A QUALITATIVE MULTIPLE CASE STUDY EXPLORING HIGH-PERFORMING TEACHER AGENCY AND REFORM OF "LOW-PERFORMING" SCHOOLS IN NORTH CAROLINA

by

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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

2023

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ABSTRACT

WILLIAM KESSLER. A Qualitative Multiple Case Study Exploring High-Performing Teacher Agency and Reform of "Low-Performing" Schools in North Carolina. (Under the direction of DR. TINA HEAFNER)

Since the early 1980s, American educational reformers tried to improve schools through standards, high-stakes tests, and punishments for those schools that failed to meet the mark. In North Carolina, many schools with diverse populations and low socioeconomic status struggled to succeed, receiving the state performance grade of D or F and the consequent "low-performing" label. Meanwhile, some teachers in these schools achieved at high levels and attempted to improve not only their classrooms, but their schools and districts. Few researchers sought the opinions and expertise of high-performing teachers in order to better understand their experiences, their role as change agents, and their recommendations for other so-called "low-performing" schools. This qualitative multiple case study used in-depth interviews with five high-performing teachers in "low-performing" elementary schools in North Carolina. Specifically, this research gathered information about their backgrounds, their actions for school transformation, and their lessons learned about education and equity. Findings from the study indicated that high-performing elementary teachers tried to reform their "low-performing" schools through teacher agency but were blocked by multiple factors. School administrators and district officials reduced teacher agency and opportunities for school improvement. North Carolina's "low-performing" schools policy harmed children, reinforced school failure, and produced discriminatory and inequitable results. Teacher agency theory provided a promising approach for the state to change course and improve failing schools.

Key words: elementary education, equity, high-performing teachers, "low-performing" schools, *Leandro*, North Carolina, segregation, teacher agency, teacher leadership

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I need to acknowledge all the people who have helped make this dissertation possible. First, I express my appreciation to Dr. Tina Heafner, Dr. Lisa Merriweather, Dr. Drew Polly, and Dr. Tracy Rock for serving on my dissertation committee and for their direction and insight. Next, I send my deepest thanks to the five participants in this study who gave of their time to share their experiences. Humbly, I have tried to do justice to their experiences and insights. Thanks to Dr. Meaghan Rand, Ms. Julie Green, and Dr. Ashley Boyd for making the time to examine my work and for their essential feedback. Thanks so much to Dr. Sarah Rector, my personal advisor on research practices and writing. Thanks to Dr. Chance Lewis for inspiring me and insisting on excellence from the first day of class. Dr. Lewis taught me the meaning of Ecclesiastes 6:11: “The more the words, the less the meaning, and how does that profit anyone?” I apologize if I have fallen short of his message. Thanks to Dr. Greg Wiggan for always making me feel special and part of important work. Thanks to Dr. Spencer Salas for his inspiration and suggestion to conduct three in-depth interviews. Thanks as well to Dr. Bettie Butler for her advice through my first three doctoral years. Thanks to my positive self-advocacy project team of Natasha Lipscomb, Christopher Reed, and Zonja Glover who pushed me to forge ahead. I have been so lucky to work with my writing group of Dr. Michelle Pazzula Jimenez and Dr. Stacy Moore. They have kept me on track and with a smile on my face.

I also want to thank my fellow educators with whom I work every day and who inspire me at school. They have taught me everything about teaching and learning and how to be a better person. I should particularly thank Shay Matthews and Houston Matthews for their prayers, support and example.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, father, brother, mother-in-law, brother-in-law, family and friends who supported me throughout this course of study. My wife and my children have encouraged and guided me. I particularly dedicate this work to my daughter and her generation of teachers who deserve a better chance at having their voices heard.

"Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EOG	End of Grade test
ESSA	Every Student Succeeds Act
mCLASS	Reading tests produced by Amplify
MOE	Ministry of Education
NAEP	National Assessment of Education Progress
NCLB	No Child Left Behind
PLC	Professional Learning Community
SIT	School Improvement Team

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Before the pandemic, the school district transferred me from a school in an affluent suburb to a "low-performing" elementary school.[1] I had been principal at a top-performing primary school and moved to a school identified as one of the bottom five performers in the district. The superintendent told me he "wanted me back in the game" (Superintendent, personal communication, August, 7, 2019). I was excited about the challenge of being principal at this school, as I had served as the assistant principal there a dozen years before and knew most of the staff. I joked with my new assistant principal, who had also worked there previously, that we were going "home." I had great memories of the relationships I had established there and had maintained over the years. Many teachers were still there from my first stint. I believed there was potential to make school improvements based on the long-term relationships and trust level that still existed from the shared struggles of the past. I relished the opportunity to do my best for teachers and families that I admired and I hoped to put to work what I had learned after nine years as a principal.

Trouble started in the first month of school when the content teacher, or learning coach, reported the school instructional practices to the district office without my knowledge. In one grade level, a teacher was using Reading AZ, a program that the district had endorsed in suburban schools. The academic facilitators and district officials said that the teacher could not use it, that she was deviating from the district reading plans. In the "high-performing" schools, teachers had the agency to select programs they thought would help their students. In the "low-performing" school, the district supervised what would be routine decisions in suburban settings.

[1] North Carolina assigns the term "low-performing" to schools that score D or F on the state performance grade in accordance with state law. I place this label in quotations as it is used in state and federal legal documents but has negative connotations that I will discuss more in depth later.

Even though this classroom teacher was a “high-performing” teacher who exceeded state growth metrics (attaining the highest level, blue, on her scores), her expertise was dismissed. “It is not hard to be a blue performer in a lower grade,” an official opined (District official, personal communication, September, 2019). I was reminded by district staff that teacher autonomy had to be earned by higher test scores and until a “low-performing” school achieved at a higher level, teachers did not deserve autonomy. Teacher ability to act in the best interest of the children was not earned even by high-performing teachers. District officials claimed that high-performance brought privileges such as agency over decision-making, curriculum, staffing, or school improvement. The reality was that leadership by high-performing teachers was denied in the “low-performing” school.

Later, the same content teacher, who reported the classroom teacher to the district, requested a move to another school. She had been one of the best teachers in the district before becoming the content teacher in the “low-performing” school, serving as a coach and lead academic resource. Yet, the teachers at the “low-performing” school refused to work with her. In addition to the content teacher alienating the staff through working as an informer for the district, the teachers had built up resentment after years of the state and district stripping away their agency. With the previous administration, they had asked for support to reduce class size and hire more teachers to help reduce discipline incidents and increase learning. Instead, the state or the district would allot positions for state interventionists or reading specialists or content teachers but not supply enough classroom teachers to improve the academics of the school significantly. The resentment against insufficient staffing grew and became so strongly entrenched that it was too much for the content teacher and she left. Interestingly, during the pandemic, with much smaller classes to maintain social distancing of five to ten students per

class, I saw how effective class size reduction could be. In two days of in-person learning even with quarantine restrictions, students grew around 80% of what they grew in five days of instruction the previous year. The teachers had been onto something, but were ignored and embittered.

During the COVID year of 2020-2021, a high-performing teacher explained the advantages of smaller class size. For social distancing, the children attended school two days a week in person and then the teachers taught the other half of the class for two days and had one day for all the students to learn remotely. The teacher and I were discussing student growth in spite of only two days of in-person learning and rather inconsistent and ineffective learning at home. The teacher said if she only had the students three days a week with the small class size of around 10 students, she could have them grow as much if not more than five days a week with a full class. This comment spoke to many problems in the "low-performing" schoolhouse that small classes solved: fewer students, fewer distractions, fewer confrontations, fewer discipline incidents, fewer mental health issues, more one-on-one and small group instruction, and more personal attention, in fact, all the attention any student ever needed.

One of the loudest conflicts between the teachers and district personnel erupted when the teachers were told they had to conduct the standards mastery assessment at the end of each unit on the iReady platform. The district academic staff prioritized this additional testing that would take place once or twice a month. Already, the teachers had to conduct diagnostic tests three times a year in one or two platforms for reading and math. Then, they had to take North Carolina "check-ins" quarterly for two or three subjects. Moreover, there were progress monitoring expectations and portfolio reading passages. In short, there were lots of tests. Each assessment reduced time available for instruction which teachers knew that the students desperately needed.

For some teachers, the new standards mastery assessments were the final straw. One teacher questioned the facilitator and protested the amount of testing and the wrongheaded nature of the initiative. She walked away from the meeting to compose herself in frustration. Within minutes, I received a call from a district official that a meeting would happen in my office that afternoon. There I was blamed for the incident and told that I would have to discipline the teacher and file additional paperwork monthly to document my supervision. Meanwhile, the teacher's concerns were ignored, the tests continued, and the students were lost in the shuffle.

In another instance, the district was mandating professional development that the teachers did not need. The county ignored feedback from the teachers and strongly encouraged me to continue the training. I yielded to the pressure at first and the teachers and I agreed to complete one round of the training. After the first sessions, the consultant told us she was pleased with our progress and the data showed no further training was necessary. District officials met with me and we agreed to cancel the redundant professional development. Later on, the decision was held against me as part of a threat against me continuing as principal at the school.

