occurred in multiple classrooms as well.

4.2.4 Team meeting observations.

The principal investigator devoted a full school day to observing only team meetings. These were held during the planning periods for each team of teachers. The day, times, and locations for team meetings each week were fixed. The elective, seventh grade, eighth grade, and sixth grade teams were observed. Counselors assigned to each team were also part of these meetings. Each meeting was facilitated by two lead teachers on the team.

During team meetings, it became clear that teacher relationships and decision-making were important in the school. Moreover, the collection and use of data to guide instruction and make decisions was a common thread in the meetings. Again, interdisciplinary learning was a prominent feature. The use of fifth block flex to address students' academic, social, and emotional needs was apparent in the discussion and planning that took place. All four STW standards were supported by evidence observed in team meetings. See Tables 4-7.

4.2.5 Interviews.

The eighth grade counselor, who also shares the counseling of seventh grade students with the school's other counselor, was directed by the school principal to identify a cross-section of Impact students to be interviewed. The goal was to interview a representative sample of the school's population: gender, socioeconomic status, ability, and achievement. In total, forty students received parent letters and consent forms. The first 12 parents who mailed the signed forms to the principal investigator had their children interviewed (Sixteen parental consent forms were returned signed). Eight girls and four boys were interviewed. The eighth grade counselor suggested interview times during the school day that would cause the least disruption or be least likely to impact each student's academic program. Most interviews took place in a closed room between the main office and the student services office. The last few occurred in an empty office in student services.

4.2.5.1 Interviewees.

Prior to starting the recorder, the principal investigator told students the first question (See Appendix H) so that they would have a few minutes to come up with a pseudonym. Most students selected a first name only. Three of them chose a first and last name. Students will be referred to by their chosen pseudonyms.

Bishop Jackson was thirteen years old at the time of the interview. Per the inclusion criteria, he had been attending Impact since sixth grade. He enjoyed drawing, playing basketball, and hanging out with his friends and family. His favorite subject was science. Bishop believed that his peers would describe him as "funny," and his teachers

would say he was “well-rounded.” Although he was passing social studies, it was one of his lowest grades due to “...bad test grades and some other homework and one project...”

Tyquan Gordon was the only one who was fourteen at the time of the interview. He was in his third year at Impact and enjoyed playing football and video games. In particular, he liked playing computer games and Playstation 3. He felt that his favorite class, math, was the easiest one because he knew “numbers and stuff.” Tyquan thought both his peers and his teachers would describe him as “silly.” He had a 504 plan and science was his most difficult subject because of the vocabulary.

Brittany had also attended Impact for three years and was thirteen. Dancing, skateboarding, cheering, and running were among her favorite things to do in her spare time. She was on the school’s soccer team and she, too, found math to be easy. When asked how her peers would describe her, she said “goofy.” Brittany felt that her teachers’ perceived her as “quiet.” She found her most challenging subject, science, “hard to remember.”

Thirteen-year-old Taylor was an avid reader and liked to dance. Accordingly, English language arts was her favorite subject. Learning about different cultures in books appealed to her. “Silly” was how she imagined her peers would describe her. The word Taylor chose to represent her teachers’ depiction of her was “determined.” She said her worst subject was science because “I really don’t have anything to connect with science.”

In her third year at Impact, Rebecca was thirteen years old. In her own words, she liked to “dance and sing...and stuff like...swimming and just being like...doing something ‘cause I don’t like sitting at home being bored.” Another English language arts lover, Rebecca was especially interested in learning new words. She thought that “silly”

or “outgoing” might be how her peers viewed her and that her teachers would describe her as “goofy.” Disliking the teacher’s personality and teaching style led her to name social studies as her hardest class.

Devin, thirteen as well, indicated that he had two pastimes: playing basketball and sleeping. He enjoyed learning about history in social studies class. He selected “comical” as the descriptive word his peers would use for him. Confirmed by his demeanor in the interview, Devin said his teachers would consider him to be “shy.” He found the amount of vocabulary required to learn science more difficult than in other classes.

Tori Brown was thirteen when she was interviewed during her third year at the school. Among her extracurricular interests were Girl Scouts, baby sitting, watching television, and using the internet. She liked everything involved with English language arts, particularly literature. “Quiet” was how Tori believed both her peers and her teachers would describe her. She deemed social studies to be the least interesting subject.

Having attended Impact since her sixth grade year, Shaniya was thirteen years old. Reading and playing sports were activities she enjoyed doing in her free time. Soccer was her favorite sport to play. When describing her best subject, math, she responded that “...It just seems easy for me to do...and the actually go step-by-step problems just help me.” Shaniya believed her peers viewed her as being “friendly,” while her teachers deemed her to be a “good student.” She said that science was “...just a little bit harder to understand with all the different things that you have to do.”

Jasmine was another thirteen-year-old who was interviewed during her final year at the school. She shared that she liked to dance, draw, listen to music, and play sports with her brother. She had taken ballet, tap, and hip hop dance classes outside of school.

She credited her mother's skill in math for it being easier for her to understand. True-to-form during the interview, Jasmine felt that her peers would say she was "energetic." She guessed that her teachers "...will probably describe me as...I think really determined because if I don't get a certain topic we're learning in class, I'll do pretty much everything I can to make sure I get it..." She could remember basic things from social studies but had difficulty retaining information beyond that.

Thirteen-year-old Aubrey's interview lasted the longest out of the twelve, as she provided more in-depth responses. Figurative language, poetry, and reading led her to focus more on English language arts, her best subject. She described herself, from her peers' perspectives, as "outgoing because I like to try new things, and I'm very...forward..." Aubrey's response to how her teachers would portray her led to two conclusions, "outgoing" and "hardworking." Science was her worst subject because she felt that she was easily confused by all the material that it entails.

Nathan was thirteen and had attended Impact for all three grades. He took pleasure in singing and doing martial arts, which he mostly learned from his dad. He had to stop taking tae kwon do when his grades dropped in elementary school. A departure from the other interviewees who named one of the four core subjects, Nathan's best subject was French because he "...took up languages really easy, so when it comes to learning French, I can get it down-packed, and I can say it with the accent that I need." Although he felt his teachers viewed him as being "helpful," he said his peers would call him "depressing" because "I don't really smile a lot. I walk around the school like if anything happens, it happens." He described himself as someone who was just not good with math.

Finally, Erica had been at the school since sixth grade and was now thirteen when interviewed. She said that she loved to sing, dance, act, and write poetry. Naturally, her love of writing fueled her energy in her best subject, English language arts. “Caring” was the way she thought her peers would describe her. When asked the same about how her teachers would depict her, Erica simply said, “Awesome.” She, too, cited math as her most difficult subject: “It’s always been hard for me ever since like sixth grade...”

4.2.6 Themes.

Observations and interviews were used to help answer the second research question: How are the shared principles of middle school philosophy and culturally responsive education implemented in an exemplary middle school with a predominantly African American student population? Impact employed those shared principles via the following: 1) A shared vision of high expectations for all, 2) Support for the diverse needs of students, 3) Empowerment for decision-making and risk-taking, 4) Assessment and modification, 5) Real-world application, and 6) Firm, proactive, and positive discipline. See Figure 3.

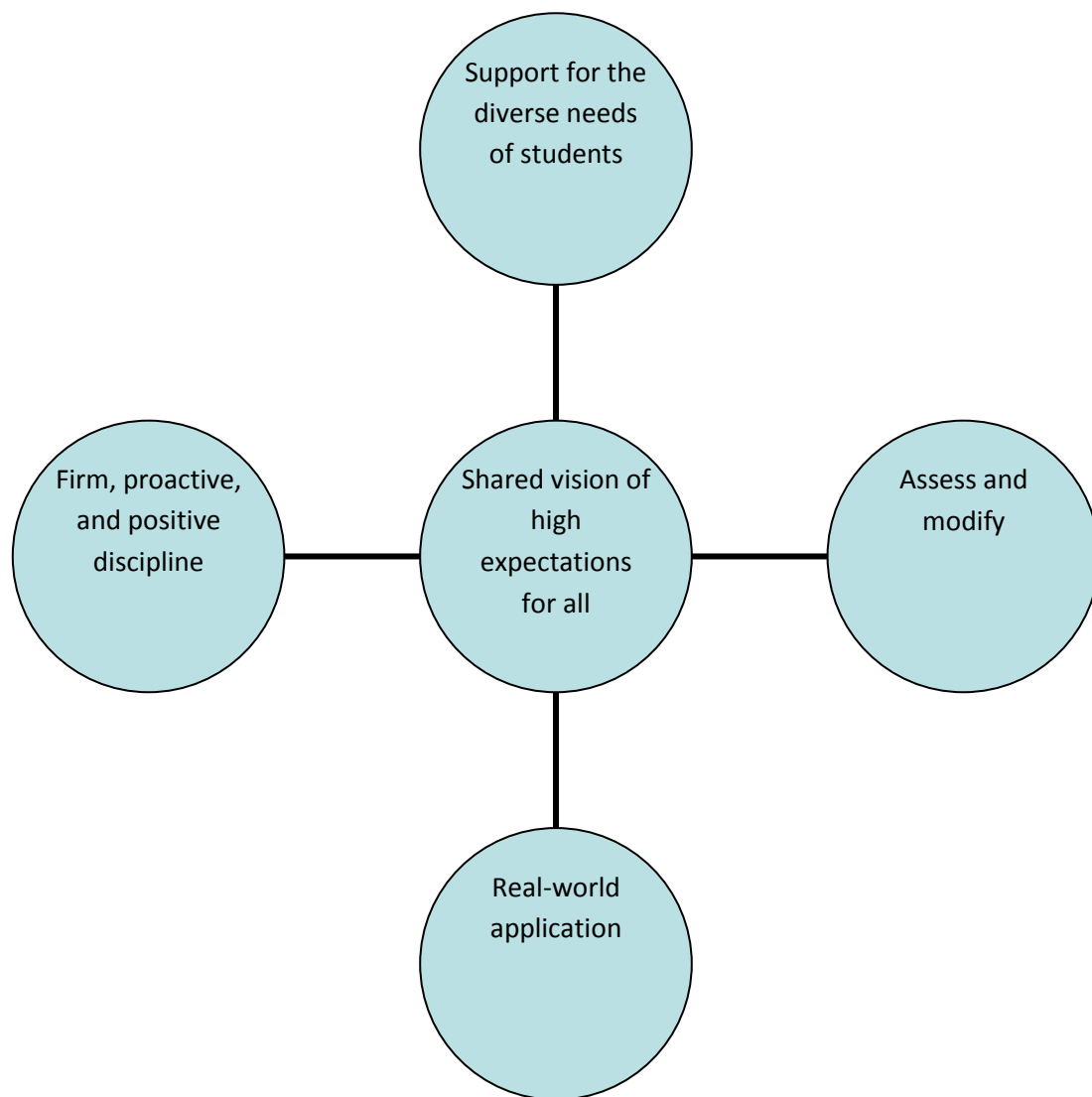


Figure 3. Impact’s implementation of the shared principles of middle school philosophy and culturally responsive education

4.2.6.1 *A shared vision of high expectations for all.*

General observations and contextual background revealed that Impact students receive the message that there are high expectations for all in multiple ways. All students participate in the IB curriculum, including exceptional children (EC) and ELLs. Students are reminded of the expectations as they walk the halls and see IB learner profiles and

college pennants on the walls. All classes are Standard Plus (at grade level) or Honors, and three Algebra classes are offered. The school day is organized into blocks of 75 minutes of instruction for each class. Impact students have several different types of support available to them to help facilitate their academic success. Among these are remediation/pull-out and tutoring offered three times a day. EC and ESL teachers provide individualized assistance as needed. Enrichment field trips and assemblies help to fill in background knowledge gaps. The school website is also used to reinforce academic concepts and skills.

The school building is over thirty years old, yet everything appears to be functional and cared for. Walking through the school hallways, students are reminded of the characteristics and expectations of IB students in various places, including the student services (guidance) office. College pennants line the main hallway with the names of the teachers, administrators, and support staff who attended them below. The front office was always a busy spot, with visits from students and parents. The office staff was usually very friendly to both types of guests. One of the secretaries was overheard telling a student who was asking to use the phone, “Won’t you be late for your next class if you stop to use the phone? Got to have a plan of action for success!” Individual photographs of several diverse Impact students in various poses graced a prominent wall in the front office.

The location of the faculty meeting also communicated the expectation of academic excellence for all. The principal recognized the health teacher’s ability to keep classes engaged and on-task, in spite of her large numbers of students at a time. She was also acclaimed for being passionate about her subject. The health teacher posted

assignments for each block by their expected graduation year, rather than by their block number. The principal led by example in teaching a strategy for the staff to ensure student understanding of concepts. She passed out an article to the teachers entitled “Checking for Understanding: Finding Out What Students Have Learned and What to Reteach Requires More Than Asking Students to Nod or Recite Facts.” She shared the importance of this and some of the key ideas from the article. She asked teachers to read the article and apply the strategies in their classes to ensure authentic student learning. The checking for understanding article emphasized higher order questioning of students and invoking their critical thinking skills, as opposed to rote memorization.

Classroom observations further corroborated the school’s aim for academic success for all. Class blocks consisted of 75 minutes of various types of instruction and practice. As noted by both a math and an English language arts teacher, both Standard Plus and Honors classes offered challenging curricula. Both levels of classes were comprised of students across racial, gender, and socioeconomic groups. The IB curriculum was infused throughout and Areas of Interaction were routinely displayed on classroom boards. Every student was required to take a foreign language every year at the school. References teachers made to college and memorabilia that they posted in their rooms reiterated high expectations. A social studies teacher stressed the dangers of plagiarism and its consequences and shared an example from college.

Impact students who were interviewed understood the high expectations of academic excellence that go along with attending the school. They referenced the IB program and the advanced learning that it encompasses. They were aware that learning is of the utmost importance and that disruptive behavior would not be tolerated. English

language arts and math were students' favorite subjects because they enjoyed reading and writing or found math to be easy. To help students meet their academic goals, they said their teachers are able to break down and explain concepts very well. Their teachers also provide them with websites, including Study Island, and offer tutoring to help them be successful. Three students could think of nothing that their teachers could do to improve. There were no consistent answers about what teachers or the school could do to improve.

Jasmine's response provides a good summary of the collective responses of the interviewees to why their school had received the *STW* designation: "I think it's all the opportunities us as students have here and teachers, too, because we always get community service opportunities, and we do about twice as much as a normal, regular middle school...and because we're IB, we incorporate a lot of global things into our learning." Students cited the following reasons for the designation: "good environment for kids," "good students," "good with academics and stuff," "we care about the community," and "we learn worldwide." Aubrey expounded, "I think we earned that honor because... these group of students... They get down to business. They're not all over the place. They're focused, and... this school itself has so much educational um... What's the word I'm looking for? Well, it's so educational to where it broadens like... It opens so many doors for you, and I think we see it as well as outsiders. They see, wow, this school really helps their students get to where they need to go, and they lay down things... so clearly that you'll understand it. It's... a very clear understanding of what the rules are and what you have to do, and they really get you, pretty much."

Four interviewees stated that their teachers did not discriminate, but that they helped all students equally. Devin explained that "they treat me... how a student is

supposed to be treated...They're supposed to be cared for and try not to get upset with them all the time and to help...them understand what they're doing, understand and try to communicate with them." Bishop Jackson described how the IB curriculum was available to everyone in the school: "Well because ummm...it's a nice school. We're IB so like other schools they just focus on what's happening in the United States, but we focus on what's happening, happening globally around the world...so...that takes part in it and the IB program where it's not just half of the school or parts of the school is IB. Everything is IB." Another student remarked that teachers at other schools may have low expectations of their African American students, but that was not the case at Impact.

Students have clearly risen to the standard of excellence, as Impact is an Honor School of Excellence. It has received local and national recognition for its success in narrowing the achievement gap. African American students at the school passed their reading and math EOG tests at a rate of 89 percent, well above the district and state averages. From the physical building, to the curriculum, to the words spoken from adults, to the corresponding supportive actions by those adults, the vision is revealed: All students at Impact are expected to excel.

4.2.6.2 Support for the diverse needs of students.

In order to help its students meet the high expectations for all, Impact offers a wealth of support for them. General observations and contextual data provided plenty of evidence. Impact teachers have participated in professional development for working with students and families in poverty. All teachers at Impact are licensed to teach middle grades, and the majority of them are considered highly qualified by state standards.

Although there were 10 new teachers due to district staffing policies, the majority of Impact's teachers were veterans.

Exceptional Children (EC) at Impact were included in regular instruction and had their needs addressed on a consultative basis with an EC teacher. The school's exceptional children policy maintains that these students are also held to high expectations but will be supported through differentiated instruction and Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Likewise, English Language Learners (ELLs) have access to a trained teacher who helps facilitate the learning of academic and conversational English. The school's language policy encourages students and parents to continue speaking and learning in their native languages at home.

Students in need of extra academic support were accommodated in multiple ways. At grade eight, struggling students receive intensive instruction in reading and math. The four math teachers each teach eighth grade math. There are three Algebra classes and one pull-out class for underperforming students. Eighth grade English language arts teachers are trained in remedial reading and teach three classes of fifteen struggling readers. Any Impact student can schedule tutoring with a teacher before school, after school, or during lunch. Computer labs open an hour before and remain open an hour after school so that students who do not have access to a computer at home may use one at school. The school district also offers an after school program there for a fee.

The school's website was also used as a link to support resources. The school calendar provides dates for parent workshops ("Parent 101" and "Parent University") and Talent Development meetings (for parents of gifted students). "Parent Assist" is a way for parents to log in and see their child's grades and assignments at any time. Students

can access “Study Island” to practice and increase proficiency in areas of weakness. Moreover, each teacher is required to create a wiki page for their classes. Homework is posted there. Teachers are also asked to include a link to the lesson for that day as a way of re-teaching it. Links to textbooks are also made available online.

In addition, the school had tailored its program to be developmentally appropriate. The assignment of students to grade-level teams helps to foster students’ sense of belonging. Fifth block advisory also provides a time to address and help students navigate the issues that affect adolescents with their backgrounds. Moreover, all students have numerous options for exploration via interest-based elective classes, clubs, and sports of their choice. Further, the Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA) also sponsors reflection contests periodically. One contest was called “Diversity Means…” and invited students to submit original dance choreography, literature, photography, film production, musical composition, and visual arts that reflected the theme. Another contest, “Defending the Dream,” asked students to reflect on the reality of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s dream.

Fittingly, the bulk of the faculty meeting was used to equip teachers to meet the needs of their diverse groups of students. The principal shared with the staff that it was held in a classroom that was an example to be emulated. The classroom was an inviting one that appeared to be student-centered. Student work was posted, and students had been assigned individual roles in their groups. The Smart Board could be used to engage 21st century learners in general, but definitely for visual and tactile/kinesthetic learners.

During the meeting, a school counselor spoke with the staff about children with 504 and Individual Health Plans (IHPs). She used notes on the projector and began by

speaking about children with diabetes first. She explained what it is, types, treatment options, and what to do. Diabetic children are to be allowed to use the restroom and to go see the nurse upon request. Second, the counselor spoke about children with asthma and stated that there were hundreds of them at Impact. She passed out a handout with the current mandates by law of 504 plans. Third, the counselor talked to the staff about homelessness. She discussed factors that contribute to it and how to determine eligibility, including the McKinney-Vento Act (law qualifying a family as homeless that lives with another family, etc.). Examples were shared of children living in neighboring counties outside of the school district but being provided transportation to get to Impact. In one case, it was to keep the child from having to switch schools. In another, domestic violence was a factor. Students living in hotels, shelter, or transitional housing are considered homeless. Finally, the counselor emphasized that everyone is a mandated reporter of abuse or neglect, not just counselors.

Classrooms also showcased the school's efforts to meet the needs of its diverse student population. In a math classroom, a box of supplies sat in the middle of each table that included items such as calculators, rulers, scissors, crayons, and colored pencils available to each student. In an ELA class, there were actually two teachers in the room, the lead teacher and the inclusion teacher who split her time between the core content teachers to be a hands-on resource for students with learning disabilities. Further, the interactive notebook in social studies held information for students and parents about tutoring before or after school by appointment as well as Parent Assist. Instructions for the Ancient Egypt newsletter assignment in another social studies class being held in the

computer lab could be found on the teacher's wiki page, which was linked to the school's website.

Likewise, team meetings rendered more documentation of support for Impact students. In an effort to offer more healthy options, especially for students from lower income families, it was announced in the seventh grade meeting that the current vending machines were being replaced with new ones. This team also discussed its upcoming field trip to the White House. The first payment was for 100 dollars, and although scholarships had been awarded to needy students, they still had to pay something to hold their spots.

A major topic of discussion in the eighth grade team meeting was Personalized Education Plans (PEPs). These are individualized academic support plans for struggling students who are not identified as having a learning disability. Parents, students, and teachers are able to provide input on the plan. One of the team leaders stated that every student who failed a class first quarter should have one. Teachers could also, at their discretion, put one in place for any student who earned a grade of D. Then the team discussed the next round of parent conferences they would hold. The priority conferences were for students who made D's and/or F's. They would start with the students who were failing and then proceed to those with multiple D's. A team leader said that teachers should have PEPs completed by the conference date for each student.

Finally, student interviews confirmed the support data obtained through observations. Nine of the twelve students referenced morning and afternoon tutoring sessions offered by teachers. Four students spoke of teachers' websites, or websites recommended by teachers, including Study Island. One student said teachers do

relooping with students to provide remediation when needed. Jasmine mentioned a few strategies: “Well my math teacher she does tutoring sessions after school...and in 5th block sometimes they let us do study halls where we can help other students who get the concepts can help each other out. In here, we do a lot of group work...and they pair us up based on who gets what and who doesn't get what, so they might pair somebody up who gets...just say atomic structure of a certain element and a person who doesn't get it. Then that person who gets it can help the person who doesn't get it, and by the end of the session or class, both will have gotten it.” Another student talked about the EC resource teacher working with individual students. Tayquan Gordon spoke from his own experience: “I'm not sure if it's help, but it's called a 504 plan, something like that. I got it...and uh it's...like for me, it's like testing, they can send me out to another class...like to the library or something while testing or...if you get more help they know that you're, that you asking a question and...you're a little bit, you can't catch up to the other students.”

Additionally, students discussed the support that they receive from teachers. Three students commended their teachers for their ability to break down concepts and explain them in-depth and repeatedly. Devin answered, “When they're teaching you stuff they actually break it down so you can actually understand it.” Five students expressed their perceptions of teachers being willing to help individual students. One of them, Tayquan Gordon, responded, “...I can ask them for...help and...I won't be nervous to ask them if I have a certain situation or something like that...” Likewise, Erica described her teachers as “really considerate, and they really like care about you...and they're like really determined to like...help you out and stuff.” Other students, like Taylor, appreciated how their teachers relate to their students: “They really know how to talk to

us, like they...understand us.” Jasmine and Rebecca acknowledged their teachers’ efforts to teach to the students’ learning styles.

Rebecca and Aubrey viewed emotional support from the staff as a valuable resource. Rebecca described the “little yellow sheets” that a student could use to write down a problem, such as bullying. She said the student would be called to the office to be helped, similar to a therapy session. Aubrey described a situation in sixth grade where the counselor was the mediator between a group of girls: “...She helped me so much ‘cause she gathered us all around. Then she did individual situations, and we all let out our feelings. There were no...like boundaries, and she let me get my feelings out without like saying, ‘Ok. No, let it go, and then leave.’ She really helped me get through that, and some teachers actually, if they see something going on or you’re acting out of the ordinary, they’ll pull you aside and say, “Hey. Are you okay? Do you need to have like some time alone?” Like they’ll give you a pass to like the bathroom to gather your thoughts and things like that. And also...lately, well, past couple of weeks ago, uh a student that went here died, and people that knew him, they were very hurt by this, and we had a whole situation if you needed to go to the counselor you could go to let your feelings out. So I think that really helps students that--get through their emotions that they’re going through.”

Not surprisingly, the favorite part of the day for a third of the group was a time for movement and talking, Healthy Active Kids. It took place right after lunch, and as Tori Brown described, it is “kind of like recess. We just walk around and socialize.” Tayquan Gordon explained that students are required to walk around the track twice, but after that, they can play organized sports or continue to walk and socialize.

The academic expectations of Impact Middle School were high, but they were not without the supports necessary for students to attain them. Students had many opportunities to learn and reinforce content. Those with specific special needs and circumstances were served by a staff that was trained to accommodate them. The principal and staff were thoughtful about the academic, cultural, developmental, and socioeconomic support they implemented.

4.2.6.3 *Empowerment for decision-making and risk-taking.*

Both staff and students of Impact are encouraged and given opportunities to make decisions and take risks, collectively and individually. Collaboration and choice were two major keys to this empowerment. General observations and contextual data yielded evidence of the theme. Sixth and seventh grade teachers and students are grouped into pure teams. Because Algebra is taught during eighth grade and not all students take it, every effort is made to group eighth graders into teams, but they are not always pure teams. While students are away in their core content classes or in their elective classes, teachers without a class have a full block of planning time. Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays are reserved for department (PLC) and team meetings during this time. The Wednesday planning block is designated as parent conference time.

Fifth block is the final block of the day. The weekly fifth block schedule is as follows: interdisciplinary lessons on Mondays and Tuesdays, clubs on Wednesdays, advisory on Thursdays, and Drop Everything and Read (D.E.A.R.) on Fridays. The integration of multiple subject areas into interdisciplinary lessons planned by team teachers during this time helps students to make meaningful connections and see the big picture of what they are learning in their classes.

On Wednesdays during fifth block, students get to participate in a club of their choosing, such as basketball, poetry, K'NEX, video, Student Council, Science Olympiad, chorus, and study hall. They also have several options of elective classes to take each semester: physical education, health, band, orchestra, business education, theater arts, Spanish, and French. In addition to activities during regular school hours, a plethora of after-school sports teams is offered: basketball, football, cheerleading, softball, baseball, volleyball, golf, soccer, and track.

The faculty meeting further emphasized the importance of collaborative decision-making. The very classroom where the meeting was held depicted the expectation for student collaboration in groups. Assigned roles for students, such as writer, speaker, and manager, were labeled on the desks. After the principal and counselor spoke, one of the assistant principals carried the rest of the meeting. He first reviewed the Safe Schools audit procedures with the staff, going over lockdown procedures and possible scenarios. He then called on the teacher mentors and team leaders to organize a practice lockdown for the school. Next, he handed out an outline of the school's discipline plan. During that discussion, the principal of the school chimed in and asked the staff to help each other, especially if a student was behaving in one class and not another. She stressed the importance of getting the counselors involved immediately if a student had questionable social skills.

Empowerment for decision-making and risk-taking was even more explicit in classroom observations. One teacher shared how their math PLC (Professional Learning Community) had decided to focus on skills, rather than standards. It had worked so well for them that they had been asked to introduce their skills-based approach to the whole

school. Similarly, the first ELA teacher whose class was observed explained how technology standards had now been embedded into language arts curriculum instead of a separate technology course. ELA teachers at each grade level had gone through trial and error to determine how best to implement it for their students. Each grade level had come up with its own plan that seemed to be working for their particular students and ELA teachers. This teacher said she felt “lucky” that they had a principal that allowed them the freedom to do so.

Some teachers, in turn, empowered their students with choices. Another math teacher allowed her students to help create the new seating arrangement for that quarter. In an ELA class, students took a vote on three options for how to read the story: A—Read as whole class, B—Read with partner, or C—Read alone. After the class chose option A, the teacher wrote the names of the nine students who volunteered to read on the board and proceeded accordingly. The third math teacher assured students that he was open to them using different strategies to solve the problems, providing that they made sense and as long as they were not doing a check-up designed to assess their ability to use a specific method.

Student collaboration was a common feature of classroom observations. Roles had been assigned to students at each table in math and theater arts classes. The students dubbed as “runners” collected homework for their groups or approached the teacher to convey the group’s needs. The last part of one math class was spent doing class work. The teacher set the timer to pace students for the 20 minutes. The whole class started out working the problems together. Then they completed the rest of the questions with a partner, each taking turns to lead.

The first science class began with students discussing the rock cycle with their groups at the tables where they were seated. The question was, “What did you hear someone say?” Students responded with, “I heard _____ (student’s name) say...” They also had interactive notebooks in this class. They had them open to their rock cycle diagrams. Having discussed it, their next task was to get up, walk around, and look at everyone else’s diagram in their notebooks. They were to add anything that was missing from another student’s diagram. At the end of this activity, the teacher asked, “How many saw something you didn’t have in your notebook?” Student responses indicated that viewing the work of other students allowed them to see what was right/wrong with theirs. The rest of class was spent on a consumer products lab. To begin the lab, students had to first read over the directions alone. Then they discussed the assignment in their table groups. Finally, they were to design and conduct the lab in a group of their choice.

Electives were not exceptions to routine collaboration. The Spanish teacher instructed the class, “If you see somebody with a red card, you go assist them.” She explained the significance of each colored card. Yellow meant there was a quick question at the table. Red meant the student didn’t understand. Green meant the student understood it. Following warm-up exercises in theater arts, the students were directed to complete the original musical scripts they had been writing in groups. Each group had about five members. One person from the group was to do the typing of the script, but before sending this person to the computer, the group had to send its “runner” to the teacher. The musical could be in revue or book format, based on the group’s preference. Groups could choose to use original or popular songs, but there must be at least three musical numbers at least one minute long each.

Furthermore, team meetings were filled with several moments of decision-making and risk-taking. The agenda for each team meeting had been shaped by the recent meeting of the school leadership team. The school leadership team consists of parents, teachers, and administrators who meet monthly for the purpose of school improvement and to create opportunities for parent involvement.

First, elective teachers discussed professional learning communities (PLCs) and were encouraged to work harder to make them work. They were told that they could do this by sharing and learning from one another. PLCs were mentioned in the seventh grade meeting as well. A team leader pointed out that there are some strong ones in the school and that teachers should visit/observe ones that are working well. She informed them that their Thursday department meetings did not have to be in isolation. They could visit with PLCs of different content areas than their own. They could even have an interdisciplinary PLC.

Every team meeting included a debate about fifth block club day because, as an eighth grade team leader stated, there had been discussions in the school leadership team meeting about getting rid of it. He said there were teachers who did not like it at all, and they were mostly ones who did not think of fresh ideas after the first month. The size of the clubs had become an issue because some teachers did not facilitate/advise a club. The team agreed that some clubs' membership should be by application and approval, such as Student Council. Clubs that were working very well included basketball and poetry. Another teacher felt that students were getting bored in other clubs. One of the team leaders emphasized that teachers needed to be more firm about removing kids who were not doing what they needed to do in clubs. A teacher remarked that students had chosen

their own clubs by ranking their preferences on a form they submitted. Two teachers who led the same club, K'NEX, talked about how much the students enjoyed it, but lamented about how students had to be told repeatedly to clean up the materials.

Seventh grade spent a considerable amount of time talking about club day as well. The team discussed whether or not they liked the clubs, how they were going, and if they should just make them grade level clubs. Some teachers felt that club day was somewhat chaotic since each club was open to any student in each grade level. Others liked having students get to know each other across grade levels. A teacher stated that some students were unhappy with the club selections. There was no consensus about club day, but it was left open for future conversation.

Sixth grade also had a substantial discussion about club day. A team leader shared an idea from the seventh grade team to keep students stationary. The clubs would mostly be grouped by grade level, but teachers could move to other grade levels to host clubs. A teacher stated that students sign up for clubs with friends for the purpose of socializing. The teacher of the chorus club expressed disappointment that students in the club were not serious about singing. The same club, K'NEX, that had been mentioned as being successful in seventh grade, was again hailed as being one that was going well and that students loved. A team leader held that when prospective students in fifth grade come to visit Impact, club day is one of the reasons they want to attend the school. A suggestion was made to add more study halls and to make one of them a club for “good” kids. Someone else said that the students did not know what they were signing up for, so it was recommended to have the video club film the clubs so that students could see what they were about. The consensus was that there was too much good coming from club day to

get rid of it, but that it did need to be improved. A teacher explained that attitudes had changed, staff was limited, numbers of students had increased, so staff members viewed it as one more thing to do.

Decisions were also made by the sixth and seventh grade teams concerning fifth block interdisciplinary lessons. The seventh grade team had been doing Socratic seminars on Mondays and Tuesdays during this time. A team leader asked them if they would like to change that. They talked about possibly doing something different with their “high flyers.”

During the sixth grade meeting, a team leader reminded the teachers that students would be running the track that day during fifth block as part of Fitness Gram. They would be documenting such things as miles, height, weight, and body mass index. Following that, one of the team leaders asked how Healthy Living Day had gone. It was a school-wide interdisciplinary theme suggested by one teacher around which each teacher had to design activities within their subject area. Teachers agreed that it had gone well. The team leader stated that it would be even better next time as they learned from their mistakes.

The sixth grade teachers were given an opportunity to put forward an interdisciplinary theme for January. The team leader suggested that the interdisciplinary lesson should span two days. One teacher vehemently objected due to having to incorporate the Design Cycle into her subject area and fearing the loss of instructional time. The team leader then proposed using the Design Cycle as the theme. Other teachers concurred that it would fit well into the curriculum and would allow the objecting teacher to not have to lose a day of instruction. The teacher seemed to be even more frustrated,

“Do whatever...Do five days.” The expressions on the other teachers’ faces seemed to signify that this was not an uncommon occurrence. The team leader replied, “Ok. Great,” and kept the meeting flowing. In spite of the disagreement on interdisciplinary teaching, the sixth grade team went on to collaborate on other agenda items.

A major topic in the seventh grade team meeting was student-led conferences (SLCs), which the team had decided would be conducted by students at home with their parents for the first time. Feedback was solicited from the team. One teacher remarked that he was happy to not be stuck in the gym where the conferences are normally held all during the teacher workday. Another said that as a parent, he preferred to have conferences at school, but maybe they could move them to the classroom instead of the gym. He believed the at-school conferences put more pressure on the student. In addition, a teacher commented that she thought half of the parents may have signed the forms without actually doing the conference. A teacher then suggested doing the conferences at school, but providing parents with an “I Have a Question” sheet that they would submit to the appropriate teacher in order to get individual concerns addressed in a timely manner. The sixth grade team determined that their SLCs had gone well and felt it was valuable and a good decision to hold them at school again.

The final agenda item for each team meeting was an “IB Approaches to Learning” assignment that was due to the school’s Academic Facilitator the next week.

Documentation had to be submitted describing what they had done relative to each IB characteristic. One elective teacher volunteered to develop a template for each elective subject area to use. For various skills taught, they had to indicate in what grade the skill should be introduced, in what grade it should be practiced, and in what grade it should be

mastered. It could be incorporated as part of students' self-reflection for their portfolios. Eighth and sixth grade teachers decided to complete the chart right then and there together in their team meetings.

Student voices during interviews echoed the collaborative decision-making witnessed in observations. Jasmine, previously quoted, described fifth block study halls where students are able to work together on difficult assignments in mixed-ability cooperative learning groups. Another student said his peers could help him with problem-solving at school. Nathan especially liked his teachers' teaching styles. He specifically mentioned teachers who allow students to collaborate in groups. He later said of his peer relationships: "I hang out with a variety of friends, so I don't just hang out with African Americans. I hang out with White kids, Hispanics, Puerto Ricans...and I feel valued since we're all together and nobody's ever fighting, and we're all working together if we ever need help." One of the IB characteristics to which many students alluded in their interviews is being a risk taker.

One choice that did not seem to be available to the staff and students of Impact is whether or not they will make decisions and collaborate. The schedule of the school was created in such a way that forces collaborative decision-making. The school leadership team, PLCs, grade level teams, and cooperative learning teams put the staff and students in a position to take risks and make decisions. They provided safe spaces for the sharing and debating of ideas. Choices in how to implement ideas and changes, as well as interest-based options further encouraged risk-taking and decision-making.

4.2.6.4 *Assessment and modification.*

Much of the decision-making occurring at the school was expected to be data-driven. Impact and its principal have received state and national awards that recognize its success in narrowing the achievement gap. Credit has been given to the staff's ability to make data-driven decisions and modifications. The article the principal shared in the faculty meeting instructed teachers on how to effectively check for student understanding and how to re-teach if necessary. It was intended to move teachers beyond surface-level questioning and assessment during a lesson to deeper measurements of student understanding. When it was clear that students were not grasping a concept, strategies were offered to make adjustments.

Even in classrooms, assessment and modification were integral parts of the lessons. A math teacher shared that students are made aware of the percentage of EOG test questions for each standard and the associated skills for each. They take a mock EOG that the teacher goes over individually with each student so that they can see their areas of strength and weakness to target the areas in need of reinforcing. For the warm-up in this teacher's class, students responded to four questions that required them to apply concepts involving fractions and measurement. He said that, based on assessments, measuring with a ruler was one of the skills in need of reinforcing for many students. Next, students were asked to take out their homework. Answers were projected onto the wall as students were given an opportunity to check their work. They were instructed to change incorrect answers in a different colored ink so that the teacher could see what they were doing wrong. References were made a few times by the teacher that solutions were "common sense" and "should have been easy." If students did not find this to be the case,

they were invited to come to tutoring. The teacher then asked students which problems they needed him to go over. As they gave him problem numbers that they didn't quite get, he worked them out on the board with their input.

The majority of another math teacher's class was spent preparing students for the upcoming student-led conferences (SLCs). The guide/script students were to use included items such as the following: "What to bring, I do/do not do this..., What we've learned about so far, What you should see in my math notebook, I am especially proud of..." The teacher inserted personal stories and humor of past experiences as a student sharing his class performance information with his parents. The students then practiced the conference scripts with a partner. They took turns having one person to be the student, while the other was the parent.

At the beginning of a science class, the teacher had students to take out their homework and discuss it in their groups of four at their tables. Their homework had required them to cut out words/definitions from a handout and glue them onto construction paper under the correct categories: cells, tissues, organs, or organisms. They were asked to raise their hands if their whole group had everything correct and the same. If not, they had to tell what was different. They went over answers and made corrections.

In Spanish, class started with students writing a first quarter reflection describing what they would maintain and what they would improve from the previous quarter. It had to be three paragraphs long and include specifics about homework and tests. Next, students had to set up their Spanish data folders. They were provided rulers to assist them in this process. On the right side, they were to staple their tests and record grades for "spoken personal info," "written personal info," and "1st qtr. adjective" for the first

quarter. Students were instructed to make corrections to their tests. For the second quarter, their first test entry was “1-45 vocabulary word.” The teacher let the students know that they could find the grades for each one on Parent Assist. She then went over these vocabulary words with the students, including the associated body motions/signs that she had taught them to help them remember what the words meant. During the subsequent part of the lesson, each student was given an index card. The teacher told them the card was for them to keep a tally with plus and minus symbols in class of their speaking. They were to track their own progress. The teacher asked, “How much are you speaking in Spanish? You can do a lot better. You’re not pushing yourself enough.” She then referenced their speaking log that students were to use outside of class. They were to get an adult to sign it each time they spoke Spanish when they were not in that class. Emphasizing the index cards and logs seemed to be effective, as students began to participate and focus more.