These stories present some of the issues and themes that arise in “low-performing” schools as teachers struggle to find the ability to act, or have agency, in ways to help their schools improve. Many of these teachers in “low-performing” schools are actually high-performing in terms of their effectiveness with students and their agency to improve the school’s performance beyond their own classroom walls. They work with fellow teachers in professional learning communities or grade level teams or on the school improvement team or on school leadership task forces. Yet, they find resistance to their efforts for improvement coming from other teachers, administration, district leadership, or state accountability policies. They find limitations on their ability as change agents and policies that threaten the success of the school

and their classroom. The story of high-performing teachers in “low-performing” schools is a tale of determination and conflict that needs to be told and shared for the benefit of other students and teachers.

After the pandemic, students, particularly urban students, continued to struggle, and many students and teachers were working to make up for lost time. In North Carolina, the number of “low-performing” schools increased after the 2022 end of grade test results (Fofaria, 2022; Helms, 2023a). “Low-performing” was the pejorative that the state labeled schools with Ds or Fs on their performance report cards based on proficiency and growth in reading, math, and science. Historically, results were highly correlated to student socioeconomic status (Fofaria, 2022; Wagner, 2019). Diverse schools and school districts continued to seek solutions to low performance. Improving “low-performing” schools was ultimately a question of equity and social justice. “Low-performing” schools in North Carolina were disproportionately diverse and high-poverty schools (Oakes et al., 2019). To transform these schools in a positive direction might help address historic issues of race and injustice.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experience and opinions of high-performing teachers who exhibited agency and leadership for reform outside of their classrooms to improve “low-performing” elementary schools in North Carolina. High-performing teachers were the silenced experts who had achieved success in the classroom as determined by independent confirmation such as bonuses for performance on end of grade tests or outstanding student growth. High-performing teachers had beaten the system at its own game by excelling on data-driven measures that usually seemed predetermined to correlate low performance with student socioeconomic and racial factors.

Since the early 1980s, school reformers had pursued multiple solutions to help the most challenged schools. Many of the top-down, punitive policies have been unsuccessful (Heissel & Ladd, 2018; Henig et al., 1999; Payne, 2008). The persistence of these difficulties and their inherent inequities increased the urgency to know the perspectives and recommendations of high-performing teachers in "low-performing" schools in North Carolina so as to work towards rectifying schooling for high-poverty neighborhoods as soon as possible. Federal government directives insisted upon quantitative, quasi-experimental research for solutions (Schueler et al., 2020). Few studies have turned to the high-performing teachers in the trenches and in the actual classrooms for their advice.

I had a somewhat unique opportunity over my career as an administrator, as I met multiple teachers who had excelled in difficult circumstances in "low-performing" schools. I had seen them teach, seen them recognized by the state of North Carolina for their excellence, and seen them struggle against colleagues, school leadership, and district officials to help their students and their schools. Through a series of three, 90-minute interviews with five teachers, I proposed to explore their experiences and agency inside *and* outside of their classrooms to search for policy solutions for "low-performing" schools. Using multiple case studies to guide procedures and the theory of teacher agency to determine reform strategies sought to yield productive results (Imants & Van der Wal, 2020; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The era of accountability, top-down educational reform, and constriction of teacher autonomy might be reaching the end of its course (Ravitch, 2020). These high-performing teachers presented information that could have a lasting impact on "low-performing" schools, their students and families through their unique insider knowledge of the core issues of student learning and agency for improvement in the schoolhouse.

The following section will present the contextual background of "low-performing" schools in North Carolina and a recent history of recommendations for improvement, including efforts at school "turnaround." Next, the statement of the problem will identify the marginalization of teachers in "low-performing" schools, explain the purpose of the study, and present the research questions. The conceptual framework section details the role of teacher agency theory and previews the relevance of the study and its significance for teacher leadership and professional development. The last sections outline the limitations and delimitations of the research, as well as the assumptions and key terms.

Background

In the 1980s, the school accountability movement developed a new lens to analyze struggling schools. The "back to the basics" movement that undergirded *A Nation at Risk,* published in 1983, insisted on standards, accountability, and mandates. In 2002, No Child Left Behind codified the sentiment, requiring high-stakes testing and remediation for schools that did not make annual progress goals. Teachers had to adhere to presenting the standards and preparing students for end of grade tests in reading, math, and science, facing state sanction for performance below annual yearly progress measures.

In 2013, North Carolina started assigning schools a letter grade to identify schools in need of change (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2015). The state had tried several plans to improve schools with diverse populations or urban settings in previous years. During the Obama administration, the North Carolina qualified for a Race to the Top grant with its Turning Around the Lowest Achieving Schools (TALAS) process that sought to promote change through setting a new direction for "low-performing" schools quickly (Heissel & Ladd, 2018; Henry & Harbatkin, 2019). Schools would either receive a new principal, new teachers,

new governance by a charter organization, or close their doors (Heissel & Ladd, 2018). Today, North Carolina still gives districts these options, including the restart model where schools receive more flexibility for hiring and expenditures (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2023a). State sanctions for poor performance remain in place and districts pressure teachers and schools to improve or face consequences, such as replacing the principal and teachers. My study sought to question this policy approach by exploring teacher insider knowledge and experiences to better understand the challenges and successes of working within "low-performing" elementary schools.

In spite of these strict measures for "low-performing" schools, little research backed up the effectiveness of turnaround efforts. Schueler et al. (2020) conducted a meta-analysis of evaluations of school improvement for "low-performing" schools nationwide and found little significant evidence in test scores and much more uncertainty about what actually worked by replacing leadership and teachers. Heissel and Ladd (2018) concluded that North Carolina's turnaround effects were misplaced and did not address the core issues of high-needs students, such as family support, counseling, medical clinics, and social services. They determined that turnaround efforts did not raise achievement levels and likely fostered negative outcomes such as increased paperwork for teachers and decreased resources (Heissel & Ladd, 2018). Henry and Harbatkin (2019) found that the North Carolina Transformation program did not improve student achievement growth or retain teachers. In fact, they connected their results to several other studies on school turnaround that found little evidence for success and some findings of deterioration of quality largely due to the initiatives (Henry & Harbatkin, 2019). The state failed as it sought to pressure individual teachers rather than develop schoolwide capacities, climate,

and morale. The lack of time and resources devoted to improving school level procedures resulted in poor effects.

In 2019, the *Leandro* case over North Carolina's constitutional duty to provide a "sound basic education" for all of its students led to a detailed study of education in North Carolina and recommendations for all schools, including high-poverty schools which were highly associated with "low-performing" schools (Oakes et al., 2019; Wagner, 2019). The plaintiffs, defendants, and judge agreed to the WestEd consultant group assessing the North Carolina education system. WestEd recommended that North Carolina take several steps to address a "sound basic education" in "high-poverty" schools (Oakes, et al., 2019). Their first recommendation sought to invest in the number of experienced, qualified teachers in high-poverty schools and provide them with the incentives, supports, and professional development to be successful. Proposed training included trauma-informed decision-making, culturally responsive teaching, and restorative discipline (WestEd, Learning Policy Institute, & Friday Institute for Educational Innovation at North Carolina State University, 2019). They also prioritized reducing class sizes to no more than 15:1 by increasing the number of teachers in high-poverty schools. WestEd's vision of investing in teachers and staff, building trust in the schoolhouse, and equitable financing contrasted with the failed school turnaround model of firings, blame, and privatization.

WestEd's proposals followed the lead of the Consortium on Chicago School Research which had studied hundreds of elementary schools in Chicago in the early 2000s. They found five specific supports that made the difference in school improvement, including a cohesive learning plan, safe school climate, community and family capacity, school leadership, and professional capacity of teachers and staff (Bryk, 2010). A leader of the Consortium underscored the importance of trust in the school community and the responsibility of the principal to guide

and develop teacher, staff, and family leadership. For schools to improve, professional staff capacity and collaboration were essential and all of the five elements must have been present (Bryk, 2010). For “low-performing” schools, extra efforts were necessary to address lower levels of capacity in the community and staff.

Many “low-performing” schools in North Carolina already employed teachers with the capacity and previous experience of excellence in their classrooms. These high-performing teachers set the standard for classroom leadership and in many cases, provided schoolwide leadership outside their classroom that would give them a unique perspective on improving “low-performing” schools. A few found the school so far beyond redemption that they were incentivized to retreat behind their classroom door and let the school run itself, giving the impression that teachers could not contribute to school improvement (Payne, 2008; Poplin et al., 2011). In other schools where administration included teachers in leadership decisions and plans, schoolwide climate rallied and achievement results followed (Johnson et al., 2014). School success in a “low-performing” environment depended on teachers leading both inside and outside of their classrooms (Johnson, et al., 2014). Furthermore, Johnson et al. (2014) highlighted that the underlying principles of leadership success in schools–generating ideas, discussions, and decision-making–came from the quality of interdependency and investments in empowerment rather than the controlling of teachers as instruments. Budge and Parrett (2022) confirmed that teachers should “have the power to make decisions of schoolwide importance” (p. 35). A cohesive, collaborative, and shared vision was also essential for making high-poverty schools high-performing where, “Leaders are responsive to teachers' needs and there is a spirit of reciprocity” (Budge & Parrett, 2022, p. 36). Not only was teacher leadership essential to school

improvement, but also the agency of high-performing teachers provided an insightful perspective on how to improve “low-performing” schools.

Statement of the Problem

Leandro proposed more funds, more qualified teachers, and more professional development but has been tied up in court and stymied by the state legislature. In the meantime, the search continues for other solutions. A likely source of information and possibility was an untapped resource: high-performing teachers who succeeded in their classrooms and acted as change agents in their “low-performing” schools. Johnson et al. (2014) identified the need for more qualitative research on high-poverty schools to understand their adaptive challenges. Improving “low-performing” schools and their related issues of equity and social justice were a gap in the literature for teacher leadership, according to Wenner and Campbell (2017). Schueler et al. (2020) demonstrated that quantitative studies showed the failure of turnaround efforts and the need for a better comprehension of “low-performing” schools. Bryk (2010) emphasized that continued, dedicated research was necessary to understand the inner workings and solutions for “low-performing” schools: “In the end, melding strong, independent disciplined inquiry with a sustained commitment among civic leaders to improve schooling is the only long-term assurance that an education of value for all may finally emerge” (p. 30). The goal of this study was to conduct such a “disciplined inquiry” and possibly pave a way to match it to a civic commitment, where local and state leaders listened to the recommendations of high-performing teachers, for sustained improvement and success.

The problem perhaps was that not enough leaders and policymakers actually took into account the experiences or opinions of teachers who work in “low-performing” schools. Many assumed they were not worth listening to and the accountability era labeled them as part of the

problem (Goldstein, 2015). Reconsidering teachers as part of the solution at the school, district, and state level was a paradigm shift considering the amount of blame typically assigned to them. Moreover, teachers who distinguished themselves in difficult environments and took action for school improvement produced the voices most in need of attention.

Research Purpose and Questions

The aim of this study was to investigate the experience and opinions of high-performing teachers as they exhibited agency and leadership for reform outside of their classrooms to improve "low-performing" elementary schools in North Carolina. The research questions guiding this study were:

1. How did the experience of becoming a high-performing teacher in a "low-performing" elementary school inform the teacher's agency for change and leadership outside their classroom?
2. What factors did high-performing teachers identify that promoted or hindered exercising agency to influence change in "low-performing" schools?
3. Based on their experience and the theory of teacher agency, how did high-performing teachers in "low-performing" schools describe their strategies for school improvement, transformation, and equity?
4. How did the model of teacher agency frame high-performing teachers' experiences and opinions?

I utilized a multiple case study qualitative design in order to obtain detailed descriptions from three in-depth interviews with each participant (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2006; Yin, 2018). Three interviews helped garner the full, rich description of high-performing teachers' backgrounds, school contexts, and lessons learned from agency in "low-performing" schools.

The participants were high-performing teachers who taught for five or more years in “low-performing” schools in North Carolina within the past three years. While other researchers have conducted quantitative studies about what works in “low-performing” schools, there was a need for more ideas for ways to improve such schools (Schueler et al., 2020). Few have asked high-performing teachers their opinions about leading their classrooms but even fewer about their actions to reform and improve their schools. By conducting a qualitative study, gathering their perspectives, and coding them for coherence and connections, I hoped to contribute to the knowledge base about how to improve “low-performing” schools in North Carolina.

Conceptual Framework

Several scholars have proposed teacher agency as a way to improve education and counter the demands of the accountability system (Evers & Kneyber, 2015; Sahlberg, 2015; Stevenson & Gilliland, 2015). Teacher agency was defined as the quality of engaged teacher action to address their challenges in their classroom, school environments or beyond (Priestley et al., 2015). Teachers' actions as change agents included leadership inside and outside the classroom, in formal and informal roles. Teacher agency theory argued that schools would be more productive, creative, and innovative with teacher voice in decision-making and teacher leadership as part of the solution for education challenges (Biesta et al., 2015; Calvert, 2016; Priestley et al. 2015). Those who stressed accountability for teachers and schools saw teachers as a problem and objects in the way to reform schools, not worthy of subjectivity or control over their classrooms. Teacher agency theory promoted teachers as part of the solution.

Imants and Van de Wal (2020) proposed a model whereby teacher agency produced outcomes and reforms in teaching. As seen in Figure 1, context and practice affected agency

which in turn impelled outcomes and school reform (Imants & Van der Wal, 2020). In spite of circumstances or perhaps because of them, teachers could take actions to improve schooling.

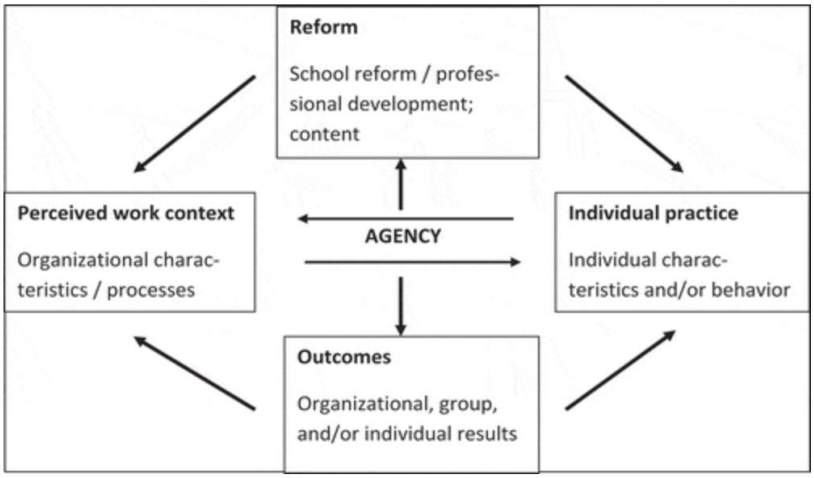

Figure 1

The Model of Teacher Agency in School Reform and Professional Development

(Imants & Van der Wal, 2020)

Moreover, Casey (2006) argued that agency drove improvement in business or learning organizations. Teachers could work within a system, its structures and standards, and still the organization would function better by empowering teacher voices. Ng (2015) confirmed how teachers in Singapore followed national standards but also utilized decision-making capacity.

The circumstances of the accountability movement–including the sanctions, punishments, and recriminations against "low performing" schools–hindered school improvement as they denied teacher agency and interfered with productive or innovative changes to classroom practice through pressure and threats (Goldstein, 2015; Ng, 2015; Priestley et al., 2015). Accountability systems in states like North Carolina blamed teachers, raised the stakes for evaluation, and implemented merit pay that pitted teachers against each other. The globalized business model was misapplied to school reform when it committed to reorganization and

decisions at the management level, not the worker level (Casey, 2006; Sahlberg, 2015). Likewise, other top-down directives limited school success through disruption, restructuring, and privatization (Ravitch, 2020). Output controls over schools such as high-stakes tests tied to teacher evaluation and school performance grades deteriorated school cultures, student performance, and teacher responsiveness or agency (Priestley et al., 2015).

The theory of teacher agency stated that the quality of teacher engagement in school reform was affected by daily practice and outside factors such as the "perceived work context" (Imants & Van der Wal, 2020; Priestley et al., 2015). Schools and districts could promote positive teacher actions and school improvement through improved circumstances for teaching (Imants & Van der Wal, 2020). A systematic study of teacher agency in "low-performing" schools could provide insights on how to help improve student, classroom, and school performance because it could present an alternative perspective to the prevailing mindset of many education leaders. Teacher agency suggested that to improve "low-performing" schools teachers needed more voice, more control, more opportunities to collaborate, and stronger teams. Teacher agency in the right direction led to more innovation, effective reforms, and better outcomes for students and schools.

Significance and Relevance

Wenner and Campbell (2017) found few studies of teacher leadership that addressed equity and social justice concerns. "Low-performing" schools embodied multiple equity issues due to their correlation with diversity and socioeconomic status (Oakes et al., 2019; Wagner, 2019). Many schools received the "low-performing" label because of the challenges of their demographics or income levels, as both were highly correlated with test outcomes (Nordstrom & Tillitski, 2021; Wagner, 2019). Studying these schools and the teachers who succeeded in them

might help rectify the equity imbalance. High-performing teachers might not be able to teach every student but spreading their ideas and recommendations to every classroom and "low-performing" school might improve student outcomes for those students in most need. The teachers involved in this study had lots of strategies on how to improve "low-performing" schools. There was a need to listen to them and document their ideas. High-performing teachers provided innovative and useful direction for their own schools and similar schools with the "low-performing" label.