Team meetings highlighted the school’s prioritization of assessment and modification. They presented a time for teachers to discuss data and its usage. Teachers were given more guidance for using data binders in their classes during the team meetings. They were to allow the data to guide their instruction and assessments. Each team mapped out when students would be introduced, practice, and master IB skills. Even previously documented team discussions about clubs and student-led conferences served as examples of evaluating programs and practices to make necessary adjustments.

Elective teachers were instructed to be thoughtful about what students were to submit in the data binders. Submissions should be materials that are helpful to them and the teacher. The teachers should consider how to triangulate the data and how they would

use it. Accordingly, the following item on their agenda was about grade data. Teachers were told that they should be aligning the quarterly assessments with their instruction. The grade data should be informing what and how they teach. Next, one of the team leaders asked the teachers to evaluate their wikis for their classes. The question was posed, “Is yours a strong 21st century effective communication tool?” If not, the teacher was to update and make adjustments to their wiki.

Like the elective team, the seventh grade teachers also talked about grades and formative assessments. The emphasis this time was on whether or not grades for students in their classes aligned with their performance on formatives. Then the team was asked to make sure that the data binders were working for them. They should each make a system for themselves so that they could keep track of what they needed for their specific classes. Data binders should reflect the level of rigor of their classes and track the root of students’ will to succeed (or lack thereof). The seventh grade teachers were also asked to evaluate their wiki pages to assess how strong and effective they are and make modifications accordingly.

Eighth grade teachers were instructed to break down quarterly assessment data by class, gender, and grade level. Like the other teams, they spent the last part of the meeting working on the IB Approaches to Learning assignment. Teachers were given a date by which they were to have their criterion grades done to prepare for the IB report card. The team discussed how to tackle the Approaches to Learning chart of when students were expected to be introduced to a skill, practice it, and master the skill and decided to complete the task right then.

Finally, students' sense of personal accountability and self-evaluation was reflected in interviews as well. Four students believed their work ethic and quality caused teachers to value them. Erica responded, "...I may...turn in work that's like really excellent, and I think they feel that I do really good. Just knowing like everything that they say African Americans have been through, and then if I turn in something that's really good, they're like 'Okay really, like basically they've come a long way, something along the lines of that.'" Brittany said of her teachers, "...they think about the intelligence and not what's on the outside, but what you...have to offer." Although Bishop Jackson could not think of anything his school could do better, he expressed that the students "...could do better by working harder and studying more so we all can get in that A and B quartile." Rebecca articulated similar sentiments: "My school...They can...I mean they already a good school, like I don't know if they can do anything better...or probably try to make the kids that's not doing as good, like try to help them to do better...like push them harder." Some students referred to the IB learner profile that encourages students to be reflective learners who assess their strengths and limitations to aid in their own meaningful learning.

The importance of student accountability, self-assessment, and taking ownership of their own learning became apparent through student-led conferences, data binders, and opportunities to assess and revise tests, class work, and homework. Teachers were also charged with evaluating the effectiveness of their own practices and making necessary changes. Instruction was to be guided by assessment data. When something was not working properly, the expectation was for the problem to be diagnosed and for focused solutions to be implemented.

4.2.6.5 Real-world application.

An IB World School, Impact put considerable effort into reaching out beyond the school and preparing its students for life in the real world. Impact students are required to do community service: 40 hours in sixth grade, 50 hours in seventh grade, and 60 hours in eighth grade. The logs students must have completed and signed are received from and returned to math teachers. Not fulfilling the required hours for an academic year will prevent a student from returning to the school the following year. Parents are encouraged to assist students in meeting the requirements. The school provides community service opportunities as well, such as Landscape Day to help beautify the school on a Saturday and giving donations for care packages to be sent to U.S. soldiers deployed overseas.

In addition, enrichment activities are planned throughout the school year. According to the school principal, field trips at Impact are designed to help fill in the background knowledge gaps of its students. They range from local trips uptown to a museum or the professional basketball team arena, to the Outer Banks, to Washington D.C., and to a Native American reservation. Another form of enrichment employed by the school is the selection of a theme word for each school year. The previous year, the word had been “Courage.” During the year of this study, the word was “Grit.” Plans were in the works to have t-shirts made with the word displayed, as well as to invite “The Grit Soldiers” to the school as guest speakers.

The first official school event that was observed by the principal investigator was an eighth grade morning assembly. It was a play called “Liars” that took place in the large auditorium of the school. Before the production started, a few Impact students spoke about etiquette during the show and explained why those requests were necessary

(for example, no getting up, no big hats, no talking). The cast was comprised of adults, two of whom were playing the roles of students. The play involved topics such as drug use, depression, alcoholism, sex, pregnancy, marital problems, and parental issues. Afterwards, the cast led a discussion with the students. A series of statements were made, and students could signify agreement with each by raising their hands. Most students participated by doing so. Students were then asked to line up the cast from the most to the least guilty. Several students raised their hands to share their opinions, and there was much discussion in the crowd. Teachers had received community resource forms to post in their classrooms for students to seek help related to the issues presented in the play. They had also been given a six-page study guide beforehand and information for students to access an online survey.

Real-world connections were also made in classrooms throughout the school. One math lesson officially opened up with “What’s in a serving of cookies?” The teacher used a projector to display the nutrition facts from a bag of chocolate chip cookies, and students had to calculate the calories, fat, cholesterol, sodium, carbohydrates, fiber, sugars, and protein if one were to eat 10 cookies. The class was interrupted by a fire drill, but the teacher used it as an opportunity to do something she had hoped the weather would allow anyway. She did a demonstration of proportions using the shadow of a student. At the end of another math class, they went over the class work aloud, and the teacher asked students to give an example seen in life of percentages or decimals. Students were able to apply the math problems they had been doing to their everyday lives. A different math teacher encouraged his students to support the school-wide Veterans Day project of donating items to U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan

Similarly, a social studies teacher opened class by discussing the ongoing school-wide Veterans Day donations project. He asked, “What is a veteran?” and made application of the term to other careers. He then posed the questions, “Why do we celebrate Veterans Day? What’s the difference between Veterans Day and Memorial Day?” The class then read an article about Veterans Day out loud. After the reading, students began writing letters to current American soldiers overseas that would go in the packages being mailed by the school. The teacher solicited student input on what should be the tone of the letter (thankfulness, joyful, admiration, encouraging, uplifting). He also got students to tell him what should not go in the letter (death, violence, personal beliefs about war/government/religion/culture). Finally, the teacher allowed students to share what should go in the letter (a little about themselves, why they are writing, thank you).

Moreover, the consumer products lab in science required students to create an experiment to determine which brand of paper towels worked the best. They were to think through and record the problem statement, hypothesis, variables, operational definitions, constants, materials, and procedures. Each group had to document their observations, summarize their results, and discuss the implications.

Spanish students were asked to open their notebooks to their IB Article Notes. There was a place to write the student’s name who shared the article, what country the article was about, and notes/facts about the country. Students had been assigned dates to present their articles. The students that shared started out in Spanish: “Me llamo _____. Mi pais es _____.” After the introduction, they began to speak in English, explaining why they chose that particular text, why they agreed or disagreed with it, how the event impacted the world, and through what lens they viewed the article (health, social,

environmental, etc.). Immediately following each presenter, the class said together, “Aplausa, Aplausa.”

Team meetings were used to plan and coordinate some of the school’s endeavors into the real world. It was announced in the elective team meeting that the school would be open that Saturday from 8:00-12:00 for beautification, which students could use to fulfill community service hours. Each teacher was directed to find an activity to contribute to Veterans Day.

An eighth grade team leader explained that the Grit Soldiers were coming as guest speakers. Teachers were instructed to prepare the students by showing the video clips of interviews and have students to make up questions to ask the guest speakers. This was to be done in fifth block on Monday and Tuesday. There would be an approximately 30-minute session for each grade level. Following the assembly, specific students with ties to the military would be invited to have lunch with the guests. That led to an elaboration of what would be taking place at the school for Veterans Day. Again, everyone was encouraged to wear red, white, and blue. Teachers should continue collecting the items for the care packages for deployed soldiers. Monetary donations could be collected after lunch. Students needed to be reminded that they would receive community service credit for their donations. Any veteran would be invited to the school for a reception during first block. Another teacher raised the question of whether or not students were involved in the reception. Others thought that students should be, and the team agreed to select a student from each homeroom to attend the reception.

At the end of the sixth grade meeting, a brief discussion was held about Veterans Day. Teachers should ask their homeroom classes to wear red, white, and blue. A teacher

introduced the idea of having some of the soldiers receiving the care packages to use Skype or YouTube videos to personally thank the students. He felt that the students would love that, and it would provoke them to give even more the next time.

The upcoming trip to the White House was part of the seventh grade team agenda. There were four students for whom the school did not have social security numbers and needed them for the trip. A student may have been labeled as a U.S. citizen but not born here. Those students without social security numbers could go on the field trip, but could not go in the White House. The case of one student was brought up who was scheduled to go to court soon for citizenship determination.

In their interviews, some students also talked about real-world application of their schooling. Bishop Jackson affirmed the relevance of the curriculum: “Yes because we can use these things in the world to watch out like health, AIDS, and HIV...because um teenagers in this, in this era is like the highest it's ever been in African American history that HIV has been the highest percentile, and they're teaching us how to stay away from that, be abstinent and other things.” Rebecca shared that they were learning about the current reality of racial discrimination in her social studies class.

Other students expressed an understanding of the significance of the IB curriculum. Taylor thought the school received the *STW* award “because we have high academic grades, and the students here, we learn...not just what our community learns, but we learn nationwide, like we learn...other, like about other states, other countries. We learn worldwide.” Tori Brown explained how the IB Areas of Interaction allowed students to learn of the similarities between theirs and other cultures as well as how to connect school to their everyday lives. Aubrey said of the school: “We do appreciate all

cultures and... You'll see when--If you come here, you'll see how the impact is on the students learning about different cultures that they see. They learn about it and they see it, and we see videos, and we read articles. It's like real-life situations, and we read them, and we—The way they taught us, they've instilled in us that we shouldn't discriminate on any race or religion, and we've all gathered that information, and we've put it into like hands-on situations. And I do think that they do teach us lots of cultural differences and we learn to... We learn to um put that into when we leave here way...after college. We learn—They've put it in us that--they've instilled in us that information so that when I'm out in the world, I'll be able to connect with different cultures and religions.” Still other students saw their foreign language classes as being helpful when visiting other countries.

The big idea of schooling at Impact was to be effective and impactful beyond the walls of the school. Real-world application was incorporated into class lessons. The community service requirement allowed students to see beyond their own immediate needs. Enrichment activities were designed to broaden students' horizons by taking them out into the real world or to bring it in to them at school. The premise of the IB program was to prepare students to be critical thinkers, able to navigate a global society.

4.2.6.6 Firm, proactive, and positive discipline.

To create an environment conducive to learning, the staff of Impact employed positive reinforcement, preventative measures, and consistency. During the faculty meeting, the assistant principal passed out a handout with an outline of the school's discipline plan. It is a school-wide tiered plan that progresses from teacher classroom discipline, to team discipline, to counselor intervention and parent contact, to parent conference with entire team, to administrative team, to principal meeting, and eventually

to request for revocation to Student Placement. It included opportunities for reflection and self-correction by students. Each tier had multiple actions between it and the next one, and some teachers expressed concerns about the lengthy steps in the plan. The outline of the plan ended with “All Steps Must Be Exhausted Before Moving To Next Tier In Discipline Plan.”

Positive reinforcement and quick redirection were witnessed in almost every observed classroom. Although the first math teacher had a very relaxed teaching style, he was quick to correct off-task or inappropriate behavior with cues such as “Excuse me.” Likewise, when students in another math class blurted out answers or talked while the teacher was instructing, he responded with “Raise your hands. I’ll wait...” or “You’re talking while I’m talking. That’s not respectful.” He used another opportunity to remind students of two of the ten characteristics of the Areas Of Interaction (AOI), intercultural learning and communication.

The first ELA teacher quickly and firmly corrected or redirected a student who had gotten out of his seat without permission and a few who were talking while directions were being given. These students responded quickly and without further disruption. On-task behavior was affirmed with “I love the way y’all are not waiting and drawing right away.” When it was time to regroup after silent reading, the other ELA teacher tried to get the students’ undivided attention. Some were so into their reading that she thought out loud about the dilemma that it must present for them to either stay engrossed in the book or lose points for not participating in this part of class.

One science teacher first used a call-and-response clap to get the attention of the class. Having several students’ attention, he then raised his hand to get everyone onboard,

and students followed his lead by raising their hands. At the appropriate time during the consumer products lab, the teacher directed, “When I snap two times, move into your groups of one to three.” At one point during the other science class, the teacher quieted students by saying, “I know there’s a lot of talk going on and it’s about what we’re doing, but it’s hard to hear, so let’s zip it for a minute.” Later in the class, a student began talking loud to a student at another table, and the teacher simply called her name to get the class refocused and immediately continued with the lesson. When given an opportunity to ask real-life questions about the topic of the day, there were so many questions that the teacher had to temporarily cut them off to get back on track and move to the next slide: “Write your question down, and we’ll get to it. I promise.”

As students in a social studies class responded to a question, their teacher reinforced positive behavior: “Thank you for raising your hand and waiting on me to call on you before speaking.” He also addressed off-task or disruptive behavior: “What did I ask you to do?...Please be quiet.” Similarly, when students began to get loud in theater arts, the teacher asked, “Can you raise your hand so I can hear?”

Teachers were able to coordinate and discuss proactive discipline strategies during team meetings. The first issue the elective team covered concerned safety and security. They discussed recent occurrences of items being stolen from teachers and what they could do to not make their belongings accessible to students. They also talked about an incident of a sexual nature that had just taken place between a male and a female student under the stairwell. The team was reminded that students must have an escort to the restroom, except in the case of diabetics. Remarks were made about how reasonable

and realistic the policy is, but it was established that it was in the best interest of all to follow it.

The first topic for seventh grade teachers was afternoon dismissal from school. They were to close their doors and make sure students are seated after car riders have been dismissed. During transitions before and after school and between classes, they were to stand in the hallway. The team was informed that athletes are to change in the locker rooms, not in bathrooms all over the building. Then this team also discussed students being required to have an escort to the restroom. It was explained that this was because of “issues” in the restrooms. The 10-10 rule should be enforced: Students should not be let out of the class the first 10 minutes or the last 10 minutes of the block. One of the team leaders relayed a plea from an elective teacher who had been present in the leadership team meeting asking the core content teachers to schedule bathroom breaks on the way to lunch so that students did not always come back needing to use the restroom.

When the two counselors joined the seventh grade team meeting, one of them spoke about the discipline assembly that was scheduled for the next month. Issues to be addressed in the assembly included disruptive talking, inappropriate touching, including “gripping” (which she said was the number one bus referral problem), stealing, and what characterizes an IB student. After the larger grade level meeting, they broke down into two smaller groups. One team spoke about students having behavior problems, the sexual incident in the school stairwell, and a particular student continuing to fall asleep in class. The counselor said she would call the students’ home again. The other team talked about strategies and suggestions for students struggling academically or behaviorally. The team was asked to support any teacher in whose class the student was having problems.

In the eighth grade meeting, a team leader mentioned that there would be one discipline assembly per quarter. That led into a discussion of awards for students. The counselor shared that eighth graders were rewarded with beady bracelets. The team brainstormed that there would be recognition for highest averages, most improved, athletics, attendance, National Junior Honor Society, and some type of teacher awards. Winners would be announced in an assembly. One of the team leaders then provided the teachers with directions and reminders about restroom escorts and the 10-10 rule. Another carry-over from the school leadership team meeting concerned supervision of students. A team leader shared that each grade level had been assigned certain areas of the school to do a surveillance walk-through. The eighth grade team decided to pair up and sign up for an A/B-day supervision rotation.

One of the two sixth grade team leaders opened the floor to discussion about scheduling and asked if there were any “kid concerns.” The teachers talked about a student who was feeling as though he gets made fun of easily and how they might help him. Supervision was also a topic of the sixth grade meeting. A team leader explained that teachers had to walk a region of the school to make sure students were where they were supposed to be. A sheet of paper was sent around for the teachers to sign up for areas to supervise. Next, the date was decided for the sixth grade discipline assembly. It would take place during fifth block on a “short” day. That progressed into planning for awards day. Students with the highest averages would be dubbed “Academic All-Stars.” Each teacher would recognize only one student as “most improved,” unless they taught both Honors and Standards Plus, in which case they could select one from each. Any

additional awards teachers wanted to give students would need to be done during their individual classes.

Four students used some variation of the word “strict” to describe Impact’s discipline policies during interviews. Half of them viewed that favorably, and half found the policies to be too much so. Tayquan Gordon lamented, “It feels like you can’t even say ‘hi’ to a person because it’s so strict...It’s kinda, I mean not, not boot camp or nothing, but it’s...stricter than the other 2 years, but it’s probably because of other students and what they did, so it’s understandable. I can see why.” Two students described discipline policies as “good,” and two depicted them as “fair.” One student referred to the policies as “basic.” Two students explained how good behavior resulted in rewards, while bad behavior led to consequences. Devin expounded, “...if you get a referral or if you get suspended, and if there’s a big trip coming up, you don’t get to participate or if it’s...at the end of the year, then you don’t get to participate in the end-of-the-year activities.” Some interviewees mentioned detention, OSS (Out of School Suspension), and ISS (In-School Suspension) as steps in the process.

Aubrey explained the school’s discipline policy: “...There’s lots of steps to get you on the right path of not being off-task, but after like a parent meeting, then you’re going to the principal. Then it’s ISS and OSS. It’s a long process, and through that process, they should either see you getting better, and if you get worse, we’ll just go to the next step and just—It’s more and more, and I think that that...helps students realize, ‘Why am I doing all these bad things when I can be on the right track and learning like I’m supposed to instead of going to the principal and getting a parent meeting and then on top of that getting punished at home for getting in trouble at school?’ I think that snaps

the student's brain on like, 'Act right.' That's what I think." Jasmine described it in a different way: "We have a A, B, D, C policy--ABCD. And A is Anarchy, which is a level you don't want to be at, and D is Democracy where everybody's following directions...If somebody breaks a rule or...Depending on what the rule is, you could get something as simple as silent lunch or something as big as being suspended from school...and the administrators in the office take care of all that."

Although Impact students saw the school's discipline policy as being strict, they generally deemed it to be necessary and fair. They seemed to have a good grasp of the rewards and consequences for behavior. Their teachers were quick to address off-task behavior, but they were just as swift to acknowledge good behavior. Teachers used their times of collaboration to share and coordinate proactive strategies to try to prevent behavioral issues. The school's discipline plan required all of the stakeholders to be involved in each level. The observers did not witness any major behavioral incidents during the three-month period.

4.2.7 Schools to Watch team evaluation.

Impact Middle School received the Schools to Watch award in 2011. The STW team that conducted the observations and interviews that led to the designation found Impact to be exemplary in academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, social equity, and organizational structures and processes (NCMSA, 2009b). The principal investigator and second observer did not read the summary of the STW team's evaluation of Impact until after all data had been collected and analyzed.