Furthermore, this study might serve as a model for school leaders, district officials, or state leaders when determining solutions. Consulting research and quantitative data has its place, but hearing from those involved with the problem daily–those working for solutions beyond their classroom–might be invaluable in looking for strategies to end "low-performing" status. The time was right for in-depth qualitative study of this problem (Fofaria, 2022; Johnson et al., 2014). High-performing teacher opinions might be more relevant and responsive to current needs and problems. Consider how teachers identified solutions to the COVID pandemic and lockdowns far more nimbly than others (Heikkilä & Mankki, 2021). "Disruptive" reformers who sought true change could be more effective and efficient by seeking out high-performing teachers in so-called "low-performing" schools (Ravitch, 2020).

Wenner and Campbell (2017) underscored Smylie and Eckert's work (2018) that leadership development activities led to largely positive teacher responses. The process of soliciting high-performing teacher ideas might lead to teacher development opportunities to bring out teacher voice, advocacy, and agency. The teachers involved in this study might also grow from their participation and formulate new ways that they can improve their schools.

Limitations and Delimitations

As multiple case study qualitative research, this study was limited for transferability (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The sample size was small in order to gather rich detail. Findings were restricted to the schools where the participants taught in their particular context, but the researcher hoped to contribute to the field of "low-performing" schools and offer ideas for improvement for teachers, principals, and district officials (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

As the research instrument, I am a limitation of this study. I have had the special opportunity of working with many high-performing teachers and have observed numerous examples in "low-performing" schools as an administrator. They have been high-achieving on their own merits, certainly not due to my leadership. I have been able to determine who was high-performing by access to data, results, and observation. The participants were limited to ones that I have encountered. Nevertheless, many other administrators and officials could use this approach to listen to their teachers for school improvement, if this method proves to be effective.

A delimitation for this study was that the teachers have taught in a "low-performing" school and achieved success as recognized by others in a formal way, such as an award or bonus for their test scores. The sampling was purposeful as I have drawn from teachers who I have met over my twenty years teaching and serving as a principal in North Carolina. The teachers did not work for me during the course of this study.

Assumptions

One assumption was that high-achieving teachers in their classrooms were worth listening to or were more worthwhile to listen to than other teachers. They disproved the old slur, "those who can't, teach. Those who can, do" (Seidman, 2006, p. 24). If they were successful in their classrooms, they might have more clout with or garner more respect from school

administration or district officials. They also might run counter to the stereotype that teachers–especially elementary teachers–did not have something to add, or were disengaged and small-minded (Goldstein, 2015). I have focused on high-performing teachers as they have beaten the system at its own game, taken students who were supposed to fail, and helped them succeed.

Another assumption was that listening to the teachers and compiling their experiences and recommendations would make a change or difference. Perhaps by soliciting recommendations from high-performing teachers, new ideas will emerge to overcome the persistence of "failure." Furthermore, this study provided a format for school leaders to hold conversations with high-performing teachers about more effective directions for new initiatives or efforts.

Definition of Terms

- *The accountability era* was the current epoch of schooling that began with *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 and continued to the present highlighted by initiatives such as No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, the Common Core Standards, high-stakes testing, and teacher evaluation tied to assessment scores.
- *English Language Arts or ELA* was the term given to reading and writing instruction in elementary schools.
- *End of Grade tests or EOGs* were the summative, once yearly, standardized tests in grades three through eight, including reading, math, and science, that were required by federal law.
- *Every Student Succeeds Act or ESSA*, passed in 2015, was the current federal reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965.
- *High-needs schools* was another name for high-poverty schools.

- *High-poverty schools* were schools where poverty levels were over a certain level based on students with free and reduced lunch services, such as 40% of the school (Parrett & Budge, 2020) or above the district median for free and reduced lunch (Johnson et al., 2014).
- *High-performing teachers* were teachers with full-time classroom responsibilities who achieved success in the classroom as determined by outside confirmation such as observation, bonuses for performance on end of grade tests or outstanding student growth.
- *High-stakes tests* were tests such as the end of grade tests that were tied to student retention or teacher employment.
- *Leandro* was the North Carolina court case that began in 1994 and continued until today based on a lawsuit that North Carolina was not fulfilling its constitutional duty to provide appropriate instruction to its children.
- *Low-performing schools* were schools in North Carolina that scored at the D or F level on EOG scores or underperformed on student growth measures such that fewer than 85% of students made annual growth on EOG tests. Many low-performing schools in North Carolina were also high in diversity and poverty (Oakes et al., 2019).
- *Professional learning community or PLC* were grade level teams or school level teams of teachers who planned and worked together on common goals. Most often in this study they referred to grade level teams, such as the third grade professional learning community.
- *School improvement* was the process of affecting change for the better in a "low-performing" school as seen by measurements such as higher test scores, higher family

satisfaction with the school, higher teacher responses on climate surveys, such as the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey, or higher accreditation scores.

- *Teacher agency* was the quality of engaged teacher action to address challenges in the classroom, school environments or beyond (Priestley et al., 2015). Teachers' actions as change agents included leadership inside and outside the classroom, in formal and informal roles.
- *Teacher leadership* was the agency of classroom teachers outside their classrooms for school improvement. This derived from Wenner and Campbell (2017) who wrote, "we defined teacher leaders as *teachers who maintain K-12 classroom-based teaching responsibilities, while also taking on leadership responsibilities outside the classroom*. This definition reflected the stance that teacher leaders with continuing classroom responsibilities were afforded a special understanding of the complexities of teaching (Mangin & Stoelinga, 2008)" (p. 140).

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to introduce this prospective qualitative study and provide an outline of its main components. Beginning with my personal experience in "low-performing" schools, the chapter then presented how the accountability system in North Carolina failed to improve such schools, thus reinforcing inequities, in part, due to the system's restrictions on teacher agency. In spite of extensive research on school improvement, few studies have produced lasting reforms to turnaround schools. Fewer researchers have approached high-performing teachers in "low-performing" schools to learn about their suggestions for school transformation. This study investigated the backgrounds and perspectives of teachers who had achieved at high levels while acting as change agents in "low-performing" elementary schools in

North Carolina, in the hopes of finding productive recommendations for a more effective and equitable school system.

In the next section, Chapter Two presents a critical review of the literature most pertinent to this study. Topics in this chapter include: the standards-based, accountability system; "low-performing" schools in North Carolina; the *Leandro* case and its recommendations for a "sound basic education" for students in high-poverty schools; research on school improvement in the United States and in other high-performing nations; teacher agency; and teacher leadership. The impetus behind this literature review was to better comprehend the strategies of policymakers, officials, and even high-performing teachers to change the outcomes of "low-performing" schools.

Chapter Three describes the methods of conducting a multiple case study to learn more about high-performing teachers' agency in "low-performing" schools. I used a unique sample of high-achieving North Carolina elementary teachers and in-depth interviews to explore their backgrounds, agency, and recommendations for school transformation. I also described the data collection, analysis, and strategies for quality.

Chapter Four addresses the results of the study. Five case studies detail the struggle for teacher agency in "low-performing" schools by five high-performing elementary school teachers. These case studies precede a cross case analysis and then the findings about school reform and teacher agency.

Chapter Five elaborates on the results of this work, beginning with the findings in the context of the empirical literature. Based on the findings and the theory of teacher agency, I present a model of teacher agency for reform of "low-performing" schools. A discussion of the implications and recommendations follows and ends with limitations and a conclusion.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experience and opinions of high-performing teachers who exhibited agency and leadership for reform outside of their classrooms to improve "low-performing" elementary schools in North Carolina. High-performing teachers were defined as the teachers I have observed who attain better than average results on tests scores and other measures. "Low-performing" schools were schools designated by the state of North Carolina's school performance grade system as D or F schools, with less than exceptional growth. I placed "low-performing" in quotations as it represented an unfair assignment by the state that was largely determined by socioeconomic and diversity factors, and not reflective of the holistic efforts of the staff or students (Fofaria, 2022; Wagner, 2019). Many high-performing teachers struggling for transformation engaged in agency and leadership outside their classrooms.

To provide context for their commitment to raise outcomes for "low-performing" schools, this chapter begins with a review of the challenges of the present accountability era in American schools, the system of designating schools in North Carolina as "low-performing," and the "high-poverty" schools recommendations of the *Leandro* case. Afterward follows an overview of efforts to improve "low-performing" schools in North Carolina in the areas of school reform inside and outside the United States, teacher agency, and teacher leadership. Teachers might produce more effective results based on the potential for teacher agency, as Casey (2006) foresaw and Imants and Van der Wal (2020) asserted through a connection between teacher agency and school reform. Policies related to the accountability system and standards movement have limited high-performing teachers' ability to act in "low-performing" schools.

Accountability Era

In 1983, the present era of education dawned with the publication of *A Nation At Risk*. President Reagan and many conservatives called for an educational movement to go "back to the basics" after the 1960s and 1970s, which caused years of desegregation, federal expansion into education, and turmoil in urban areas. Reagan's secretary of education, Ted Bell, formed a commission consisting of academics to study primarily high schools and ostensibly report back on their findings (Ravitch, 2020). Instead, scholars advanced an agenda that concluded that American schooling was failing its children, needed to reinstate a more traditional, rigorous curriculum, and end the previous era's progressive, freewheeling approach to education.

A Nation At Risk demanded that teachers no longer had the autonomy to teach whatever they wished but perform to higher expectations of excellence with accountability (Chenoweth, 2009; Goldstein, 2015; Ravitch, 2020). The report criticized schools as aimless institutions with idle students and a la carte courses (Goldstein, 2015). Most of the findings pertained to high schools and recommended teaching the "5 New Basics," including increasing the number of required high school social studies classes to three for graduation (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 20). The report called for achievement testing when changing from school level to another school level, such as fifth grade before moving to middle school. Interestingly, and in contrast with the public spin on the report, one of the findings was that elementary school achievement in many urban schools was improving on average. Other consequent studies found further confirmation that American schools were not underperforming (Evans, 2004; Ravitch, 2020). Media promoted the false generalization of K-12 public school failure while overlooking many educational successes in elementary and urban schools.

A Nation At Risk recommended elementary school teaching that "should foster an enthusiasm for learning and the development of the individual's gifts and talents," but, in fact, the report launched a new era of accountability for teachers that continued to impact teachers today (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 22). *A Nation At Risk* fueled an impetus for standardization, tests, and consequences in order to drive progress. This spirit would misdirect federal and state efforts at improvement, distort district leadership strategies, fuel dysfunction in "low-performing" schools, and undermine teacher agency (Heissel & Ladd, 2018; Henry & Harbatkin, 2019; Payne, 2008; Ravitch, 2020). Instead of *A Nation At Risk* planting the seeds of individualized learning and bottom-up, school-based improvement, it produced a top-down, counterproductive system of high-stakes testing, punishment, school closure, and charter schools. Today's accountability era drew motivation and spirit from the social efficiency movement of the early 20th century (Evans, 2014; Goldstein, 2015). At that time, reformers embraced Taylor's theory of scientific management that by measuring each input, educators could raise outcomes. By creating standards for each measurable factor, teachers and schools would achieve improvement by striving to meet each standard (Evans, 2004; Goldstein, 2015; Ravitch, 2020).

In the 1980s and 1990s, states began to enhance standards and standardized testing plans to better monitor and promote student achievement and control teachers and curriculum. In 2002, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) set the goal that all students would be on grade level in reading, math, and science by 2014 and imposed a system of consequences for schools that did not perform well on state tests. The federal law created a mandate for high-stakes testing for grades three through eight that remains in place due to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) reauthorization of 2015. The accountability era has promoted merit pay and value-added

evaluation plans to tie teacher job performance to student test scores (Goldstein, 2015; Ravitch, 2020). The punitive system of No Child Left Behind which focused on school accountability shifted to teachers with the Every Student Succeeds Act. Although equally controlling of teachers' work, ESSA acknowledged the central role of teachers in student learning (Heafner, 2019; Oakes et al., 2019).

With increased pressure to perform on state required tests, elementary instruction has suffered. Ultimately, the standards movement narrowed the curriculum and perpetuated a content-centered, traditional course of study with teacher-centered approaches prevailing. Instead of tailoring teaching to the needs of students, the standards movement increased pressures to teach "at grade level" to prepare for end of grade exams, even if many students in "low-performing" schools did not possess the prerequisites yet. The new form of the old efficiency movement emphasized teaching what could be tested and limited materials, time to teach, and opportunities for questions (Evans, 2004; Goldstein, 2015). Policies restricted teaching to transmitting standardized knowledge from the test or test-preparation materials to the student (Chenoweth, 2009; Ravitch, 2020).

For example, the accountability era reduced the teaching of social studies (Fitchett & Heafner, 2010) as a subject and methods such as inquiry (Evans, 2004). The federal government required states to test in Grades 3-8 in reading, math, and science, but not social studies. Prioritizing these subjects has decreased the amount of time spent on social studies, especially in elementary schools in North Carolina where there were not mandated social studies tests (Heafner et al., 2014). High-stakes testing in the accountability era has curtailed the time spent on social studies learning and instruction in many schools, especially those labeled "low-performing" (Fitchett et al., 2014; Winstead, 2011). Some teachers managed to overcome these

systemic pressures to become high-performers, even while the accountability movement whittled away at teacher agency and labeled many schools "low-performing."

"Low-Performing" Schools in North Carolina

In 2022, the number of schools in North Carolina designated as "low-performing" rose with many commentators pointing to the pandemic and its concomitant effects (Fofaria, 2022). "Low-performing" schools were those schools that scored a D or an F on the state report card and had fewer than 85% of students making annual growth (North Carolina State Board of Education, 2023). North Carolina followed the lead of Florida and began giving schools letter grades in 2013 with 80% of the score based on proficiency and 20% on growth (Fofaria, 2022; Ravitch, 2020). Repeated studies have shown how the school grades and student proficiency largely were tied to family demographics and socioeconomic status (Fofaria, 2022; Nordstrom & Tillitski, 2021; Wagner, 2019). As a counterexample, Wagner (2019) presented how student growth and economic background shared much less correlation. Nordstrom and Tillitski (2021) criticized school performance grades as largely associated with student demographics and liable to promote racial segregation in schools and communities.

In this work, I have studied "low-performing" schools that some scholars call "high-poverty" schools or another similar term. For example, Parrett and Budge (2020) studied how several schools changed from "low-performing" schools into high-performing schools despite "high-poverty," as defined where "elementary schools had to have a minimum of 65% qualifying" for free and reduced lunch (p. 17). Chenoweth (2007) called her schools "It's Being Done" schools and used the federal program standard for free meals with her high-poverty level at 50% or more of students eligible. The WestEd report utilized the federal poverty levels and called schools "high-poverty" based on 75% or more of students eligible for free or reduced

lunch, including “community eligibility provision” schools, where enough students qualified for free meals that all students were deemed automatically eligible (Oakes et al., 2019, p. 10). High-poverty schools highlighted in the WestEd report composed 33% of North Carolina traditional public schools (Oakes et al., 2019).

Many U.S. students living in poverty are races other than white (Parrett & Budge, 2020). WestEd confirmed that in North Carolina, schools with high-poverty have disproportionate students of color enrolled and the poverty level is highly tied to the racial composition of the school (Oakes et al., 2019). In North Carolina, “disproportionate percentages of students of color attend high-poverty schools and high-poverty schools are located disproportionately in communities of color” (Oakes et al., 2019, p. 21). In 2022, the number of low-performing schools increased by nearly 400 schools compared to pre-pandemic levels (Fofaria, 2022).

Based on laws enacted around 2016, North Carolina schools labeled “low-performing” had to enact plans to reverse their poor performance or face sanctions and firings. Districts could choose from several options, including those called turnaround, transformation, restart, and closure (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2023a). Turnaround required firing the principal and half the teachers in the school. Transformation included the possibility of changing the principal, removing ineffective teachers, and providing extensive professional development for improvement. Restart schools received charter-like flexibilities and justifiable exemptions from certain state policies or rules with the same budget as previously assigned. Unlike the federal restart designation, North Carolina law allowed local education agencies or districts to continue to control restart schools (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2023a). The school closure option declared that the school would cease operations unless managed by a charter school organization. More funding was not a strategy for “low-performing” schools.

This system of school turnaround created unique pressures and consequences for teachers who taught in schools labeled “low-performing” (Heissel & Ladd, 2018; Henry & Harbatkin, 2019). These reform requirements identified the root problems of “low-performing” schools as the school leadership and the teachers. The current school principals and instructional staff were the weakest link in need of replacement. The North Carolina school reform models ignored the demands to address the needs of students in poverty, English language acquisition, and adequate resources or staffing (Ravitch, 2020). Instead, the state used the school grading system that labeled schools based on their socioeconomic levels and then blamed the school personnel for their “low performance.”

Many of these schools were actually “low budget” schools (Oakes et al., 2019). Some reformers have insisted that “more money was not the solution” for school turnaround (Chenoweth, 2009; Lattimore, 2017). Rather than pay for improvement, the legislature blamed the teachers and principals, promoted charter schools as an alternative or even systemwide solution, and used the grading system as justification (Fofaria, 2022; Goldstein, 2015; Ravitch, 2020). More professional development could make up for lack of teacher ability and more rigorous evaluation could eliminate ineffective teachers. While some claimed that the restart designation provided more funds to “low-performing” schools, in my experience as a principal in a restart school, my school received the same allotment as any other school (Walkenhorst, 2022).

The state’s fixation on teachers, not finance, did not solve the problem. In 2022, “low-performing” schools increased in North Carolina from 488 to 864 (Helms, 2023a). Only 46 out of 151 restart schools have exited the “low-performing” status since 2017 (Helms, 2023b). Recently, Superintendent Truitt crafted a response, with a plan to reorganize the departments that supervise “low-performing” schools and provide $16.5 million more in coaching support and

professional development to those schools, which equates to less than $45,000 per school, the price of approximately one teacher assistant (Granados, 2023).