Many of the same evidences were cited by both the case study observers and the STW team. In the area of academic excellence, the STW team made mention of the

following: high expectations, data-driven instruction, learning styles, variety of instructional strategies, and integrated curriculum (interdisciplinary units). For developmental responsiveness, the committee alluded to these evidences: passionate teachers, counselors on teacher teams, team meetings, student clubs and organizations, student voice, opportunities for cultural awareness, career awareness, and students' input and choices in everyday experiences. Regarding the social equity standard, EC inclusion, team meetings to help students, fundraisers and scholarships for field trips, parental and community involvement, community service, and the IB program were the documented factors. Finally, several leadership teams, administrators' encouragement of teachers to be risk-takers and leaders, community support and communication, professional learning communities, happy teachers and students, and the local university class held on the school's campus were cited as strong aspects of Impact's organizational structures and processes.

4.3 Summary

There was found to be no significant difference in the academic achievement of African American eighth grade students in the Schools to Watch (STW) cohort and their peers in the non-STW group based on quantitative data. Case study analysis revealed how Impact employed the shared principles of middle school philosophy and culturally responsive education via 1) A shared vision of high expectations for all, 2) Support for the diverse needs of students, 3) Empowerment for decision-making and risk-taking, 4) Assessment and modification, 5) Real-world application, and 6) Firm, proactive, and positive discipline. In Chapter Five, quantitative and qualitative findings will be analyzed in light of the literature and theoretical framework.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

5.1 Discussion

This study was undertaken to investigate the overlapping principles of the middle school philosophy and the ideals of culturally responsive education and to determine their effects on the academic achievement of African American middle school students. Those shared tenets have been identified as relevance, rigor, and relationships. Statistical data was gathered to answer the first research question: Is there a significant difference in the academic achievement of African American students in middle schools that highly implement the shared principles of middle school philosophy and culturally responsive education, and African American students in middle schools that do not highly implement the shared principles of middle school philosophy and culturally responsive education?

5.1.1 Quantitative

Statistical analyses revealed that there is not a significant difference in the academic achievement of African American students in middle schools that highly implement the shared principles of middle school philosophy and culturally responsive education, and African American students in middle schools that do not highly implement the shared principles of middle school philosophy and culturally responsive education. These quantitative findings contradict some of what has been previously reported in the literature. Felner et al. (1997) found that students in middle schools highly

implementing major components of middle school philosophy, such as interdisciplinary teaming, advisory, and consistent teacher norms, outperformed students in all subject areas in schools with low or partial implementation. Likewise, several other investigators obtained similar results when comparing high- and low-implementation middle schools (Backes, Ralston, & Ingwalson, 1999; Cook, Faulkner, & Kinne, 2009; Lee, Smith, Perry, & Smylie, 1999; Mertens & Flowers, 2006; Mertens, Flowers, & Mulhall, 1998; Picucci et al., 2004). The findings of this study are that there was no significant difference in the math and reading achievement of African American eighth graders in STW and non-STW schools.

In the case of other prior studies, the results of these statistical analyses neither contradict nor support them. For example, Lee and Smith (1993) did not compare high-implementation sites with low-implementation sites when they found moderate but significant increases in academic achievement in middle schools engaging in teaming, decreased departmentalization, and heterogeneous grouping. Mertens, Flowers, and Mulhall (2002) and Sweetland and Hoy (2000) simply documented how empowered middle school teachers positively impacted their students' academic achievement. Neither did the statistical procedure to confirm or contradict the finding that culturally relevant pedagogy supports a culture of achievement for students of color (Smith & Ayers, 2006; Ware, 2006). Average passing rates of eighth grade African American students on the reading and math EOG tests were very similar between the two cohorts in the present study. The quantitative results of this study and prior ones further support the need for qualitative data collection and analysis.

5.1.2 Qualitative

Qualitative data was gathered to answer the second research question: How are the shared principles of middle school philosophy and culturally responsive education implemented in an exemplary middle school with a predominantly African American student population? Impact was an exemplary middle school with a predominantly African American student population. As detailed in Chapter Four, the way the school implemented the shared principles of middle school philosophy and culturally responsive education was through the following: 1) A shared vision of high expectations for all, 2) Support for the diverse needs of students, 3) Empowerment for decision-making and risk-taking, 4) Assessment and modification, 5) Real-world application, and 6) Firm, proactive, and positive discipline.

As noted in Chapter Two, the context in which teaching and learning occur have a powerful impact on students' learning (Cotton, 1995; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nuthall, 2005). Impact has been able to contextualize instruction and schooling practices while maintaining academic rigor (Burns, Keyes, & Kusimo, 2005). Like many schools across the nation, students of predominantly one race attend Impact (Kozol, 2005; Rumberger, 1995; The Civil Rights Project, 2006). It is probable that the location of the school in the inner city and the elementary feeder schools from which its students come contribute to that fact. However, unlike the trend of predominantly African American schools providing an inadequate education for their students that does not empower them with many options beyond secondary school (Ferguson, 2000; Ford & Harris, 1992; Mickelson, 2006; Talbert-Johnson, 2004; The Civil Rights Project, 2006), the thriving

vision of Impact is that all of its students will participate in a rigorous and relevant curriculum.

5.1.2.1 A shared vision of high expectations for all.

Observations and interviews at Impact Middle School substantiated that African American students thrive in environments with a strong sense of group membership in which there is an explicit and regularly communicated expectation of academic success for all (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003, p. 107). The relevant curriculum ensured sensitivity to and responsibility for all students as learners (Huber, 1996). Although students attended Standard Plus and Honors math and English language arts classes, everyone was immersed in the IB curriculum, including exceptional children and English language learners. When there is less differentiation in academic programs, students learn more and learning is distributed more equitably across socioeconomic and racial groups (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Lee & Burkam, 2003; The Civil Rights Project, 2006).

With 89 percent of its African American students passing their EOGs, being below grade level in reading and math cannot be applied as a predictor for Impact students dropping out (Fine, 1991). The high percentage of African American students passing reading and math EOGs and the small, narrowing gap between them and their White peers at Impact supported findings of increased academic achievement in schools that highly implement the middle school concept (Lee & Smith, 1993; Lee, Smith, Perry, & Smylie, 1999). Impact can be acknowledged among schools such as the 90/90/90, Comer Process, and Effective Schools that have demonstrated success with all students, regardless of racial or socioeconomic background (Cotton, 1995; Joyner, Ben-Avie, and Comer, 2004; Reeves, 2003).

5.1.2.2 *Support for the diverse needs of students.*

Impact seemed to have taken seriously the National Middle School Association's charge to account for the cultural, experiential, and personal backgrounds of middle school students (2010). The staff received training and constantly tried to meet the diverse needs of their students who were in poverty, homeless, had asthma or juvenile diabetes, had learning disabilities, and other circumstances that could negatively impact their academic success.

The school was equally conscious of the developmental stage of its adolescent students. Assigning students to teams and fifth block advisory were non-negotiable at Impact Middle School. Teams and advisory helped minimize the potential to have a social class disconnection between teachers and students (Cokley & Chapman, 2008; MacLeod, 1995; Talbert-Johnson, 2004). They have been found to improve student-student as well as teacher-student relationships (Connors, 1986; Dickinson & Erb, 1997; George & Lounsbury, 2000; George and Oldaker, 1985; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Ziegler and Mulhall, 1994). By and large, observations and interviews revealed positive relationships among students and between them and their teachers.

Teaming and advisory are also expected to set the stage for good teaching and high academic achievement (Shann, 1999). They have been shown to enhance students' sense of belonging and capacity for learning and support teachers in their endeavors to tailor instruction and assessment to the personalized needs of students (Goodenow, 1993; Tomlinson, 2003; Watson, Battistich, & Solomon, 1997). Minority students from low socioeconomic groups are more motivated by their need for affiliation than for achievement (Delpit, 2006). Impact students described their teachers as being helpful and

caring, and both teachers and students exhibited high levels of respect and appreciation for one another.

5.1.2.3 *Empowerment for decision-making and risk-taking.*

The way that Impact's principal empowered teachers to take risks and make decisions together has been shown to positively impact academic achievement (Mertens, Flowers, & Mulhall, 2002; Sweetland & Hoy, 2000). Teachers were represented on multiple levels of leadership and seemed to freely voice their opinions and concerns. On their PLCs and grade level teams, they were willing to try new strategies, fail, and then try again.

Students also benefitted from the collaboration of their teachers. Interdisciplinary teams of teachers facilitating integrated lessons have been shown to positively impact student learning (Bergstrom, 1998; Caskey, 2002; Daniels & Bizar, 1998; Five & Dionisio, 1996; Pate, 2001; Stevenson & Carr, 1993; Vars, 1997; Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1998). Authentic disciplinary teams help create environments that are positive and conducive to learning (Arhar 1990, 1997; Dickinson & Erb, 1997; Lee & Smith, 1993). In grades six and seven, Impact students and teachers were organized into pure teams.

The disempowerment of teachers correlates with their negative attitudes towards their students who are also disempowered (Fine, 1991). To the contrary, students at Impact were often enabled to make choices, independently and cooperatively. Schools that have been successful with traditionally underperforming students have embedded choices in the curriculum based on students' interests, needs, and strengths (Joyner, Ben-Avie, & Comer, 2004; Reeves, 2003). Impact students could make decisions concerning elective courses, clubs, assignments, and groups.

5.1.2.4 Assessment and modification.

Assessment was used to drive decision-making at Impact. This is considered a best practice in schools with similar demographics (Cotton, 1995; Reeves, 2003). Impact students are just as involved in the use of assessment data as their teachers. They maintain data notebooks, do reflections at the end of each quarter, and use portfolios to do self-evaluations. Their work is assessed frequently, and they are able to pinpoint misunderstandings and get clarification.

Impact teachers appropriately tailored their instruction to students' learning styles and their strengths and weaknesses (Andrews, 2005; Bransford et al., 1999; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Tomlinson, 2003; Tomlinson, 2005; Tomlinson & Eidson, 2003; Wiggins & McTighe, 1998; Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1998). In sixth grade, students take a learning styles assessment so that both they and their teachers would be aware of their specific needs. Students also receive feedback on formative assessments so that they can target areas in need of strengthening.

5.1.2.5 Real-world application.

Giving Impact students regular opportunities to make decisions and solve problems has contributed to a real-world, practical curriculum (Bowers, 2000; Gay & Hanley, 1999). Enriching the curriculum with field trips and community involvement has helped make learning more meaningful for Impact students (Bowers, 2000; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2004). In addition, the interdisciplinary lessons connect schooling to real-world application and provide opportunities for student input on what is learned and how it is learned (Pate, Homestead, & McGinnis, 1997). Interdisciplinary learning occurred at

Impact during fifth block on Mondays and Tuesdays as well as throughout the day at times on a whole-school or whole-grade level basis.

Moreover, designing practical lessons that incorporate students' backgrounds is a routine practice in culturally relevant classrooms (Bowers, 2000; Delpit, 2006; Gay & Hanley, 1999; Irvine & Armento, 2001). Impact teachers solicited input from their students about their experiences and everyday lives during instruction. Another important obligation of culturally responsive teachers is to instill in students the realization that we are all interconnected and interdependent (Gay & Hanley, 1999; Traoré & Lukens, 2006). The IB curriculum in place at the school conveyed that message well. Finally, Impact teachers are expected to provide and use relevant and meaningful learning materials, create learning environments inclusive of cultures, customs, and traditions that are different from their own, and include lessons that assist students in making meaningful connections between their lives and school-related experiences (Hefflin, 2002; National Education Association, 2005).

5.1.2.6 Firm, proactive, and positive discipline.

Previous studies have documented how students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, particularly African American students, are often prejudged and labeled as unruly troublemakers (Carter, Hawkins, & Natesan, 2008; Ferguson, 2000; Fine, 1991; Giroux, 1996; MacLeod, 1995). In order to maintain their sense of dignity and respect, they sometimes resist the mandated norms of school and act out in class (Cokley & Chapman, 2008; Ferguson, 2000; MacLeod, 1995; Ogbu, 2003). The shared vision of high expectations for all at Impact has helped to diminish these practices. The use of a firm, collaborative discipline plan along with positive reinforcement and proactive

strategies to try to prevent behavioral issues allows students to keep their respect and dignity intact.

Further, other studies have recorded how the social class gap between middle class teachers and their underprivileged students can exacerbate conduct problems (Cokley & Chapman, 2008; MacLeod, 1995; Talbert-Johnson, 2004). Impact's efforts to build teacher-student relationships through programs such as advisory assist in alleviating this phenomenon. Felner et al. (1997) concluded that students in middle schools highly implementing major components of middle school philosophy, such as interdisciplinary teaming, advisory, and consistent teacher norms, had lower levels of behavior problems than partial or low implementation schools.

5.1.3 Theoretical framework.

Ladson-Billings and Tate's (1995) critical race theory in education provided a suitable lens through which to investigate Impact Middle School, a predominantly African American urban middle school with approximately half of its students in poverty. Indeed, race is still a substantial factor influencing inequity in the U.S., as Ladson-Billings and Tate argue. To be sure, property rights are foundational to American society. Thus, analyzing observations and interviews at Impact via race and property rights was very appropriate.

First, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) posited that the rights of disposition are at work when students are rewarded for acting according to White middle class norms and penalized for behaving otherwise. Accordingly, it affects relationships, the relevance of the curriculum, and school as a whole. Relationship-building and the relevant curriculum of Impact seem to have lessened the rights of disposition, particularly since the student

population is majority African American. While students have been prepared to successfully navigate mainstream society, they have also been taught to appreciate and respect the diversity of the world, including their own. Moreover, discipline at the school is administered in such a way to allow students to maintain their dignity and to self-correct. Furthermore, supports in place for Impact students assist in making up for any lack of cultural capital. Advisory, interdisciplinary teaming, inclusion, community collaboration, self-expression, exploration, and personalized, relevant pedagogy have helped to engage African American students in learning. Relationships formed and nurtured across cultural boundaries and supports for the student population have empowered Black students with the rights of disposition typically given for exemplifying what is deemed to be White middle class behavior and beliefs.

Second, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) connect the rights to use and enjoyment to the disparities in resources, facilities, and curricula between majority White and majority Black schools. It is most evident in the level of academic rigor in the different types of schools. Impact was housed in an old building in an urban area. However, its students were far from short-changed in getting a quality education. Its students partook in a rigorous, challenging IB curriculum. Their curriculum was enriched with interdisciplinary themes, guest speakers, and field trips in which all students had the opportunity to participate. Further, the school offered a myriad of interest-based classes, clubs, and extracurricular activities. Hence, Impact has extended the rights to use and enjoyment to its entire student body.

Ladson-Billings and Tate's (1995) third argument is that schools gain or lose reputation and status depending on which student population is in the majority. In that

regard, Impact represents a contradiction to the norm. Not only has the school been awarded with the *STW* designation, but it is also an Honor School of Excellence. Moreover, it has received local, state, and national recognition for its academic success and for narrowing the achievement gap. Thus, Impact has gained a reputation that rivals successful predominantly White schools.

Fourth, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) point to academic tracking as the expression of the absolute right to exclude in schools. As explained in Chapter One, racial minorities usually suffer the most at the hand of tracking, which generally offers them the least rigorous curriculum. Again, Impact, a school whose student population consisted of predominantly racial minorities, chose to emphasize inclusion rather than exclusion. All of its students participate in the IB curriculum, including exceptional children and English language learners. The school's shared vision is to uphold high expectations for all. Rather than using challenges as excuses to exclude, the staff was trained on how to include students with special needs, including diabetics, asthmatics, and the homeless. The counselors and EC and ESL teachers were on staff to help facilitate the inclusion of students. Therefore, the absolute right to exclude has been nullified at Impact Middle School.

5.1.4 Quantitative versus qualitative findings.

The quantitative findings, in comparison to the qualitative results, leave much room for speculation and questioning. The stark contrast between the two certainly points to a need for further research. Why was there not a statistically significant difference between the EOG passing rates of *STW* and non-*STW* schools when so much of the qualitative data provided evidence of rigor and meaningful learning taking place in the

case study school? The answer could lie in the limitations of EOG test scores themselves. Many factors can influence how students perform on standardized tests, such as stereotype threat, anxiety, and cultural biases. What is it that standardized tests are not able to tell us? Perhaps the selected statistical tests were not sensitive enough to detect a significant difference. Undoubtedly, the use of student-level data rather than school-level data would have allowed for more precise analyses.

5.2 Limitations of the Study

Clearly, caution should be taken in applying the findings of this study. Schools to Watch schools are members of a cohort that emphasizes academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, social equity, and organizational processes and structures. The member schools in this study were all located in the state of North Carolina. Individually, these schools are situated within their local school districts. Moreover, the case study site had its own particular student population and location demographics. It is a magnet school with a fully implemented IB program. Although generalization to middle schools as a whole would not be wise, a springboard has been provided for some potentially fruitful studies in the future.

5.3 Implications for Further Research

This study provided valuable information and insights, but it also spurred many more questions that need to be answered. The initial proposal for this study included the use of student-level data for the statistical analyses. However, when principals or school districts would not consistently release this data, the decision was made to use publicly available school-level data instead. A future study might include the use of individual EOG test scores of African American students. Examining those scores three years prior

to and three years following the STW designation would be a worthwhile endeavor. Adding standardized test scores in science and social studies is another way to gain more understanding of the effects of these types of schools, particularly since so many of the interviewees found them to be the most difficult subjects. Since very few of the N.C. STW schools had predominantly African American student populations, perhaps a comparison of STW and non-STW schools that are majority Black is in order. Likewise, parallel case studies of predominantly African American STW and non-STW schools would render further insight. Of course, this type of study could be extended to other racial minority groups, such as Hispanics/Latinos and Native Americans, including an ethnic breakdown of the data and findings. The use of quantitative data to investigate both research questions could contribute to a more robust study. In particular, measuring these important features of the case study school would provide even more detailed and precise evidence: absenteeism rates, perceptions of parents and teachers, student motivation, and graduation rates. In the future, a follow-up on Impact students could delve into what school was like before, during, and after attending the school.

5.4 Conclusions

Middle school was a defining time period in my life. Living in a working class predominantly African American neighborhood, school represented glimpses into a world beyond my immediate surroundings. My sixth grade year was the first year that my school district was shifting from junior high to middle schools. Reflecting on that time period now, it became clear to me that lives were made or broken during that crucial stage of life. School could be a refuge and opener of doors, or it could be a place where dreams were shattered. Years later, remembering the tears I shed upon “graduating” from

middle school and having to part ways with friends who were bused in from the suburbs helped fuel my decision to become a middle school teacher.

Having an intelligent brother who dropped out of school as soon as he was legally able to do so and is now in prison, and a sister with a learning disability who was retained twice but decided to persevere to graduation, has energized my passion for learning how to make schools more equitable. Doing this mixed-methods study was quite an undertaking. Conducting meaningful, quality research is hard, but worth every moment. The lack of statistically significant difference in the EOG passing rates of African American eighth grade students was an important finding that led to plenty of other questions. It is very true that the numbers do not tell the whole story. Time spent with the staff and students of Impact Middle School painted a picture and filled in gaps that the statistical data could not. Had this been a quantitative study alone, it may have appeared that *STW* schools are not truly exemplary schools. This speaks volumes about the potentially misleading practice of solely relying on standardized test scores to assess effectiveness and learning. The value of qualitative research cannot be understated.

Speaking with the school's long-time principal before the study began gave me a glimpse into why they have been able to do what they have done with their students. She is a courageous risk-taker who is passionate about providing every student who comes through that school with an exceptional education and preparation for a successful life. Although no school is perfect, including Impact, it is a school that epitomizes the "no excuses" philosophy. They have combined the best of the middle school concept and culturally responsive education to provide a relevant, rigorous education for their students in an environment where relationships are valued and nurtured. Schools do not have to

emphasize one at the expense of the other. In particular, they have implemented those principles via 1) A shared vision of high expectations for all, 2) Support for the diverse needs of students, 3) Empowerment for decision-making and risk-taking, 4) Assessment and modification, 5) Real-world application, and 6) Firm, proactive, and positive discipline. Students there have bright outlooks for the future and have taken ownership of their learning and academic success. Schools with similar student demographics, particularly those that are underperforming, would do well to take note of which aspects of Impact may benefit their students. It is my sincere hope to continue to seek out and investigate schools that are narrowing the achievement gap and effectively educating underprivileged student populations so that they are no longer anomalies, but the norm.

REFERENCES

- Andrews, P. G. (2005). Different, differentiated, and daily. *Middle Ground*, 9(1), 16–18.
- Anyon, J. (2005). *Radical possibilities: Public policy, urban education, and a new social movement*. New York: Routledge.
- Arhar, J. (1990). Interdisciplinary teaming as a school intervention to increase the social bonding of middle level students. *Research in Middle Level Education: Selected Studies 1990*. Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association.
- Arhar, J., Johnston, J. H., & Markle, G. C. (1989). The effects of teaming on students. *Middle School Journal*, 20 (3), 21-27.
- Balfanz, R., & Boccanfuso, C. (2007). *Falling off the path to graduation: Middle grade indicators in [an unidentified northeastern city]*. Baltimore: Center for Social Organization of Schools.
- Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2006). Closing the mathematics achievement gap in high poverty middle schools: Enablers and constraints. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 11, 143–159.
- Balfanz, R., Herzog, L., & Iver, D. (2007). Preventing student disengagement and keeping students on the graduation path in urban middle-grades schools: Early identification and effective interventions. *Educational Psychologist*, 42(4), 223-235.
- Bandlow, R. J. (2001). The misdirection of middle school reform: Is a child-centered approach incompatible with achievement in math and science? *Clearing House*, 75(2), 69-73.
- Bergstrom, K. L. (1998). Are we missing the point about curriculum integration? *Middle School Journal*, 29(4), 28–37.
- Bernard, B. (2003). Turnaround teachers and schools. In Belinda Williams (Ed.), *Closing the achievement gap: A vision for changing beliefs and practices* (2nd ed.). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Bernstein, B. (1975). Class and pedagogies: Visible and invisible. In Halsey, A.H., Lauder, H., Brown, P., & Wells, A.S. (Eds.). *Education: Culture, economy, society*. (pp. 59-79). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Bidwell, C. E. (1965). The school as a formal organization. In March, J. G. (Ed.). *Handbook of organizations*. (pp. 972-1022). Chicago, IL: Rand McNally.

- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In Halsey, A.H., Lauder, H., Brown, P., & Wells, A.S. (Eds.). *Education: Culture, economy, society*. (pp. 46-58). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. & Passeron, J. (1977). *Reproduction in education, society, and culture*. London, UK: Sage.
- Bowers, R. S. (2000). A pedagogy of success: Meeting the challenges of urban middle schools. *Clearing House*, 73(4), 235-238.
- Bowles, S. & Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in capitalist America*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Bransford, J. D., Brown, A. L., & Cocking, R. R. (Eds.) (1999). *How people learn: Brain, mind, experience, and school*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.
- Bryk, A. S. & Thum, Y. M. (1989). The effects of high school organization on dropping out: An exploratory investigation. *American Educational Research Journal*, 26(3), 353-383.
- Bunting, C. E. (2005). Middle school: Lessons from the rand report. *Clearing House*, 78(3), 132.
- Burns, R., Keyes, M., & Kusimo, P. (2005). Closing achievement gaps by creating culturally responsive schools. Charleston, SC: Advantia, Inc.
- Burris, C., Garrity, D. T., & Association for Supervision and Curriculum, D. (2008). *Detracking for excellence and equity*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Carnegie Corporation of New York. (1989). *Turning points: Preparing American youth for the 21st century*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Carr-Chellman, A., Beabout, B., Almeida, L., & Gursoy, H. (2009). Idealized visions from behind bars: Prisoners' perspectives on school change. *International Journal of Educational Reform*, 18, 155-172.
- Carter, N. P., Hawkins, T. N., & Natesan, P. (2008). The relationship between verve and the academic achievement of African American students in reading and mathematics in an urban middle school. *Educational Foundations*, 22(1-2), 29-46. Retrieved from <http://caddogap.com/periodicals.shtml>
- Caskey, M. M. (2002). Authentic curriculum: Strengthening middle level curriculum. In V. A. Anfara, Jr., & S. L. Stacki, (Eds.), *Middle school curriculum, instruction, and assessment*, (pp. 103–117). Greenwich, CT: Information Age.

- Catsambis, S., Mulkey, & Crain, R. L. (2001). For better or for worse? A nationwide study of the social psychological effects of gender and ability grouping in mathematics. *Social Psychology of Education*, 5, 83–115.
- Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence. (2004, March). *Research evidence: Five standards for effective pedagogy and student outcomes*. Technical Report No. G1. Retrieved from <http://www.crede.org>
- Christle, C., K. Jolivet, and M. Nelson. 2007. School characteristics related to high school dropout rates. *Remedial & Special Education* 28(6), 325–339.
- Cokley, K. O., & Chapman, C. (2008). The roles of ethnic identity, anti-white attitudes, and academic self-concept in African American student achievement. *Social Psychology of Education: An International Journal*, 11(4), 349-365. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11218-008-9060-4>
- Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. In Halsey, A.H., Lauder, H., Brown, P., & Wells, A.S. (Eds.). *Education: Culture, economy, society*. (pp. 80-95). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Collins, J. (2011). Literacy as social reproduction and social transformation: The challenge of diasporic communities in the contemporary period. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 31(6), 614-622.
- Columbia College. (2005). *The academic achievement gap: Facts and figures*. Retrieved from <http://www.tc.edu/news/article.htm?id=5183>.
- Connors, N. (1986). *A case study to determine the essential components and effects of an advisor/advisee program in an exemplary middle school*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL.
- Cotton, K. (1995). *Effective schooling practices: A research synthesis, 1995 update*. Retrieved from <http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/esp/esp95toc.html>
- Cook, C.M., Faulkner, S. A., & Kinne, L. J. (2009). Indicators of middle school implementation: How do Kentucky's Schools to Watch measure up? *Research in Middle Level Education Online*, 32(6), 1-10.
- Daniels, H., & Bizar, M. (1998). *Methods that matter: Six structures for best practice classrooms*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- Darling, D. (2005). Improving minority student achievement by making cultural connections. *Middle School Journal*, 36(5), pp. 46-50.
- Datnow, A., & Hirshberg, D. (1996). A case study of King Middle School: The symbiosis of heterogeneous grouping and multicultural education.

- Delgado, R. & Stefancic, J. (2001). *Critical race theory: An introduction*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Delpit, L. (2006). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. (2nd ed.). New York, NY: New York Press.
- DeMarrais, K. B. and LeCompte, M. D. (1999). *The way schools work: A sociological analysis of education*. White Plains, NJ: Longman.
- Dickinson, T. S., & Erb, T. O. (1997). *We gain more than we give: Teaming in middle schools*. Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association.
- Diero, J. (1996). *Teaching with heart: Making healthy connections with students*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Dillon, S. V., & Grout, J. A. (1976). Schools and alienation. *Elementary School Journal*, 76(8), 481-489.
- Engerman, K. (2006). Family decision-making style, peer group affiliation and prior academic achievement as predictors of the academic achievement of African American students. *Journal of Negro Education*, 75(3), 443-457. Retrieved from <http://www.journalnegroed.org/>
- Erb, T. O., & Stevenson, C. (1999). From faith to facts: Turning Points in action – What difference does teaming make? *Middle School Journal*, 30 (3), 47-50.
- Esposito, J., & Swain, A. N. (2009). Pathways to social justice: Urban teachers' uses of culturally relevant pedagogy as a conduit for teaching for social justice. *Penn GSE Perspectives on Urban Education*, 6(1), 38-48. Retrieved from <http://www.urbanedjournal.org/Vol.%206%20Immigration%20Issues%20in%20Urban%20Schools/38-48--Esposito%20and%20Swain%20.pdf>
- Evans, J., & Davies, B. (2011). New directions, new questions? Social theory, education and embodiment. *Sport, Education and Society*, 16(3), 263-278.
- Felner, R. D., Jackson, A. W., Kasak, D., Mulhall, P., Brand, S., & Flowers, N. (1997). The impact of school reform for the middle years: Longitudinal study of a network engaged in Turning Points-based comprehensive school transformation. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 78 (7), 528-532, 541-550.
- Ferguson, R. (1998). Teachers' perceptions and expectations and the Black-White test score gap. In C. Jencks & M. Phillips (Eds.), *The Black-White test score gap* (pp. 273-317). Washington, D.C.: Brookings.
- Ferguson, A. (2000). *Bad boys: Public schools in the making of black masculinity*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.

- Ferguson, R. F. (2002). What doesn't meet the eye: Understanding and addressing racial disparities in high-achieving suburban schools. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, John F. Kennedy School of Government. (ED 474 390)
- Fine, M. (1991). *Framing dropouts: Notes on the politics of an urban public high school*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Five, C. L., & Dionisio, M. (1996). *Bridging the gap: Integrating curriculum in upper elementary and middle schools*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Flowers, N., Mertens, S., & Mulhall, P. (1999). The impact of teaming: Five research-based outcomes of teaming. *Middle School Journal*, 31(2), 57–60.
- Flowers, N., Mertens, S., & Mulhall, P. (2000). What makes interdisciplinary teams effective? *Middle School Journal*, 31 (4) 53-56.
- Ford, D. Y., & Harris III, J. J. (1992). The American achievement ideology and achievement differentials among preadolescent gifted and nongifted African American males and females. *Journal of Negro Education*, 61(1), 45-64. Retrieved from www.csa.com
- Fordham, S., & Ogbu, J. U. (1986). Black students' school success: Coping with the burden of "acting white." *The Urban Review*, 18, 176-206.
- Gamoran, A., & Weinstein, M. (1998). Differentiation and opportunity in restructured schools. *American Journal of Education*, 106(3), 385–431.
- Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research and practice*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Gay, G., & Hanley, M. S. (1999). Multicultural empowerment in middle school social studies through drama pedagogy. *Clearing House*, 72(6), 364-370.
- George, P. S. (1988). Tracking and ability grouping: Which way for the middle school? *Middle School Journal*, 20(1), 21–28.
- George, P. S., & Lounsbury, J. H. (2000). *Making big schools feel small: Multiage grouping, looping, and schools-within-a-school*. Westerville, OH: National Middle School Association.
- George, P., & Oldaker, L. (1985). *Evidence for the middle school*. Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association.
- George, P. S., & Shewey, K. (1994). *New evidence for the middle school*. Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association.

- Gere, A. R., Buehler, J., Dallavis, C., & Haviland, V. S. (2009). A visibility project: Learning to see how preservice teachers take up culturally responsive pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 46(3), 816-852.
- Giroux, H. (1996). *Fugitive cultures: Race, violence, and youth*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Glesne, C. (2005). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Goodenow, C. (1993). Classroom belonging among early adolescent students: Relationships to motivation and achievement. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 13(1), 21-43.
- Gottfried, M. A. 2009. Excused versus unexcused: How student absences in elementary school affect academic achievement. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 31 (4): 392-415.
- Gravetter, F. J. & Wallnau, L. B. (2007). *Statistics for the behavioral sciences*. Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.
- Gutman, L. M., Sameroff, A. J., & Eccles, J. S.; (2002). The academic achievement of African American students during early adolescence: An examination of multiple risk, promotive, and protective factors. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 30(3), 367-399.
- Hallinan, M. T. (1992). The organization of students for instruction in the middle School. *Sociology of Education*, 65(2), 114-27.
- Hill, K. D. (2009). A historical analysis of desegregation and racism in a racially polarized region: Implications for the historical construct, a diversity problem, and transforming teacher education toward culturally relevant pedagogy. *Urban Education*, 44(1), 106-139. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0042085907311841>
- Irvine, J., & Armento, B. (2001). *Culturally responsive teaching: Lesson planning for elementary and middle grades*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Jackson, A. W., & Davis, G. A. (2000). *Turning points 2000: Educating adolescents in the 21st century*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Joyner, E., Ben-Avie, M., & Comer, J. (2004). *The field guide to Comer schools in action*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Juvonen, J., Le, V., Kaganoff, T., Augustine, C., & Constant, L. (2004). *Focus on the wonder years: Challenges facing the American middle school*. Santa Monica, CA: Rand.

- Kea, C. D., Trent, S. C., & Davis, C. P. (2002). African American student teachers' perceptions about preparedness to teach students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. *Multiple Perspectives*, 4(1), 18–25.
- King, J. E. (2005). *Black education: A transformative research and action agenda for the new century*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Kozol, J. (2005). *The shame of the nation: The restoration of apartheid schooling in America*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press.
- Ladson-Billings, Gloria (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(3), 465-491. Retrieved from www.csa.com
- Ladson-Billings, G. & Tate IV, W. F. (1995). Toward a critical race theory of education. *Teachers College Record*, 97, 47-68.
- Lareau, A. (2003). *Unequal childhoods: Class, race, and family life*. Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- Lee, C. (2005). Intervention research based on current views of cognition and learning. In J. King (ed.) *Black education: A transformative research and action agenda for the new century* (pp. 73–114). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Lee, V. E. & Burkam, D. T. (2003). Dropping out of high school: The role of school organization and structure. *American Educational Research Journal*, 40(2), 353-393.
- Lee, V., & Smith, J. (1993). Effects of school restructuring on the achievement and engagement of middle-grades students. *Sociology of Education*, 66 (3), 164-187.
- Lee, V., Smith, J., Perry, T. E., & Smylie, M. A. (1999). *Social support, academic press, and student achievement: A view from the middle grades in Chicago*. Chicago, IL: Consortium on Chicago School Research, University of Chicago.
- Lincoln, Y. S. & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- MacLeod, J. (1995). *Ain't no makin' it: Aspirations and attainment in a low-income neighborhood*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, Inc.
- Mac Iver, D. (1990). Meeting the needs of young adolescents: Advisory groups, interdisciplinary teaching teams, and school transition programs. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 71(6), 458–464.

- Merriam, S. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Mertens, S. B., Flowers, N., & Mulhall, P. (1998). *The Middle Start Initiative, phase I: A longitudinal analysis of Michigan middle-level schools*. Champaign, IL: Center for Prevention Research and Development, University of Illinois.
- Mickelson, R. A. (1990). The attitude-achievement paradox among black adolescents. *Sociology of Education*, 63(1), 44-61.
- Mickelson, R. A. (2006). Segregation and the SAT. *Ohio State Law Journal*, 67, 157-199.
- Milner, M. (2004). *Freaks, geeks, and cool kids: American teenagers, schools, and the culture of consumption*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Mitchell, A. (1998). African American teachers: Unique roles and universal lessons. *Education and Urban Society*, 31(1), 104-122. Retrieved from www.csa.com
- National Center for Education Statistics (2009). *Achievement gaps: How Black and White students in public schools perform in mathematics and reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress*. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pubs/studies/2009455.asp>
- National Center for Education Statistics (2008). *The condition of education 2008 (NCES 2008-031), Table 23-1*. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=16>
- National Education Association. (2005). *Culture, abilities, resilience, effort: Strategies for closing the achievement gaps*. Washington, DC: Author.
- National Middle School Association. (2010). *This we believe: Keys to educating young adolescents*. Westerville, OH: Author.
- Neild, R. C., & Balfanz, R. (2006a). An extreme degree of difficulty: The educational demographics of urban neighborhood high schools. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 11, 131-141.
- Nieto, S. (2000). *Affirming diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Longman.
- Nieto, S., & Bode, P. (2008). *Affirming diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education* (5th ed.). New York, NY: Pierson.

- Norman, O., Ault, C., Bentz, B., & Meskimen, L. (2001). The Black-White achievement gap as a perennial challenge of urban science education: A socio-cultural and historical overview with implications for research and practice. *J. of Research in Science Teaching*, 38(10), 1101-1114.
- Norman, O., Crunk, S., Butler, B., & Pinder, P. (2006). Do Black adolescents value education less than White peers? An empirical and conceptual attempt at putting a thorny question in perspective. Paper presented at the April 2006 American Educational Research Association Conference.
- North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. (2011). *Reports of disaggregated state, school system (LEA) and school performance data for 2009 – 2011*. Retrieved from <http://accrpt.ncpublicschools.org/app/2011/disag/>
- North Carolina Middle School Association. (2009a). *Resources*. Retrieved from <http://www.ncmsa.net/resources.html>
- North Carolina Middle School Association. (2009b). *Schools to watch*. Retrieved from <http://www.ncmsa.net/stw.html>
- North Central Regional Educational Laboratory. (2004). *Culturally responsive education*. Retrieved from <http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/students/learning/lr1cre.htm>
- Nuthall, G. (2005). The cultural myths and realities of classroom teaching and learning: A personal journey. *Teachers College Record*, 107(5), 895-934.
- Ogbu, J. U. (2003). Black American students in an affluent suburb: A study of academic disengagement. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Paik, S.J. (2004). Korean and U.S. families, schools, and learning. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 41, 71-90.
- Pang, V. O., & Sablan, V. A. (1998). Teacher efficacy: How do teachers feel about their abilities to teach African American students? In M. E. Dilworth (Eds.), *Being responsive to cultural differences—how teachers learn* (pp. 39–58).
- Pate, P. E. (2001). Standards, students, and exploration: Creating a curriculum intersection of excellence. In T. S. Dickinson (Ed.) *Reinventing the middle school* (pp. 79–95). New York, NY: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Pate, P. E., Homestead, E. R., & McGinnis, K. L. (1997). *Making integrated curriculum work: Teachers, students, and the quest for coherent curriculum*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Perry, T., Steele, C., & Hilliard, A., III (2003). *Young gifted and black: Promoting high achievement among African-American students*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

- Picucci, A. C., Brownson, A., Kahlert, R., & Sobel, A. (2004). Middle school concept helps high-poverty schools become high-performing schools. *Middle School Journal*, 36(1), 4-11. Retrieved from <http://www.nmsa.org/Publications/MiddleSchoolJournal/Articles/September2004/tabid/130/Default.aspx>
- Powell, S. D. (2005). *Introduction to middle school*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Raudenbush, S., Bryk, A., Cheong, Y.F., Congdon, R., & du Toit, M. (2004). HLM 6: Linear and nonlinear modeling. Lincolnwood, IL: Scientific Software International, Inc.
- Reeves, D. (2003). *High performance in high poverty schools: 90/90/90 and beyond*. Englewood, CO: Center for Performance Assessment.
- Rumberger, R. W. (1995). Dropping out of middle school: A multilevel analysis of students and schools. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(3), 583-625.
- Schools to Watch (2010). *Schools to watch criteria rating sheet*. Retrieved from <http://schoolstowatch.org/Portals/2/STWDocs/STWCriteriaRatingSheet.pdf>
- Shann, M. H. (1999). Academics and a culture of caring: The relationship between school achievement and prosocial and antisocial behaviors in four urban middle schools. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 10(4), 390-413.
- Shepard, J. & Greene, R. W. (2003). *Sociology and you*. Columbus, OH: Glencoe McGraw-Hill.
- Schoeneberger, J. A. (2012). Longitudinal attendance patterns: Developing high school dropouts. *Clearing House: A Journal Of Educational Strategies, Issues And Ideas*, 85(1), 7-14.
- Skinner, E. A., Zimmer-Gembeck, M. J., & Connell, J. P. (1998). Individual differences and the development of perceived control. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 63(2-3, Serial No. 254).
- Sirin, S. R. (2005). Socioeconomic status and academic achievement: A meta-analytic review of research. *Review of Educational Research*, 75(3), 417-453.
- Slavin, R. E. (1990). Achievement effects of ability grouping in secondary schools: A best-evidence synthesis. *Review of Educational Research*, 60(3), 471-499.
- Slavin, R. E. (1993). Ability grouping in middle grades: Achievement effects and alternatives. *Elementary School Journal*, 93(5), 535-552