Based on these dynamics, the term “low-performing” schools remained in quotation marks throughout this study. Many so-called “low-performing” schools are in fact high-performing based on student growth, graduation rates, and other measures (Fofaria, 2022). As the defendants for the state legislature testified in regards to the *Leandro* case, the state testing system was “insufficient” to judge educational quality (Fofaria, 2022). The “low-performing” designation based on those tests was not “an accurate reflection of the efforts and progress of teachers and school leaders throughout this state,” according to the State Deputy Superintendent (Fofaria, 2022). Rather, “low-performing” was a designation associated with school characteristics such as low funding levels and certain student demographics based on wealth levels, student background, and neighborhood composition (Oakes et al., 2019; Wagner, 2019). “Low-performing” is a smear against the teachers and staff in schools that struggle daily to help students in need, especially the high-performers for whom it is a particular misrepresentation.

Leandro

Since 1994, North Carolina has wrestled with a state constitutional crisis from its commitment that every North Carolina student has the “right to the privilege of education, and it is the duty of the State to guard and maintain that right” (N.C. Const. Art. I, §15). Over 25 years ago, dissatisfied parents and school districts sued the state over violating its constitutional promise. In the *Leandro* decision of 1997, the state supreme court decreed that the education system was unconstitutional and that every student had a right to a “sound basic education” (*Leandro v. State*, 1997). In the years that followed, the state supreme court assigned Judge Manning to preside over the case. He determined that a “sound basic education” meant each

student deserved a qualified principal, skilled teacher, and sufficient resources in each classroom. In 2017, the plaintiffs and the state agreed to have an independent consultant, WestEd, determine the details of what the state needed to provide for its students and to meet these constitutional obligations. Meanwhile, Governor Cooper created a commission to study the problem and prepare to implement the consultant's proposals. In December, 2019, WestEd released its results, including recommendations to improve high-poverty schools and districts.

WestEd identified high-poverty schools—schools with 75% or higher of their students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch—as a major challenge to fulfill North Carolina's constitutional commitment (Oakes et al., 2019). The number of North Carolina students in high-poverty schools had only increased since the original lawsuit. North Carolina in 2019 ranked 37th in the United States for children living in poverty (Oakes et al., 2019). "High-poverty" schools performed consistently lower on state tests and graduated lower percentages of students than low-poverty schools (Oakes et al., 2019).

Leandro outlined the fundamental state policies necessary to drive school improvement for high-poverty students. Judge Manning's court had determined the basic standard for all schools to have effective principals, teachers, and resources to learn, and he further found that "at-risk" students required more support to be successful. WestEd started with these findings and examined what North Carolina should do to fulfill its constitutional requirements.

The WestEd report made four broad recommendations on how to meet *Leandro's* mandates for students in "high-poverty" schools (Oakes et al., 2019). North Carolina needed to implement:

- A comprehensive preschool program beginning with four-year-olds and expanding to three-year-olds for all students in poverty

- A new structure for pay and incentives to improve the quality of teachers
- Sufficient resources to meet the needs of students in high-poverty schools
- An integrated approach for schools that would pull together community resources to match family needs with governmental services

The WestEd report elaborated, explaining that preschool reform would seek to dramatically increase enrollment for students living in poverty. Oakes et al. (2019) stated that North Carolina should analyze the number of students who needed early childhood education compared to the existing resources and fill the gap. The state should provide the funds to create and sustain preschool classes for students in need. Working with other funding sources such as Head Start, North Carolina should expand NC Pre-K to 80% of four-year-olds and 50% of three-year-olds within five years.

The current teacher employment system was insufficient for the needs of "high-poverty" schools. Oakes et al. (2019) declared that North Carolina should create incentives to teach in disadvantaged areas, increase allotments for teachers and lower classroom size by numbers of students to a 15:1 ratio. A new formula for teacher pay based on overall average teacher pay statewide per student would make teaching in a "high-poverty" school more equitable (Oakes et al., 2019).

"High-poverty" schools required much greater resources to achieve a sound, basic education for their students. Oakes et al. (2019) recommended that the state should coordinate career and technical programs with community colleges to promote higher education choices. Schools needed a dramatic investment in materials and supplies for students to access the challenging curriculum to be successful.

A community schools approach was another proven model that North Carolina should follow, according to WestEd (Oakes et al., 2019). Schools in "high-poverty" areas ought to provide longer school days and extended school years to address student and family needs. Government services should operate out of the community and in coordination with the schools to improve family health and housing. A wrap-around approach was needed to compensate for the effects of poverty and offer the basic education services required by *Leandro*.

Based on the WestEd report, the solution to "high-poverty" schools started with teachers (Oakes et al., 2019). The North Carolina General Assembly needed to make an investment to draw high-quality teachers through attractive salaries and advancement potential, including graduate degrees. Increasing allotments of teachers to "high-poverty" schools, reducing class size, and ensuring sufficient classroom space would take a significant commitment. Better teachers with the right knowledge and experience were proven to be effective at multiple levels.

On another note, the final edition of the WestEd report sought to eliminate the school performance grading system based on proficiency and proposed using other indicators such as school climate, absenteeism or attendance, and student discipline numbers (WestEd, Learning Policy Institute, & Friday Institute for Educational Innovation at North Carolina State University, 2019). This same final report also called for flexibility from the state to meet the particular needs of the "high-poverty" schools by utilizing community resources and shared leadership to increase learning time and overcome social or neighborhood circumstances through family, community, and school collaboration for leadership decisions (WestEd, Learning Policy Institute, & Friday Institute for Educational Innovation at North Carolina State University, 2019).

Importantly, WestEd recognized that the success of "low-performing" schools required collaboration and respect for teachers and teacher contributions to school improvement. The

WestEd report exposed the multiple ways that "high-poverty" schools had been shortchanged for a generation or more of students and the high-performing teachers who chose to teach them. Currently, the WestEd proposals remain tied up in court as the state legislature continues to delay fully funding the court orders.

Dissertation Contribution to Research on High-Performing Teachers Improving "Low-Performing" Schools

I sought to contribute to the knowledge base about the accountability era by detailing the pitfalls that the legal and educational system may have created for teachers and learning, particularly high-performing teachers who have succeeded in spite of the difficulties present in "low-performing" schools. The experience of high-performing teachers might expose the foundational failure of the accountability system to improve "low-performing" schools. They might have had to overcome unnecessary barriers to success. The accountability system itself might be counterproductive to high-performance.

Others have studied the pedagogical practices of high-performing teachers but my study proposed to detail the school circumstances, teacher agency, and personal leadership challenges they had to overcome outside of their classrooms. Chenoweth (2009) interviewed teachers, principals, and district officials in high-performing, high-poverty schools, but this study concentrated on the high-performing teachers in schools that have not become high-performing yet. Furthermore, there was a need to follow up on Payne's (2008) work and know more about what high-performers experience so policymakers and upcoming teachers and leaders will know what to avoid. More work remained to address the particular circumstances of high-performing teachers in their attempts to improve "low-performing" schools. The next section explored the potential for agency for high-performing teachers and leadership strategies of high-performing

teachers in the schoolhouse or outside of their classrooms, and the literature of ways to improve "low-performing" schools heretofore attempted.

Recommendations How to Change "Low-performing" to High-performing Schools

Many have devised recommendations for improving "low-performing" schools, but few have succeeded at scale. Some proposed changes to the political economy first to address the systemic problems of employment and government services (Anyon, 2014). Others called for increased civic capacity and commitment to overcome issues of race and poverty in city schools (Henig et al, 1999). Goldstein (2015) concluded that paying teachers more, addressing teacher preparation, and revising union protections were essential steps to change.

Tyack and Cuban (1995) earlier had proposed that themes of educational equity and excellence fluctuated on a generational political cycle. Chenoweth (2009) showed how the visions of excellence and equity came together in the standards movement with the theory that standards, tests, and accountability would lead to excellence for all. Today, North Carolina's increasing number of "low-performing" schools and restart schools remaining in D and F status may make this statement seem particularly questionable (Fofaria, 2022; Helms, 2023b). According to the accountability proponents, those who had argued for more equitable resources and teacher agency in the 1970s had failed to improve schools and to provide accountable metrics for success. The clarity and purpose of standardization would raise education levels and then worker productivity and capacity in the business world. The market forces theory embodied in the charter school movement argued that choice would lead to improvement with enrollment at the good schools and shuttering of bad ones (Chenoweth, 2009). Free market advocates and accountability reformers envisioned transforming "low-performers" not through funding increases but by enlarging testing requirements and charter school operations (Ravitch, 2020).

Chenoweth (2009) highlighted Massachusetts' successes at the state level in raising test scores by implementing standards *and* increasing funding to high-poverty schools. This combined approach led to high scores on national and international tests. Nevertheless, Chenoweth (2009) cited one Massachusetts standards champion who showed that accountability and sanctions only went so far and there needed to be more curriculum assistance and social services:

> "We overestimated capacity in a number of ways," Reville said. "We thought that if we clarified goals and expectations, the field would know what to do to meet them." That is why he is looking to Massachusetts to take the next step. "We've gotten as much out of pressure as we can," Reville said. The next question, he said, is, "How can we provide expertise and guidance in the support of districts?" (p. 33)

Standards and accountability have their limitations, as Reville said. They may be a useful first step but ultimately, support, funding, and knowledge come to the fore. High-performing teachers know how to take the next steps as seen in their ability to achieve in "low-performing" schools. North Carolina could start with their expertise and compare their recommendations to the literature. To address the practical problem of immediate reforms that are within the control of "low-performing" schools in North Carolina, a review of the research provides multiple suggestions and recommendations at the teacher, leadership, and district levels.