- Slavin, R. E. & Madden, N. A. (2006). Reducing the gap: Success for all and the achievement of African American students. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 73(3), 389-400.
- Smith, D. C. (2008). *The words unspoken: The hidden power of language*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press.
- Smyth, J., & McInerney, P. (2007). "Living on the edge": A case of school reform working for disadvantaged young adolescents. *Teachers College Record*, 109, 1123-1170.
- Steinberg, S. R. & Kincheloe, J. L. (2004). *19 urban questions: Teaching in the city*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Stevenson, C., & Carr, J. F. (1993). *Integrated studies in the middle grades: Dancing through walls*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Talbert-Johnson, C. (2004). Structural inequities and the achievement gap in urban schools. *Education and Urban Society*, 37(1), 22-36. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0013124504268454>
- Teranishi, R., & Parker, T. L. (2010). Social reproduction of inequality: The racial composition of feeder schools to the University of California. *Teachers College Record*, 112(6), 1575-1601.
- The Civil Rights Project. (2006). *Brief of 553 social scientists as amici curiae in support of respondents*. Retrieved from www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/deseg/amicus_parents_v_seatle.pdf
- Thomas, R. M. (2005). *High stakes testing: Coping with collateral damage*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2003). *Fulfilling the promise of the differentiated classroom: Strategies and tools for responsive teaching*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2005). Instructional methods: Differentiated instruction. In V. A. Anfara, Jr., P. G. Andrews, & S. B. Mertens (Eds.), *The encyclopedia of middle grades education* (pp. 248–251). Greenwich, CT: Information Age.
- Tomlinson, C. A., & Eidson, C. (2003). *Differentiation in practice*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Traoré, R. & Lukens, R. J. (2006). *This isn't the America I thought I'd find: African students in the urban U.S. high school*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

- U.S. Department of Education. (2003). Preliminary overview of programs and changes included in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Retrieved from http://www.ed.gov/nclb/overview/intro/progsum/sum_pg2.html
- U. S. Department of Education. (2007). No Child Left Behind-ED.gov. Retrieved from <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml>
- Vang, C. T. (2005). Minority students are far from academic success and still at-risk in public schools. *Multicultural Education*, 12(4), 9–15.
- Yanow, D. & Schwartz-Shea, P. (2006). *Interpretation and method: Empirical research methods and the interpretive turn*. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, Inc.
- Vars, G. F. (1997). Effects of integrative curriculum and instruction. In J. Irvin (Ed.), *What current research says to the middle level practitioner* (pp. 179–186). Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association.
- Walton, G., & Cohen, L. (2007). A question of belonging: Race, social fit, and achievement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92, 82-96.
- Ware, F. (2006). Warm demander pedagogy: Culturally responsive teaching that supports a culture of achievement for African American students. *Urban Education*, 41(4), 427-456. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0042085906289710>
- Watson, M., Battistich, V., & Solomon, D. (1997). Enhancing students' social and ethical development in schools: An intervention program and its effects. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 27, 571–586.
- Wiggin, G. "A Pathway to Success: Promoting High Achievement among African American Students" *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, Atlanta Hilton, Charlotte, NC* <Not Available>. 2009-05-24 from http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p207014_index.html
- Wiggins, G., & McTighe, J. (1998). *Understanding by design*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Willis, P. (1977). *Learning to labor*. Aldershot, UK: Gower.
- Wilson-Jones, L. & Caston, M. C. (2004). Cooperative learning on academic achievement in elementary African American males. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 31(4): 280-283.
- Zemelman, S., Daniels, H., & Hyde, A. (1998). *Best practices: New standards for teaching and learning in America's schools* (2nd ed.). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Ziegler, S., & Mulhall, L. (1994). Establishing and evaluating a successful advisory program in a middle school. *Middle School Journal*, 25(4), 42–46.

Yecke, C. (2005). *Mayhem in the middle: How middle schools have failed America—and how to make them work*. Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

APPENDIX A: THIS WE BELIEVE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Major Goals of Middle Level Educators

To become a fully functioning, self-actualized person, each young adolescent should

- Become actively aware of the larger world, asking significant and relevant questions about that world and wrestling with big ideas and questions for which there may not be one right answer.
- Be able to think rationally and critically and express thoughts clearly.
- Read deeply to independently gather, assess, and interpret information from a variety of sources and read avidly for enjoyment and lifelong learning.
- Use digital tools to explore, communicate, and collaborate with the world and learn from the rich and varied resources available.
- Be a good steward of the earth and its resources and a wise and intelligent consumer of the wide array of goods and services available.
- Understand and use the major concepts, skills, and tools of inquiry in the areas of health and physical education, language arts, world languages, mathematics, natural and physical sciences, and the social sciences.
- Explore music, art, and careers, and recognize their importance to personal growth and learning.

- Develop his or her strengths, particular skills, talents, or interests and have an emerging understanding of his or her potential contributions to society and to personal fulfillment.
- Recognize, articulate, and make responsible, ethical decisions concerning his or her own health and wellness needs.
- Respect and value the diverse ways people look, speak, think, and act within the immediate community and around the world.
- Develop the interpersonal and social skills needed to learn, work, and play with others harmoniously and confidently.
- Assume responsibility for his or her own actions and be cognizant of and ready to accept obligations for the welfare of others.
- Understand local, national, and global civic responsibilities and demonstrate active citizenship through participation in endeavors that serve and benefit those larger communities.

Essential Attributes

To guide and support students in their quest to achieve these goals, National Middle School Association affirms that educational programs for young adolescents must be

Developmentally responsive: using the distinctive nature of young adolescents as the foundation upon which all decisions about school organization, policies, curriculum, instruction, and assessment are made.

Challenging: ensuring that every student learns and every member of the learning community is held to high expectations.

Empowering: providing all students with the knowledge and skills they need to take responsibility for their lives, to address life's challenges, to function successfully at all levels of society, and to be creators of knowledge.

Equitable: advocating for and ensuring every student's right to learn and providing appropriately challenging and relevant learning opportunities for every student.

These four essential attributes of successful middle level education can be realized and achieved best through programs and practices that are in line with the following 16 characteristics. These characteristics or qualities, while identified independently, are interdependent and need to be implemented in concert.

Characteristics

To comprehend their breadth and focus, the characteristics are grouped in three general categories:

Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment Characteristics

- Educators value young adolescents and are prepared to teach them.
- Students and teachers are engaged in active, purposeful learning.
- Curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant.
- Educators use multiple learning and teaching approaches.
- Varied and ongoing assessments advance learning as well as measure it.

Leadership and Organization Characteristics

- A shared vision developed by all stakeholders guides every decision.

- Leaders are committed to and knowledgeable about this age group, educational research, and best practices.
- Leaders demonstrate courage and collaboration.
- Ongoing professional development reflects best educational practices.
- Organizational structures foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships.

Culture and Community Characteristics

- The school environment is inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all.
- Every student's academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate.
- Comprehensive guidance and support services meet the needs of young adolescents.
- Health and wellness are supported in curricula, school-wide programs, and

related

policies

- The school actively involves families in the education of their children.
- The school includes community and business partners.

Note. (NMSA, 2010)

APPENDIX B: SCHOOLS TO WATCH CRITERIA RATING SHEET

Rate your school on each of the measures below and cite evidence in space provided.

4 = High quality, complete, mature, and coherent implementation – NEARLY

PERFECT, LITTLE ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

3 = Good quality, incomplete, maturing, or not fully implemented by all – STILL ROOM

FOR REFINEMENT AND IMPROVEMENT

2 = Fair quality, mixed implementation, immature practice, sporadic by some –

SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENT NEEDED

1 = Poor quality, low level of implementation, new program, by a few –

CONSIDERABLE STRATEGIC PLANNING, CONSENSUS

BUILDING AND IMPROVEMENT NEEDED

Academic Excellence: High-performing schools with middle grades challenge all students to use their minds well.

CRITERIA RATING

AE1- All students are expected to meet high academic standards. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

AE2- Curriculum, instruction, assessment, and appropriate academic interventions are aligned with high standards. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

AE3- The curriculum emphasizes deep understanding of important concepts and the development of essential skills.

4 3 2 1

Evidence:

AE4- Instructional strategies include a variety of challenging and engaging activities that are clearly related to the grade-level standards, concepts, and skills being taught. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

AE5- Teachers use a variety of methods to assess and monitor the progress of student learning (e.g., tests, quizzes, assignments, exhibitions, projects, performance tasks, portfolios). 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

AE6- The faculty and master schedule provide students time to meet rigorous academic standards.

4 3 2 1

Evidence:

AE7- Students are provided the support they need to meet rigorous academic standards. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

AE8- The adults in the school are provided time and frequent opportunities to enhance student achievement by working with colleagues to deepen their knowledge and to improve their standards-based practice.

4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Developmental Responsiveness: High-performing schools with middle grades are sensitive to the unique developmental challenges of early adolescence.

CRITERIA RATING

DR1- The staff creates a personalized environment that supports each student's intellectual, ethical, social, and physical development. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

DR2- The school provides access to comprehensive services to foster healthy physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

DR3- Teachers foster curiosity, creativity and the development of social skills in a structured and supportive environment. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

DR4- The curriculum is both socially significant and relevant to the personal and career interests of young adolescents. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

DR5- Teachers use an interdisciplinary approach to reinforce important concepts, skills, and address real-world problems. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

DR6- Students are provided multiple opportunities to explore a rich variety of topics and interests in order to develop their identity, learn about their strengths, discover and demonstrate their own competence, and plan for their future.

4 3 2 1

Evidence:

DR7- All students have opportunities for voice – posing questions, reflecting on experiences, and participating in decisions and leadership activities. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

DR8- The school staff members develop alliances with families to enhance and support the well-being of the students. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

DR9- Staff members provide all students with opportunities to develop citizenship skills, to use the community as a classroom, and to engage the community in providing resources and support. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

DR10- The school provides age-appropriate, co-curricular activities to foster social skills and character, and to develop interests beyond the classroom environment. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Social Equity: High performing schools with middle grades are socially equitable, democratic, and fair. They provide every student with high-quality teachers, resources, learning opportunities, and supports. They keep positive options open for all students.

CRITERIA RATING

SE1- To the fullest extent possible, all students, including English learners, students with disabilities, gifted and honors students, participate in heterogeneous classes with high academic and behavioral expectations. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

SE2- Students are provided the opportunity to use many and varied approaches to achieve and demonstrate competence and mastery of standards. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

SE3- Teachers continually adapt curriculum, instruction, assessment, and scheduling to meet their students' diverse and changing needs. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

SE4-All students have equal access to valued knowledge in all school classes and activities. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

SE5-Students have ongoing opportunities to learn about and appreciate their own and others' cultures. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

SE6- The school community knows every student well. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

SE7- The faculty welcomes and encourages the active participation of all its families and makes sure that all its families are an integral part of the school. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

SE8- The school's reward system is designed to value diversity, civility, service, and democratic citizenship. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

SE9- Staff members understand and support the family backgrounds and values of its students. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

SE10- The school rules are clear, fair, and consistently applied. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Organizational Structures and Processes: High-performing schools with middle grades are learning organizations that establish norms, structures, and organizational arrangements to support and sustain their trajectory toward excellence.

CRITERIA RATING

OS1- A shared vision of what a high-performing school is and does drives every facet of school change. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

OS2- The principal has the responsibility and authority to hold the school-improvement enterprise together, including day-to-day know-how, coordination, strategic planning, and communication. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

OS3- The school is a community of practice in which learning, experimentation, and time and opportunity for reflection are the norm. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

OS4- The school and district devote resources to content-rich professional development which is connected to reaching and sustaining the school vision and increasing student achievement. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

OS5- The school is not an island unto itself; it is a part of a larger educational system, i.e., districts, networks, and community partnerships. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

OS6- The school staff holds itself accountable for the students' success. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

OS7- District and school staff possess and cultivate the collective will to persevere, believing it is their business to produce increased achievement and enhanced development of all students. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

OS8- The school and district staffs work with colleges and universities to recruit, prepare, and mentor novice and experienced teachers. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

OS9- The school includes families and community members in setting and supporting the school's trajectory toward high performance. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Note. (Schools to Watch, 2010)

APPENDIX C: N.C. SCHOOLS TO WATCH SELF-STUDY AND RATING RUBRIC

District: School:

4 = High quality, complete, mature, and coherent implementation – NEARLY PERFECT, LITTLE ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

3 = Good quality, incomplete, maturing, or not fully implemented by all – STILL ROOM FOR REFINEMENT and IMPROVEMENT

2 = Fair quality, mixed implementation, immature practice, sporadic by some – SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENT NEEDED

1 = Poor quality, low level of implementation, new program, by a few – CONSIDERABLE STRATEGIC PLANNING, CONSENSUS BUILDING AND IMPROVEMENT NEEDED

0 = No score, isolated or not in practice – INITIATE DISCUSSION

Academic Excellence High-performing schools with middle grades are academically excellent. They challenge all students to use their minds well.

General Criteria Detailed Evidence of Criteria Self-Rating

1. All students are expected to meet high academic standards. 4 3 2 1 Average

Expectations are clear for students and parents. 4 3 2 1

Prior to students beginning an assignment, teachers supply students with exemplars of high quality work that meet the performance standard or level. 4 3 2 1

Students know what high quality work should be like. 4 3 2 1

Students revise their work based on meaningful feedback until they meet or exceed the performance standard or level. 4 3 2 1

2. Curriculum, instruction, assessment, and appropriate academic interventions are aligned with high standards. 4 3 2 1 Average

Standards provide a coherent vision for what students should know and be able to do. 4 3 2 1

Students, teachers and families understand what students are learning and why. 4 3 2 1

In any class and at any time, students can explain the importance of what they are learning. 4 3 2 1

The curriculum is rigorous, non-repetitive, and moves forward substantially. 4 3 2 1

Work is demanding and steadily progresses. 4 3 2 1

3. The curriculum emphasizes deep understanding of important concepts and the development of essential skills.

4 3 2 1 Average

Teachers make connections across the disciplines to reinforce important concepts and assist students in applying what they have learned to solve real-world problems.

4 3 2 1

All teachers incorporate academic and informational literacy into their course work (i.e. reading, writing, note taking, researching, listening, and speaking) 4 3 2 1

4. Instructional strategies include a variety of challenging and engaging activities that are clearly related to the grade-level standards, concepts, and skills being taught. 4 3 2 1

Average

To reach students, all teachers draw from a common subset of instructional strategies and activities such as:

Direct instruction

4 3 2 1

Cooperative learning 4 3 2 1

Project-based learning 4 3 2 1

Simulations 4 3 2 1

Hands-on learning – integrated technology 4 3 2 1

Other 4 3 2 1

4 = High quality, complete, mature, and coherent implementation – NEARLY

PERFECT, LITTLE ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

3 = Good quality, incomplete, maturing, or not fully implemented by all – STILL ROOM

FOR REFINEMENT and IMPROVEMENT

2 = Fair quality, mixed implementation, immature practice, sporadic by some –

SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENT NEEDED

1 = Poor quality, low level of implementation, new program, by a few –

CONSIDERABLE STRATEGIC PLANNING, CONSENSUS BUILDING AND

IMPROVEMENT NEEDED

0 = No score, isolated or not in practice – INITIATE DISCUSSION

Academic Excellence

5. Teachers use a variety of methods to assess and monitor the progress of student

learning (e.g., tests, quizzes, assignments, exhibitions, projects, performance tasks,

portfolios). 4 3 2 1 Average

All teachers use common, frequent assessments to benchmark key concepts and the

achievement of their students. 4 3 2 1

Students learn how to assess their own and others' work against the performance standards, expectations, or levels. 4 3 2 1

6. The faculty and master schedule provide students time to meet rigorous academic standards. 4 3 2 1 Average

Students are provided more time to learn the content, concepts or skills if needed. 4 3 2 1

Flexible scheduling enables students to engage in academic interventions, extended projects, hands-on experiences, and inquiry-based learning. 4 3 2 1

7. Students are provided the support they need to meet rigorous academic standards. 4 3 2 1 Average

Teachers know what each student has learned and still needs to learn. 4 3 2 1

Students have multiple opportunities to succeed and receive extra help as needed, such as:

o co-teaching or collaborative resource model, 4 3 2 1

o support and intervention classes, 4 3 2 1

o before- and after-school tutoring, 4 3 2 1

o homework centers 4 3 2 1

o other 4 3 2 1

8. The adults in the school are provided time and frequent opportunities to enhance student achievement by working with colleagues to deepen their knowledge and to improve their standards-based practice. 4 3 2 1 Average

They collaborate in analyzing student achievement data and making decisions about rigorous curriculum, standards-based assessment practice, effective instructional methods, and evaluation of student work.

4 3 2 1

The professional learning community employs coaching, mentoring, and peer observation as a means of continuous instructional improvement 4 3 2 1

Developmental Responsiveness High-performing schools with middle grades are sensitive to the unique developmental challenges of early adolescence.

General Criteria Detailed Evidence of Criteria Self-Rating

1. The staff creates a personalized environment that supports each student's intellectual, ethical, social, and physical development. 4 3 2 1 Average

Adults and students are grouped into smaller communities (i.e. teams, houses, academies) for enhanced teaching and learning. 4 3 2 1

These small learning communities are characterized by stable, close, and mutually respectful relationships. 4 3 2 1

Every student has a mentor, advisor, advocate, or other adult he/she trusts and stays in relationship with throughout the middle school experience. 4 3 2 1

2. The school provides access to comprehensive services to foster healthy physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development. 4 3 2 1 Average

Teachers are trained to recognize and handle student problems. 4 3 2 1

Students with difficulties, and their families, can get help. 4 3 2 1

The school houses a wide range of support—nurses, counselors, resource teachers—to help students and families who need special assistance. 4 3 2 1

The school staff-members offer parent education activities involving families. 4 3 2 1

3. Teachers foster curiosity, creativity and the development of social skills in a structured and supportive environment. 4 3 2 1 Average

All Teachers:

o enhance standards-based learning by using a wide variety of instructional strategies;

4 3 2 1

o incorporate well-developed procedures and routines for effective classroom management;

4 3 2 1

o facilitate learning by deliberately teaching study and organizational skills; 4 3 2 1

o integrate creative activities in the lessons, e.g., current technologies, visual and performing arts, etc. 4 3 2 1

4. The curriculum is both socially significant and relevant to the personal and career interests of young adolescents. 4 3 2 1 Average

Students talk about daily issues in their own lives, their community and their world. 4

3 2 1

Students take action, make informed choices, work collaboratively, and learn to resolve conflicts. 4 3 2 1

Developmental Responsiveness

5. Teachers use an interdisciplinary approach to reinforce important concepts, skills, and address real-world

problems. 4 3 2 1 Average

For example, students may read a historical novel for language arts and history and then study music from the same time period in music class. 4 3 2 1

Students can work on the same project in several different classes. 4 3 2 1

6. Students are provided multiple opportunities to explore a rich variety of topics and interests in order to their identity, learn about their strengths, discover and demonstrate their own competence, and plan for their future. 4 3 2 1 Average

Teachers and counselors push students to challenge themselves and set high academic and career goals for their future. 4 3 2 1

7. All students have opportunities for voice—posing questions, reflecting on experiences, and participating in decisions and leadership activities. 4 3 2 1 Average

All students have a real say, or have legitimate representation, in what happens at school. 4 3 2 1

School staff members have an “open-door” policy to encourage student involvement and connection. 4 3 2 1

Students take an active role in school-family conferences. 4 3 2 1

8. The school staff members develop alliances with families to enhance and support the well-being of the children. 4 3 2 1 Average

Parents are more than just volunteers or fund-raisers; they are meaningfully involved in all aspects of the school. 4 3 2 1

Parents are informed, included, and involved as partners and decision-makers in their children’s education. 4 3 2 1

9. Staff members provide all students with opportunities to develop citizenship skills, to use the community as a classroom, and to engage the community in providing resources and support. 4 3 2 1 Average

Students take on projects to improve their school, community, state, nation, and world. 4 3 2 1

10. The school provides age-appropriate, co-curricular activities to foster social skills and character, and to develop interests beyond the classroom environment. 4 3 2 1 Average

Student co-curricular activities cover a wide range of interests—team sports, clubs, exploratory opportunities, service opportunities, and a rich program in the visual and performing arts. 4 3 2 1

Social Equity High performing schools with middle grades are socially equitable, democratic, and fair. They provide every student with high quality teachers, resources, learning opportunities, and supports. They keep positive options open for all students
General Criteria Detailed Evidence of Criteria Self-Rating

1. To the fullest extent possible, all students, including English learners, students with disabilities, gifted and honors students, participate in heterogeneous classes with high academic and behavioral expectations. 4 3 2 1 Average

Faculty and administrators are committed to helping each student produce proficient work. 4 3 2 1

Evidence of this commitment includes tutoring, mentoring, enrichment assignments, differentiated instruction, special adaptations, supplemental classes and other supports. 4 3 2 1

Accelerated, short-term interventions for students with similar needs are fluid and do not become low-level or permanent tracks. 4 3 2 1

2. Students are provided the opportunity to use many and varied approaches to achieve and demonstrate competence and mastery of standards. 4 3 2 1 Average

Teachers know each student's learning style. 4 3 2 1

Teachers differentiate instruction in order to give each student equal opportunity to comprehend the standards-based curriculum. 4 3 2 1

3. Teachers continually adapt curriculum, instruction, assessment, and scheduling to meet their students' diverse and changing needs.

4 3 2 1 Average

The faculty is always seeking ways to improve programs, curriculum, and assessment to better meet student needs. 4 3 2 1

4. All students have equal access to valued knowledge in all school classes and activities.

4 3 2 1 Average

All students use technology to do research and analyze data, read more than textbooks, and understand how to solve complex problems. 4 3 2 1

To the fullest extent possible, students with disabilities are in regular classrooms that are co-taught by special education professionals. 4 3 2 1

All students have access to participate in interest-based classes, activities, or opportunities. 4 3 2 1

5. Students have ongoing opportunities to learn about and appreciate their own and others' cultures. 4 3 2 1 Average

- The school values knowledge from the diverse cultures represented in the school, community, and our nation. 4 3 2 1
- Materials in the media center represent all of the cultures of the students. 4 3 2 1
- Families often come and share their traditions and beliefs. 4 3 2 1
- Teachers use multi-cultural materials and methods. 4 3 2 1
- Multiple viewpoints are encouraged. 4 3 2 1

Social Equity

6. The school community knows every student well. 4 3 2 1 Average

- Each student is appreciated and respected. 4 3 2 1
- Staff members do not use negative labels or discuss students in negative ways. 4 3 2 1
- Every student has an adult advocate and supporter in the school. 4 3 2 1

7. The faculty welcomes and encourages the active participation of all its families and makes sure that all its families are an integral part of the school, such as: 4 3 2 1 Average

- Transportation, meals, childcare, and translation support are provided so all families of diverse cultures and languages can attend school events. 4 3 2 1

8. The school's reward system is designed to value diversity, civility, service, and democratic citizenship. 4 3 2 1 Average

- The faculty recognizes the contributions of all its students. 4 3 2 1
- Awards are not limited to sports and academic honors. 4 3 2 1
- Students' success and good deeds are always noticed. 4 3 2 1

9. Staff members understand and support the family backgrounds and values of its students. 4 3 2 1 Average

- The school recruits a culturally and linguistically diverse staff. 4 3 2 1

The staff members are a good match to the school's community. 4 3 2 1

10. The school rules are clear, fair, and consistently applied. 4 3 2 1 Average

Students and parents are informed of school rules and know exactly what will and does happen if students break the rules. 4 3 2 1

The school's suspension rate is low. 4 3 2 1

Staff members routinely analyze and act upon referral and suspension data to make sure that no one group of students is unfairly singled out by classroom and school staff. 4 3 2 1

The school's disciplinary referrals and suspension rate are low as a result of proactive interventions that keep students engaged, resilient, healthy, safe, and respectful of one another. 4 3 2 1

Organization Structures and Processes High-performing schools with middle grades are learning organizations that establish norms, structures, and organizational arrangements to support and sustain their trajectory toward excellence.

General Criteria Detailed Evidence of Criteria Self-Rating

1. A shared vision of what a high-performing school is and does, drives every facet of school change. 4 3 2 1 Average

The shared vision drives constant improvement. 4 3 2 1

Shared, distributed, and sustained leadership propels the school forward and preserves its institutional memory and purpose. 4 3 2 1

Everyone knows what the plan is and the vision is posted and evidenced by actions. 4 3 2 1

2. The principal has the responsibility and authority to hold the school-improvement enterprise together, including day-to-day know-how, coordination, strategic planning, and communication. 4 3 2 1 Average

- Lines of leadership for the school's improvement efforts are clear. 4 3 2 1
- The school leadership team has the responsibility to make things happen. 4 3 2 1
- The principal makes sure that assignments are completed. 4 3 2 1

3. The school is a community of practice in which learning, experimentation, and reflection are the norm. 4 3 2 1 Average

- School leadership fosters and supports interdependent collaboration. 4 3 2 1
- Expectations of continuous improvement permeate the school culture. 4 3 2 1
- Everyone's job is to learn. 4 3 2 1

4. The school and district devote resources to content-rich professional development, which is connected to reaching and sustaining the school vision and increasing student achievement. 4 3 2 1 Average

- Professional development is intensive, of high quality, ongoing, and relevant to middle-grades education. 4 3 2 1
- Teachers get professional support to improve instructional practice (i.e. classroom visitations, peer coaching, demonstration lessons, etc.) 4 3 2 1
- Opportunities for learning increase knowledge and skills, challenge outmoded beliefs and practices, and provide support in the classroom. 4 3 2 1

5. The school is not an island unto itself; it is a part of a larger educational system, i.e., districts, networks and community partnerships. 4 3 2 1 Average

- There are deliberate vertical articulation and transition programs between feeder

elementary schools and destination high schools. 4 3 2 1

The district supports (funding and time) its schools' participation in best practice networks, associations, learning communities, and professional development focused on middle grades improvement and achievement. 4 3 2 1

School and district work collaboratively to bring coherence to curriculum, instruction, assessment, intervention, data collection, analysis, and accountability for student achievement. 4 3 2 1

6. The school staff holds itself accountable for the students' success. 4 3 2 1 Average

The school collects, analyzes, and uses data as a basis for making decisions. 4 3 2 1

The administrators and faculty grapple with school-generated evaluation data to identify areas for more extensive and intensive improvement. 4 3 2 1

The staff delineates benchmarks, and insists upon evidence and results. 4 3 2 1

The school staff intentionally and explicitly reconsiders its vision and practices when data call them into question. 4 3 2 1

7. District and school staff possess and cultivate the collective will to persevere, believing it is their business to produce increased achievement and enhanced development of all students. 4 3 2 1 Average

The faculty and administrators see barriers as challenges, not problems. 4 3 2 1

8. The school and district staffs work with colleges and universities to recruit, prepare, and mentor novice and experienced teachers. 4 3 2 1 Average

Principals insist on having teachers who promote young adolescents' intellectual, social, emotional, physical, and ethical growth. 4 3 2 1

9. The school includes families and community members in setting and supporting the school's trajectory toward high performance. 4 3 2 1 Average

The administrators and teachers inform families and community members about the school's goals for student success and the students' responsibility for meeting those goals

4 3 2 1

The administrators and teachers engage all stakeholders in ongoing and reflective conversation, consensus building, and decision making about governance to promote school improvement. 4 3 2 1

APPENDIX D: CLASSROOM OBSERVATION INSTRUMENT

Academic Excellence High-performing schools with middle grades are academically excellent. They challenge all students to use their minds well.

1. All students are expected to meet high academic standards. 4 3 2 1 Average

Expectations are clear for students and parents. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Prior to students beginning an assignment, teachers supply students with exemplars of high quality work that meet the performance standard or level. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Students know what high quality work should be like. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Students revise their work based on meaningful feedback until they meet or exceed the performance standard or level. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

2. Curriculum, instruction, assessment, and appropriate academic interventions are aligned with high standards. 4 3 2 1 Average

Standards provide a coherent vision for what students should know and be able to do. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Students, teachers and families understand what students are learning and why. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

In any class and at any time, students can explain the importance of what they are learning. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

The curriculum is rigorous, non-repetitive, and moves forward substantially. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Work is demanding and steadily progresses. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

3. The curriculum emphasizes deep understanding of important concepts and the development of essential skills. 4 3 2 1 Average

Teachers make connections across the disciplines to reinforce important concepts and assist students in applying what they have learned to solve real-world problems. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

All teachers incorporate academic and informational literacy into their course work (i.e. reading, writing, note taking, researching, listening, and speaking) 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

4. Instructional strategies include a variety of challenging and engaging activities that are clearly related to the grade-level standards, concepts, and skills being taught. 4 3 2 1 Average

To reach students, all teachers draw from a common subset of instructional strategies and activities such as:

Direct instruction 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Cooperative learning 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Project-based learning 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Simulations 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Hands-on learning – integrated technology 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Other 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

5. Teachers use a variety of methods to assess and monitor the progress of student learning (e.g., tests, quizzes, assignments, exhibitions, projects, performance tasks, portfolios). 4 3 2 1 Average

All teachers use common, frequent assessments to benchmark key concepts and the achievement of their students. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Students learn how to assess their own and others' work against the performance standards, expectations, or levels. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

6. The faculty and master schedule provide students time to meet rigorous academic standards. 4 3 2 1 Average

Students are provided more time to learn the content, concepts or skills if needed. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Flexible scheduling enables students to engage in academic interventions, extended projects, hands-on experiences, and inquiry-based learning. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

7. Students are provided the support they need to meet rigorous academic standards. 4 3 2 1 Average

Teachers know what each student has learned and still needs to learn. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Students have multiple opportunities to succeed and receive extra help as needed, such as:

o co-teaching or collaborative resource model, 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

o support and intervention classes, 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

o before- and after-school tutoring, 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

o homework centers 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

o other 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

8. The adults in the school are provided time and frequent opportunities to enhance student achievement by working with colleagues to deepen their knowledge and to improve their standards-based practice. 4 3 2 1 Average

The professional learning community employs coaching, mentoring, and peer observation as a means of continuous instructional improvement 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Developmental Responsiveness High-performing schools with middle grades are sensitive to the unique developmental challenges of early adolescence.

1. The staff creates a personalized environment that supports each student's intellectual, ethical, social, and physical development. 4 3 2 1 Average

These small learning communities are characterized by stable, close, and mutually respectful relationships. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

3. Teachers foster curiosity, creativity and the development of social skills in a structured and supportive environment. 4 3 2 1 Average

All Teachers:

o enhance standards-based learning by using a wide variety of instructional strategies; 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

o incorporate well-developed procedures and routines for effective classroom management; 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

o facilitate learning by deliberately teaching study and organizational skills; 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

o integrate creative activities in the lessons, e.g., current technologies, visual and performing arts, etc. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

4. The curriculum is both socially significant and relevant to the personal and career interests of young adolescents. 4 3 2 1 Average

Students talk about daily issues in their own lives, their community and their world. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Students take action, make informed choices, work collaboratively, and learn to resolve conflicts. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

5. Teachers use an interdisciplinary approach to reinforce important concepts, skills, and address real-world problems. 4 3 2 1 Average

For example, students may read a historical novel for language arts and history and then study music from the same time period in music class. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Students can work on the same project in several different classes. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

6. Students are provided multiple opportunities to explore a rich variety of topics and interests in order to develop their identity, learn about their strengths, discover and demonstrate their own competence, and plan for their future. 4 3 2 1 Average

Teachers and counselors push students to challenge themselves and set high academic and career goals for their future 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

7. All students have opportunities for voice—posing questions, reflecting on experiences, and participating in decisions and leadership activities. 4 3 2 1 Average

School staff members have an “open-door” policy to encourage student involvement and connection. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

8. The school staff members develop alliances with families to enhance and support the well-being of the children. 4 3 2 1 Average

Parents are more than just volunteers or fund-raisers; they are meaningfully involved in all aspects of the school. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Parents are informed, included, and involved as partners and decision-makers in their children’s education. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

9. Staff members provide all students with opportunities to develop citizenship skills, to use the community as a classroom, and to engage the community in providing resources and support. 4 3 2 1 Average

Students take on projects to improve their school, community, state, nation, and world. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

10. The school provides age-appropriate, co-curricular activities to foster social skills and character, and to develop interests beyond the classroom environment. 4 3 2 1 Average

Student co-curricular activities cover a wide range of interests—team sports, clubs, exploratory opportunities, service opportunities, and a rich program in the visual and performing arts. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Social Equity High performing schools with middle grades are socially equitable, democratic, and fair. They provide every student with high-quality teachers, resources, learning opportunities, and supports. They keep positive options open for all students

1. To the fullest extent possible, all students, including English learners, students with disabilities, gifted and honors students, participate in heterogeneous classes with high academic and behavioral expectations. 4 3 2 1 Average

Faculty and administrators are committed to helping each student produce proficient work. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Evidence of this commitment includes tutoring, mentoring, enrichment assignments, differentiated instruction, special adaptations, supplemental classes and other supports. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Accelerated, short-term interventions for students with similar needs are fluid and do not become low-level or permanent tracks. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

2. Students are provided the opportunity to use many and varied approaches to achieve and demonstrate competence and mastery of standards. 4 3 2 1 Average

Teachers know each student's learning style. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Teachers differentiate instruction in order to give each student equal opportunity to comprehend the standards-based curriculum. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

3. Teachers continually adapt curriculum, instruction, assessment, and scheduling to meet their students' diverse and changing needs. 4 3 2 1 Average

The faculty is always seeking ways to improve programs, curriculum, and assessment to better meet student needs. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

4. All students have equal access to valued knowledge in all school classes and activities. 4 3 2 1 Average

All students use technology to do research and analyze data, read more than textbooks, and understand how to solve complex problems. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

To the fullest extent possible, students with disabilities are in regular classrooms that are co-taught by special education professionals. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

All students have access to participate in interest-based classes, activities, or opportunities. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

5. Students have ongoing opportunities to learn about and appreciate their own and others' cultures. 4 3 2 1 Average

Families often come and share their traditions and beliefs. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Teachers use multi-cultural materials and methods. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Multiple viewpoints are encouraged. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

6. The school community knows every student well. 4 3 2 1 Average

Each student is appreciated and respected. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Staff members do not use negative labels or discuss students in negative ways. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

8. The school's reward system is designed to value diversity, civility, service, and democratic citizenship. 4 3 2 1 Average

The faculty recognizes the contributions of all its students. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Awards are not limited to sports and academic honors. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Students' success and good deeds are always noticed. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

10. The school rules are clear, fair, and consistently applied. 4 3 2 1 Average

Students and parents are informed of school rules and know exactly what will and does happen if students break the rules. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

The school's disciplinary referrals and suspension rate are low as a result of proactive interventions that keep students engaged, resilient, healthy, safe, and respectful of one another. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Organization Structures and Processes High-performing schools with middle grades are learning organizations that establish norms, structures, and organizational arrangements to support and sustain their trajectory toward excellence.

4. The school and district devote resources to content-rich professional development, which is connected to reaching and sustaining the school vision and increasing student achievement. 4 3 2 1 Average

Teachers get professional support to improve instructional practice (i.e. classroom visitations, peer coaching, demonstration lessons, etc.) 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

APPENDIX E: TEAM/DEPARTMENT MEETING OBSERVATION INSTRUMENT

Academic Excellence High-performing schools with middle grades are academically excellent. They challenge all students to use their minds well.

2. Curriculum, instruction, assessment, and appropriate academic interventions are aligned with high standards. 4 3 2 1 Average

Standards provide a coherent vision for what students should know and be able to do. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Students, teachers and families understand what students are learning and why. 4 3 2 1
Evidence:

3. The curriculum emphasizes deep understanding of important concepts and the development of essential skills. 4 3 2 1 Average

Teachers make connections across the disciplines to reinforce important concepts and assist students in applying what they have learned to solve real-world problems. 4 3 2 1
Evidence:

All teachers incorporate academic and informational literacy into their course work (i.e. reading, writing, note taking, researching, listening, and speaking) 4 3 2 1
Evidence:

5. Teachers use a variety of methods to assess and monitor the progress of student learning (e.g., tests, quizzes, assignments, exhibitions, projects, performance tasks, portfolios). 4 3 2 1 Average

All teachers use common, frequent assessments to benchmark key concepts and the achievement of their students. 4 3 2 1
Evidence:

7. Students are provided the support they need to meet rigorous academic standards. 4 3 2 1 Average

Teachers know what each student has learned and still needs to learn. 4 3 2 1
Evidence:

8. The adults in the school are provided time and frequent opportunities to enhance student achievement by working with colleagues to deepen their knowledge and to improve their standards-based practice. 4 3 2 1 Average

They collaborate in analyzing student achievement data and making decisions about rigorous curriculum, standards-based assessment practice, effective instructional methods, and evaluation of student work. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Developmental Responsiveness High-performing schools with middle grades are sensitive to the unique developmental challenges of early adolescence.

1. The staff creates a personalized environment that supports each student's intellectual, ethical, social, and physical development 4 3 2 1 Average

Adults and students are grouped into smaller communities (i.e. teams, houses, academies) for enhanced teaching and learning. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

These small learning communities are characterized by stable, close, and mutually respectful relationships. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

5. Teachers use an interdisciplinary approach to reinforce important concepts, skills, and address real-world problems. 4 3 2 1 Average

For example, students may read a historical novel for language arts and history and then study music from the same time period in music class. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Students can work on the same project in several different classes. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

7. All students have opportunities for voice—posing questions, reflecting on experiences, and participating in decisions and leadership activities. 4 3 2 1 Average

Students take an active role in school-family conferences. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

8. The school staff members develop alliances with families to enhance and support the well-being of the children. 4 3 2 1 Average

Parents are more than just volunteers or fund-raisers; they are meaningfully involved in all aspects of the school. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Parents are informed, included, and involved as partners and decision-makers in their children's education. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

9. Staff members provide all students with opportunities to develop citizenship skills, to use the community as a classroom, and to engage the community in providing resources and support. 4 3 2 1 Average

Students take on projects to improve their school, community, state, nation, and world. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Social Equity High performing schools with middle grades are socially equitable, democratic, and fair. They provide every student with high quality teachers, resources, learning opportunities, and supports. They keep positive options open for all students.