Instruction and Teacher Capacity

The first challenge is to improve teaching, instruction, and teacher capacity. In its analysis of North Carolina schools for the *Leandro* case, WestEd recommended that North Carolina begin to properly staff "high-poverty" schools with highly-qualified teachers and provide them with sufficient materials, lower class-size, and professional development (Oakes et

al., 2019). Chenoweth (2009) championed teachers using standards, data-driven instruction, and formative assessments for instructional gains. Parrett and Budge (2020) built on Chenoweth's (2007, 2009) work on how high-poverty schools became high-performing. They concluded that high-performing, high-poverty schools were successful for several reasons including instruction with high standards and a focus on learning. High instructional expectations drove school improvement, as seen in other studies (Bryk, 2010; Herman et al., 2008; Payne, 2008).

Parrett and Budge (2020) also observed most teachers in the high-performing schools exhibiting a set of characteristics such as persistence, productivity, continuous learning and improvement, accountability, responsibility, the determination to learn from their mistakes, the ability to overcome the bureaucracy, respect, and forgiveness of their students. Schools where teachers cared for their students and built their relationships with them outperformed those who did not (Parrett & Budge, 2020). Chenoweth (2009) agreed that relationships between students, teachers, and all adults were one of the most important aspects of student success at "It's Being Done" schools. Most high-performing teachers overcome the pressures of the bureaucracy—rationalized, efficient, impersonal—with personalized, caring relationships connected to the individual student.

Other research showed the primacy of teachers believing that working together with other teachers, they could succeed with their students (Hattie, 2018). In the early 2000s, the Consortium on Chicago School Research determined that five elements made the difference in school improvement, including a staff professional capacity (Bryk, 2010). Parrett and Budge (2020) stressed that collective teacher efficacy was one of the pillars of improvement for "low-performing" schools. Collective teacher efficacy was defined as belief in group success as opposed to teacher agency which was about the teacher's particular action. Chenoweth (2009)

concurred that teacher collaboration was another pillar of turning high-poverty schools into high-performers. Teachers in “It’s Being Done” schools “rely on each other to help create lesson plans, examine data, and build a curriculum” (Chenoweth, 2009, p. 188). As Johnson et al. (2014) found, empowered teachers strengthened planning and opportunities for improvement schoolwide. For schools to improve, they needed to develop the abilities of the teachers, proper curriculum strategies, and teacher collaboration.

Parrett and Budge (2020) also found that high-performing schools specifically prioritized literacy. Some schools established a sacrosanct, set-aside reading time for instruction to address ongoing reading improvement and teachers continued to teach reading in all grades until mastery. Hattie’s (2018) work supported teachers' efforts to prioritize repeated reading programs, phonics, and writing. I have witnessed the positive effects of commitment to the recommendations of the National Reading panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).

Leadership and Culture

To improve “low-performing” schools in North Carolina, many recommend enhancing school leadership and culture. The Consortium on Chicago School Research studied hundreds of Chicago elementary schools and highlighted trust as essential to the school community and the role of the principal to promote leadership in staff and families (Bryk, 2010). Parrett and Budge (2020) found that successful schools all put students first. High-performing schools avoided the distraction of addressing adult needs and job security above students, as has occurred in some struggling urban districts (Chenoweth, 2009; Henig et al., 1999). Instead, high-performing schools prioritized their students in all realms of decision-making. For Parrett and Budge (2020), policies and practices were not enough to improve “low-performing” schools. As Payne (2008)

had detailed, school culture had to change to address attitudes, priorities, and mores. The school culture had to shift from dysfunction to one of responsibility, relationships, equity, and emotional compassion. “Low-performing, high-poverty schools are often distinguished by a toxic culture of low expectations, excuse making, blame, and resignation,” they explained (Parrett & Budge, 2020, p. 80). Leaders and educators needed to address that climate immediately for success to begin (Chenoweth, 2009).

Trust in successful school culture went beyond teacher to teacher relationships and included students and families (Parrett & Budge, 2020). High-performing schools extended respect and honesty to parents and guardians and all individuals in the schoolhouse to create a family atmosphere (Chenoweth, 2009). Parrett and Budge (2020) discovered ten specific actions present at all the high performing schools they studied: school leadership committed to school safety, understanding poverty, common instructional approach, reading proficiency, student engagement, equity, expanded learning time, family engagement, formative tests, and building educator capacity. These strategies were pervasive elements and actions that successful schools advanced as a collaborative, cooperative learning community. Chenoweth (2009) balanced data, standards, and assessment with relationships, leadership, and collaboration.

School Districts

What Works

Parrett and Budge (2020) labeled the high-performing, high-poverty schools they studied as “stark outliers” and the question remained how to spread their success to the majority of high-poverty or “low-performing” schools (p. 16). School districts and states had the opportunity to learn from high-performing, high-poverty schools to sustain their change and expand it. Parrett and Budge (2020) counseled that districts should provide succession planning for the next

principal, equitable funding, productive staffing, desegregation of student populations, initiatives to share and replicate success, professional development on the challenges of high-poverty schools, building maintenance, and efforts to build capacity in principals, teachers, and coaches. Districts which focused on developing leadership, instruction, and productive structures for curriculum and data analysis tended to have more high-performing schools. The best districts promoted courage, "collaborative competition," real relationships, putting students first in decision-making, and reciprocal accountability where schools and districts hold each other to a high standard (Parrett & Budge, 2020, p. 180). "District leaders must be amenable to learning from the hundreds of high-performing, high-poverty schools," they concluded (Parrett & Budge, 2020, p. 183). WestEd also proposed accountability measures other than test scores, school climate or behavior, for example, that the state could use to monitor progress (WestEd, Learning Policy Institute, & Friday Institute for Educational Innovation at North Carolina State University, 2019). Chenoweth (2009) showed how test scores and sanctions were not enough in Massachusetts, but had to accompany increased funding and other measures.

What Does Not Work

Many other studies found school districts to be part of the problem, not the solution. Parrett and Budge (2020) agreed and explained that many high-poverty schools were successful in spite of their districts. Payne (2008) detailed how many district officials tried to implement too many reforms in too short a time, while not understanding the practical implications of change on the schoolhouse. This hyperactivity did not allow for reforms to take root and flourish (Henig et al., 1999). A sense of urgency, though promoted by Parrett and Budge (2020), could be counterproductive and carry the risk of continual disarray and disruption. When the state labeled a school as "low-performing," the immediate needs of the students made it hard to be patient and

deliberate (Henig et al., 1999; Payne, 2008). Nonetheless, reforms take sometimes up to six years for schools to rise to excellence (Chenoweth, 2009).

Payne (2008) expounded upon the potential for dysfunction in "low-performing" schools where the "overdetermined" effects of poverty created perverse incentives that inhibited teacher connections and teamwork (p. 5). Payne (2008) found that the students were so far behind and their learning gains so beyond reach that many urban educators quit trying to help students and instead sought to survive in ways harmful to student learning. Wenner and Campbell (2017) demonstrated how peer and time pressures in such schools created disincentives for teacher leadership. Payne (2008) explained how the standards or accountability movement misjudged the depth of teacher disbelief in the possibility of student success, the need for intervention, and the proper support required. He summarized, "Put differently, most discussion of educational policy and practice is dangerously disconnected from the daily realities of urban schools, especially the bottom-tier schools; most discussion fails to appreciate the intertwined and overdetermined nature of the causes of failure" (Payne, 2008, p. 5). This disconnect could lead districts to increase pressure on schools, and unintentionally reproduce further failure through an urgency that prevented reforms time to be successful and asked teachers to do too much at once.

I have seen how districts can limit teacher agency and effectiveness. Teachers may vote on a curriculum selected by a district, but beyond that limited choice, they are stuck with the math textbook that the district purchases for years. Teachers may criticize a reading program and its inappropriateness for students for a decade but nothing changes until the state shifts with the political winds. Even before the Common Core went into effect, schools were teaching balanced literacy and neglecting phonics instruction and the recommendations of the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). When parents started

filing complaints against districts for malpractice in reading instruction, districts and states finally changed their approach and shifted back to a research-based, phonetic approach to teaching reading.