1. To the fullest extent possible, all students, including English learners, students with disabilities, gifted and honors students, participate in heterogeneous classes with high academic and behavioral expectations. 4 3 2 1 Average

Faculty and administrators are committed to helping each student produce proficient work. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Evidence of this commitment includes tutoring, mentoring, enrichment assignments, differentiated instruction, special adaptations, supplemental classes and other supports. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Accelerated, short-term interventions for students with similar needs are fluid and do not become low-level or permanent tracks. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

3. Teachers continually adapt curriculum, instruction, assessment, and scheduling to meet their students' diverse and changing needs. 4 3 2 1 Average

The faculty is always seeking ways to improve programs, curriculum, and assessment to better meet student needs. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

4. All students have equal access to valued knowledge in all school classes and activities. 4 3 2 1 Average

All students have access to participate in interest-based classes, activities, or opportunities. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

5. Students have ongoing opportunities to learn about and appreciate their own and others' cultures. 4 3 2 1 Average

The school values knowledge from the diverse cultures represented in the school, community, and our nation. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Families often come and share their traditions and beliefs. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Teachers use multi-cultural materials and methods. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

6. The school community knows every student well. 4 3 2 1 Average

Each student is appreciated and respected. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Staff members do not use negative labels or discuss students in negative ways. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

8. The school's reward system is designed to value diversity, civility, service, and democratic citizenship. 4 3 2 1 Average

The faculty recognizes the contributions of all its students. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Awards are not limited to sports and academic honors. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Students' success and good deeds are always noticed. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

10. The school rules are clear, fair, and consistently applied. 4 3 2 1 Average

The school's disciplinary referrals and suspension rate are low as a result of proactive interventions that keep students engaged, resilient, healthy, safe, and respectful of one another. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Organization Structures and Processes High-performing schools with middle grades are learning organizations that establish norms, structures, and organizational arrangements to support and sustain their trajectory toward excellence.

1. A shared vision of what a high-performing school is and does, drives every facet of school change. 4 3 2 1 Average

The shared vision drives constant improvement. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Shared, distributed, and sustained leadership propels the school forward and preserves its institutional memory and purpose. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Everyone knows what the plan is and the vision is posted and evidenced by actions. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

3. The school is a community of practice in which learning, experimentation, and reflection are the norm. 4 3 2 1 Average

School leadership fosters and supports interdependent collaboration. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Expectations of continuous improvement permeate the school culture. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Everyone's job is to learn. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

6. The school staff holds itself accountable for the students' success. 4 3 2 1 Average

The school collects, analyzes, and uses data as a basis for making decisions. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

The administrators and faculty grapple with school-generated evaluation data to identify areas for more extensive and intensive improvement. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

The staff delineates benchmarks, and insists upon evidence and results. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

The school staff intentionally and explicitly reconsiders its vision and practices when data call them into question. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

7. District and school staff possess and cultivate the collective will to persevere, believing it is their business to produce increased achievement and enhanced development of all students. 4 3 2 1 Average

The faculty and administrators see barriers as challenges, not problems. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

9. The school includes families and community members in setting and supporting the school's trajectory toward high performance. 4 3 2 1 Average

The administrators and teachers inform families and community members about the school's goals for student success and the students' responsibility for meeting those goals

4 3 2 1

Evidence:

The administrators and teachers engage all stakeholders in ongoing and reflective conversation, consensus building, and decision making about governance to promote school improvement. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

APPENDIX F: FACULTY MEETING OBSERVATION INSTRUMENT

- 4 = High quality, complete, mature, and coherent implementation – NEARLY PERFECT, LITTLE ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT
- 3 = Good quality, incomplete, maturing, or not fully implemented by all – STILL ROOM FOR REFINEMENT and IMPROVEMENT
- 2 = Fair quality, mixed implementation, immature practice, sporadic by some – SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENT NEEDED
- 1 = Poor quality, low level of implementation, new program, by a few – CONSIDERABLE STRATEGIC PLANNING, CONSENSUS BUILDING AND IMPROVEMENT NEEDED
- 0 = No score, isolated or not in practice – INITIATE DISCUSSION

Academic Excellence High-performing schools with middle grades are academically excellent. They challenge all students to use their minds well.

2. Curriculum, instruction, assessment, and appropriate academic interventions are aligned with high standards. 4 3 2 1 Average

Standards provide a coherent vision for what students should know and be able to do. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Students, teachers and families understand what students are learning and why. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

8. The adults in the school are provided time and frequent opportunities to enhance student achievement by working with colleagues to deepen their knowledge and to improve their standards-based practice. 4 3 2 1 Average

They collaborate in analyzing student achievement data and making decisions about rigorous curriculum, standards-based assessment practice, effective instructional methods, and evaluation of student work. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

The professional learning community employs coaching, mentoring, and peer observation as a means of continuous instructional improvement 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Developmental Responsiveness High-performing schools with middle grades are sensitive to the unique developmental challenges of early adolescence.

1. The staff creates a personalized environment that supports each student's intellectual, ethical, social, and physical development 4 3 2 1 Average

Adults and students are grouped into smaller communities (i.e. teams, houses, academies) for enhanced teaching and learning. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

These small learning communities are characterized by stable, close, and mutually respectful relationships. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

2. The school provides access to comprehensive services to foster healthy physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development. 4 3 2 1 Average

Teachers are trained to recognize and handle student problems. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Students with difficulties, and their families, can get help. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

The school houses a wide range of support—nurses, counselors, resource teachers—to help students and families who need special assistance. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Social Equity High performing schools with middle grades are socially equitable, democratic, and fair. They provide every student with high quality teachers, resources, learning opportunities, and supports. They keep positive options open for all students.

1. To the fullest extent possible, all students, including English learners, students with disabilities, gifted and honors students, participate in heterogeneous classes with high academic and behavioral expectations. 4 3 2 1 Average

Faculty and administrators are committed to helping each student produce proficient work. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Evidence of this commitment includes tutoring, mentoring, enrichment assignments, differentiated instruction, special adaptations, supplemental classes and other supports.

4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Accelerated, short-term interventions for students with similar needs are fluid and do not become low-level or permanent tracks. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

6. The school community knows every student well. 4 3 2 1 Average

Each student is appreciated and respected. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Staff members do not use negative labels or discuss students in negative ways. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

8. The school's reward system is designed to value diversity, civility, service, and democratic citizenship. 4 3 2 1 Average

The faculty recognizes the contributions of all its students. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Awards are not limited to sports and academic honors. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Students' success and good deeds are always noticed. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

10. The school rules are clear, fair, and consistently applied. 4 3 2 1 Average

Students and parents are informed of school rules and know exactly what will and does happen if students break the rules. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Staff members routinely analyze and act upon referral and suspension data to make sure that no one group of students is unfairly singled out by classroom and school staff. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

The school's disciplinary referrals and suspension rate are low as a result of proactive interventions that keep students engaged, resilient, healthy, safe, and respectful of one another. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Organization Structures and Processes High-performing schools with middle grades are learning organizations that establish norms, structures, and organizational arrangements to support and sustain their trajectory toward excellence.

1. A shared vision of what a high-performing school is and does, drives every facet of school change. 4 3 2 1 Average

The shared vision drives constant improvement. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Shared, distributed, and sustained leadership propels the school forward and preserves its institutional memory and purpose. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

- Everyone knows what the plan is and the vision is posted and evidenced by actions.

4 3 2 1

Evidence:

2. The principal has the responsibility and authority to hold the school-improvement enterprise together, including day-to-day know-how, coordination, strategic planning, and communication. 4 3 2 1 Average

- Lines of leadership for the school's improvement efforts are clear. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

- The school leadership team has the responsibility to make things happen. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

- The principal makes sure that assignments are completed. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

3. The school is a community of practice in which learning, experimentation, and reflection are the norm. 4 3 2 1 Average

- School leadership fosters and supports interdependent collaboration. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

- Expectations of continuous improvement permeate the school culture. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

- Everyone's job is to learn. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

4. The school and district devote resources to content-rich professional development, which is connected to reaching and sustaining the school vision and increasing student achievement. 4 3 2 1 Average

- Professional development is intensive, of high quality, ongoing, and relevant to middle-grades education. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

- Teachers get professional support to improve instructional practice (i.e. classroom visitations, peer coaching, demonstration lessons, etc.) 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

- Opportunities for learning increase knowledge and skills, challenge outmoded beliefs and practices, and provide support in the classroom. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

5. The school is not an island unto itself; it is a part of a larger educational system, i.e., districts, networks and community partnerships. 4 3 2 1 Average

There are deliberate vertical articulation and transition programs between feeder elementary schools and destination high schools. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

The district supports (funding and time) its schools' participation in best practice networks, associations, learning communities, and professional development focused on middle grades improvement and achievement. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

School and district work collaboratively to bring coherence to curriculum, instruction, assessment, intervention, data collection, analysis, and accountability for student achievement. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

7. District and school staff possess and cultivate the collective will to persevere, believing it is their business to produce increased achievement and enhanced development of all students. 4 3 2 1 Average

The faculty and administrators see barriers as challenges, not problems. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

APPENDIX G: GENERAL OBSERVATION INSTRUMENT

- 4 = High quality, complete, mature, and coherent implementation – NEARLY PERFECT, LITTLE ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT
- 3 = Good quality, incomplete, maturing, or not fully implemented by all – STILL ROOM FOR REFINEMENT and IMPROVEMENT
- 2 = Fair quality, mixed implementation, immature practice, sporadic by some – SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENT NEEDED
- 1 = Poor quality, low level of implementation, new program, by a few – CONSIDERABLE STRATEGIC PLANNING, CONSENSUS BUILDING AND IMPROVEMENT NEEDED
- 0 = No score, isolated or not in practice – INITIATE DISCUSSION

Academic Excellence High-performing schools with middle grades are academically excellent. They challenge all students to use their minds well.

2. Curriculum, instruction, assessment, and appropriate academic interventions are aligned with high standards. 4 3 2 1 Average

Students, teachers and families understand what students are learning and why. 4 3 2 1
Evidence:

6. The faculty and master schedule provide students time to meet rigorous academic standards 4 3 2 1 Average

Students are provided more time to learn the content, concepts or skills if needed. 4 3 2 1
Evidence:

Flexible scheduling enables students to engage in academic interventions, extended projects, hands-on experiences, and inquiry-based learning. 4 3 2 1
Evidence:

7. Students are provided the support they need to meet rigorous academic standards. 4 3 2 1 Average

Students have multiple opportunities to succeed and receive extra help as needed, such as:

o co-teaching or collaborative resource model, 4 3 2 1
Evidence:

o support and intervention classes, 4 3 2 1
Evidence:

o before- and after-school tutoring, 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

o homework centers 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

o other 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

8. The adults in the school are provided time and frequent opportunities to enhance student achievement by working with colleagues to deepen their knowledge and to improve their standards-based practice. 4 3 2 1 Average

They collaborate in analyzing student achievement data and making decisions about rigorous curriculum, standards-based assessment practice, effective instructional methods, and evaluation of student work. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

The professional learning community employs coaching, mentoring, and peer observation as a means of continuous instructional improvement 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Developmental Responsiveness High-performing schools with middle grades are sensitive to the unique developmental challenges of early adolescence.

1. The staff creates a personalized environment that supports each student's intellectual, ethical, social, and physical development 4 3 2 1 Average

Adults and students are grouped into smaller communities (i.e. teams, houses, academies) for enhanced teaching and learning. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Every student has a mentor, advisor, advocate, or other adult he/she trusts and stays in relationship with throughout the middle school experience. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

2. The school provides access to comprehensive services to foster healthy physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development. 4 3 2 1 Average

Teachers are trained to recognize and handle student problems. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Students with difficulties, and their families, can get help. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

The school houses a wide range of support—nurses, counselors, resource teachers—to help students and families who need special assistance. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

The school staff-members offer parent education activities involving families. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

6. Students are provided multiple opportunities to explore a rich variety of topics and interests in order to develop their identity, learn about their strengths, discover and demonstrate their own competence, and plan for their future. 4 3 2 1 Average

Teachers and counselors push students to challenge themselves and set high academic and career goals for their future. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

7. All students have opportunities for voice—posing questions, reflecting on experiences, and participating in decisions and leadership activities. 4 3 2 1 Average

All students have a real say, or have legitimate representation, in what happens at school. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

8. The school staff members develop alliances with families to enhance and support the well-being of the children. 4 3 2 1 Average

Parents are more than just volunteers or fund-raisers; they are meaningfully involved in all aspects of the school. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Parents are informed, included, and involved as partners and decision-makers in their children's education. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

9. Staff members provide all students with opportunities to develop citizenship skills, to use the community as a classroom, and to engage the community in providing resources and support. 4 3 2 1 Average

Students take on projects to improve their school, community, state, nation, and world. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

10. The school provides age-appropriate, co-curricular activities to foster social skills and character, and to develop interests beyond the classroom environment.

4 3 2 1 Average

Student co-curricular activities cover a wide range of interests—team sports, clubs, exploratory opportunities, service opportunities, and a rich program in the visual and performing arts. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Social Equity High performing schools with middle grades are socially equitable, democratic, and fair. They provide every student with high quality teachers, resources, learning opportunities, and supports. They keep positive options open for all students.

1. To the fullest extent possible, all students, including English learners, students with disabilities, gifted and honors students, participate in heterogeneous classes with high academic and behavioral expectations. 4 3 2 1 Average

Faculty and administrators are committed to helping each student produce proficient work. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Evidence of this commitment includes tutoring, mentoring, enrichment assignments, differentiated instruction, special adaptations, supplemental classes and other supports. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Accelerated, short-term interventions for students with similar needs are fluid and do not become low-level or permanent tracks. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

4. All students have equal access to valued knowledge in all school classes and activities. 4 3 2 1 Average

All students have access to participate in interest-based classes, activities, or opportunities. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

5. Students have ongoing opportunities to learn about and appreciate their own and others' cultures. 4 3 2 1 Average

The school values knowledge from the diverse cultures represented in the school, community, and our nation. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Materials in the media center represent all of the cultures of the students. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Families often come and share their traditions and beliefs. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

6. The school community knows every student well. 4 3 2 1 Average

Each student is appreciated and respected. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Every student has an adult advocate and supporter in the school. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

7. The faculty welcomes and encourages the active participation of all its families and makes sure that all its families are an integral part of the school, such as: 4 3 2 1 Average

Transportation, meals, childcare, and translation support are provided so all families of diverse cultures and languages can attend school events. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

9. Staff members understand and support the family backgrounds and values of its students. 4 3 2 1 Average

The school recruits a culturally and linguistically diverse staff. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

The staff members are a good match to the school's community. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

10. The school rules are clear, fair, and consistently applied. 4 3 2 1 Average

Students and parents are informed of school rules and know exactly what will and does happen if students break the rules. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

The school's suspension rate is low. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Staff members routinely analyze and act upon referral and suspension data to make sure that no one group of students is unfairly singled out by classroom and school staff. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

The school's disciplinary referrals and suspension rate are low as a result of proactive interventions that keep students engaged, resilient, healthy, safe, and respectful of one another. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Organization Structures and Processes High-performing schools with middle grades are learning organizations that establish norms, structures, and organizational arrangements to support and sustain their trajectory toward excellence.

1. A shared vision of what a high-performing school is and does, drives every facet of school change. 4 3 2 1 Average

The shared vision drives constant improvement. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Shared, distributed, and sustained leadership propels the school forward and preserves its institutional memory and purpose. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Everyone knows what the plan is and the vision is posted and evidenced by actions. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

2. The principal has the responsibility and authority to hold the school-improvement enterprise together, including day-to-day know-how, coordination, strategic planning, and communication. 4 3 2 1 Average

Lines of leadership for the school's improvement efforts are clear. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

The school leadership team has the responsibility to make things happen. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

The principal makes sure that assignments are completed. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

3. The school is a community of practice in which learning, experimentation, and reflection are the norm. 4 3 2 1 Average

School leadership fosters and supports interdependent collaboration. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Expectations of continuous improvement permeate the school culture. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Everyone's job is to learn. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

4. The school and district devote resources to content-rich professional development, which is connected to reaching and sustaining the school vision and increasing student achievement. 4 3 2 1 Average

Professional development is intensive, of high quality, ongoing, and relevant to middle-grades education. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Teachers get professional support to improve instructional practice (i.e. classroom visitations, peer coaching, demonstration lessons, etc.) 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

Opportunities for learning increase knowledge and skills, challenge outmoded beliefs and practices, and provide support in the classroom. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

5. The school is not an island unto itself; it is a part of a larger educational system, i.e., districts, networks and community partnerships. 4 3 2 1 Average

There are deliberate vertical articulation and transition programs between feeder elementary schools and destination high schools. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

The district supports (funding and time) its schools' participation in best practice networks, associations, learning communities, and professional development focused on middle grades improvement and achievement. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

School and district work collaboratively to bring coherence to curriculum, instruction, assessment, intervention, data collection, analysis, and accountability for student achievement. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

6. The school staff holds itself accountable for the students' success. 4 3 2 1 Average

The school collects, analyzes, and uses data as a basis for making decisions. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

The administrators and faculty grapple with school-generated evaluation data to identify areas for more extensive and intensive improvement. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

The staff delineates benchmarks, and insists upon evidence and results. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

The school staff intentionally and explicitly reconsiders its vision and practices when data call them into question. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

7. District and school staff possess and cultivate the collective will to persevere, believing it is their business to produce increased achievement and enhanced development of all students. 4 3 2 1 Average

The faculty and administrators see barriers as challenges, not problems. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

8. The school and district staffs work with colleges and universities to recruit, prepare, and mentor novice and experienced teachers. 4 3 2 1 Average

Principals insist on having teachers who promote young adolescents' intellectual, social, emotional, physical, and ethical growth. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

9. The school includes families and community members in setting and supporting the school's trajectory toward high performance. 4 3 2 1 Average

The administrators and teachers inform families and community members about the school's goals for student success and the students' responsibility for meeting those goals
4 3 2 1

Evidence:

The administrators and teachers engage all stakeholders in ongoing and reflective conversation, consensus building, and decision making about governance to promote school improvement. 4 3 2 1

Evidence:

APPENDIX H: STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. What name (pseudonym) would you like for me to use for you?
2. How old are you?
3. How long have you attended Impact Middle School?
4. What kind of things do you like to do in your spare time?
5. What is your best subject at school and why?
6. What is your worst subject at school and why?
7. If your peers had to describe you in one word, what would they say?
8. If your teachers had to describe you in one word, what would they say?
9. What's your favorite part of the school day?
10. What's your least favorite part of the school day?
11. What are some of the things you like about your teachers?
12. What could your teachers do to improve?
13. How do you feel about your class/schoolmates?
14. Your school has been identified as a *School to Watch*. That means a committee thought your school was setting a good example for others to follow. Why do you think your school earned this honor?
15. What do you think your school could do better?
16. What kind of help does your school offer for struggling students?
17. How would you describe your school's discipline policies?
18. As an African American student, explain why you do or do not feel valued at your school...

- a. By your peers?
- b. By your teachers?
- c. By what is taught in your school?

19. Are other cultures and backgrounds valued at your school? How do you know?

- a. From peers?
- b. From teachers?
- c. From what is taught at your school?

20. (I reserve the right to ask follow-up questions not explicitly listed on this protocol.)