Districts and states should exercise caution before acting without conversations with teachers who struggle with and overcome the problems of teaching or working in a "low-performing" school daily. "Anytime anyone in this discourse invokes the magic word *systemic*, the wise will gesture as if to ward off evil; garlic has been known to help," Payne (2008, p. 169) reminded champions of school standards and accountability. Systemic reformers were prone to ignore the facts on the ground, the realities of the classroom, and override the voices of those most aware of problems and perhaps solutions. Parrett and Budge (2020) quoted a district official who wrestled with school improvement:

> It is so tempting to mandate. It is so tempting to push things out that you think are going to do the right things for kids, but if you stop to get to know the people you're working with, you will find that they have the answers that will make the difference. They need to be given the opportunity to articulate them and then supported to enact them. So to really engage with them at that level, we can't come down from on high and offer them slap and dash advice or strategies. But we can say, "Well, let's puzzle through this together. I don't know, what do you think? Where could we get more information?" (p. 72)

Listening to teachers and staff, especially high-performing teachers, in "low-performing" schools could be essential to making effective and lasting change. Many mistakenly dismissed all teachers in "low-performing" schools as "low-performing" themselves and not legitimate voices for change. Others urged the consideration of the opinions and insights of teachers through the needs assessment process that could identify which aspects of schooling required improvement:

emotional needs, behavior, attendance, or student achievement (Bowen, 2022). In coming years, districts may have an even more important role. Ayscue et al. (2022) interviewed North Carolina state officials who foresaw a reversal of the state centralization of the 1990s and an upcoming transition to more control at the district level. Districts may shoulder even more responsibility in coming years for turning around "low-performing" schools. They would do well to have conversations with their high-performing teachers.

International Recommendations How to Improve "Low-performing" Schools

High-performing systems across the globe, like Singapore and Finland, have looked to build from the bottom up, unlike the American high-stakes testing, accountability approach. The Finns invested in their teachers by providing a free master's level degree as a requirement for teachers and subsequently allowed them the autonomy to write their own standards and classroom-based assessments, in lieu of national tests (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Sahlberg, 2015). As a small, island nation, Singapore had few resources so it made a commitment to its peoples' potential through its education system. Singapore developed teachers' human capital by recruiting the best graduates to teach, training them, mentoring them, and allowing them to choose professional development selections as part of their continuous personal growth plan (Ng, 2015). Investments in teachers' capacity in Singapore and Finland led to teacher agency and collaboration.

Sahlberg (2015) explained that the Finnish schools have had such success in Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests because Finnish schools are more collaborative than competitive. Finnish teachers routinely worked in problem-solving teams in order to improve classroom instruction. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) wrote, "the most effective settings for learning feature considerable joint work among teachers" (p. 111). Singapore

developed teachers' social capital by encouraging teams of teachers to share ideas and plans within the school and with other teams outside the school through professional learning communities and an attitude of collaboration and cooperation (Ng, 2015). High-performing schools in other nations "organize people to take advantage of each other's knowledge and skills and create a set of common, coherent practices so that the whole is far greater than the sum of the parts" (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017, p. 111). Of course, in "low-performing" schools in America, the demoralization might be so great that it might take fundamental, cultural change to attain this type of synergy. As Payne (2008) pointed out, some "low-performing" schools "make the whole less than the sum of its parts" (p. 61).

In Singapore, the national commitment to crucial aspects of the education system–teacher and social capital–led to a natural outgrowth of decisional capital, the process of "enabling individuals or groups to discern and act judiciously in circumstances that do not have fixed rules or concrete evidence to guide decision-making" (Ng, 2015, p. 151). Some decisions in schools were technical and relatively simple to solve. The problems of "low-performing" schools were deep-seated, adaptive challenges that mandated people changing their attitudes, culture, and in-grained habits (Johnson et al., 2014). These adaptive challenges necessitated decisional capital to make innovative, fundamental improvements (Heifetz et al., 2009).

Singapore's investments in human and social capital promoted teachers to make wise choices and take action (Ng, 2015). The Ministry of Education (MOE) set the goals and then teachers were empowered to act and teach within the framework of national objectives. Ng (2015) explained how teachers could have agency at the school level while working in a system with standards: "Schools align themselves to broad strategic goals set by the MOE while exercising tactical empowerment in implementation to achieve those common goals" (p. 155).

Teachers understood the national intent and used their agency to make decisions to help maximize student growth.

Finland recognized the expertise inherently present in the schoolhouse when making professional development decisions. One education ministry advisor reasoned: “It is essential to understand that we can use the already existing teachers’ know-how and knowledge and innovations to develop others, and to see that ‘the wisdom’ does not exist outside the schools but inside them” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017, p. 114). Finnish teachers knew what needed to be done and had the agency to create coursework for their colleagues and improve schools from within.

Finland and Singapore started to find answers to school improvement from teachers and actions inside the classrooms and schools, not in the education department or district office. Ng (2015) envisioned teacher agency and decision-making as the essential component and expounded that “Advancements [*sic*] in education require greater experimentation on the ground” (p. 156). Progress depended on training teachers, then trusting them to act and make sound decisions when confronted by difficult, adaptive challenges. Ng (2015) continued, “the dynamics of change draw out the expertise and collective intelligence of the professional teaching community” (p. 156). Ng (2015) foresaw the future of Singapore in the progress of its education system to develop decisional capital where teachers could act on the autonomy entrusted to them to adapt and innovate. Nations like Singapore and Finland exemplified a path from “low-performing” status towards high-performing through teacher capital, collaboration, and agency.

Theory of Teacher Agency

Through the accountability movement and subsequent sanctions for “low-performing” schools, North Carolina teachers have experienced declining agency and leadership in their instruction. The biennial North Carolina Teachers Working Conditions Survey has identified how teachers in turnaround schools have faced frustration over additional testing, more meetings and possibly lost instructional time (Heissel & Ladd, 2018). In 2022, North Carolina teachers voiced their limited ability to effectively solve problems and how they experienced a decreasing amount of influence (NC Teacher Working Conditions Survey, 2022). All of these demands and pressures on teachers have led to considerations on the best ways for teachers to respond.

Several scholars have proposed teacher agency as a way to understand and address these demands on the profession and instruction. Teacher agency is defined as the “quality of engaged” teacher action to address challenges in the classroom, school environments or beyond (Priestley et al., 2015). Teachers' actions as change agents may include leadership inside and outside the classroom, in formal and informal roles. Teacher agency theory argues that schools will be more productive, creative, and innovative with teacher voice in decision-making and teacher leadership as part of the solution for education challenges (Biesta et al., 2015; Calvert, 2016; Priestley, et al. 2015). Those who stress accountability for teachers and schools see teachers as the problem and obstacles in the way to reform schools, not worthy of subjectivity or control over their classrooms. Teacher agency theory promotes teachers as part of the solution.

Teacher agency theory came from agency theory in business, featured in organizations that viewed the worker as contributors to decision-making, not detractors. Casey (2006) argued that change that began at the upper management level and did not include the lower level workers would create unintended consequences. Including workers in decision-making would

improve processes, work conditions, and overall performance. The practical application of agency in organizations derived from the pragmatic school of thought and philosophy that sought practical solutions to real world problems (Biesta, et al., 2015; Eteläpelto et al., 2014). Priestley et al. (2015) defined teacher agency as the caliber of teacher engagement and actions over their outcomes in their classrooms, schools, and beyond. Teachers in their contexts confronted unique circumstances that affected their agency and control over results beyond their own personal ability to act independently. Teacher leadership was one outcome of teacher agency and could be found in formal roles like grade level chairs or informal roles such as an advocate or peer.

Imants and Van der Wal (2020) proposed a model whereby teacher agency produced outcomes and reforms. In spite of circumstances or perhaps because of them, teachers could take actions to improve schooling. In his study of why teachers remain in "low-income, high-minority schools," Hovis (2021) found that teachers kept teaching in these challenging environments, in part, because they felt like "change agents" (p. 93). He wrote, they "feel they can make more of an impact on the students in low-income, high-minority schools" (Hovis, 2021, p. 95). Agentic teachers realized they could change the students' life trajectory and they were "willing to be a solution to the problem" (Hovis, 2021, p. 77). Casey (2006) argued that agency would drive change in business and learning organizations. Teachers could help the school function better with teachers as empowered voices in schools, even within the structure of a system, such as curriculum standards.

Overall, the context of the accountability movement, including the restrictions, punishments, and recriminations against "low-performing" schools, hindered school improvement as they denied teacher agency and interfered with productive or innovative changes to classroom practice. The modern, globalized business model was counterproductive to school

reform when it made decisions at the management level, not the worker level (Casey, 2006; Sahlberg, 2015). The accountability system tried to impose technical solutions onto adaptive challenges (Heifetz et al., 2009; Johnson et al., 2014). Likewise, other disruptive mandates and top-down directives limited school success and performance (Ravitch, 2020). External or output controls over schools like high-stakes tests tied to teacher evaluation and school performance grades deteriorated school cultures, student performance, and teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2015).

The theory of teacher agency was essential in this context of the accountability era because it presented an alternative paradigm on how to improve "low-performing" schools. Teacher agency diagnosed that the prevailing mindset of many school leaders was misdirected. Accountability systems in states like North Carolina minimized agency through scripted curriculum and high-stakes test preparation, divided teachers from one another through merit pay that created winners and losers, and reduced innovation-taking through threats, sanctions, and restructuring. As seen in Finland and Singapore, teacher agency suggested that the solution lay in an entirely different approach (Ng, 2015; Sahlberg, 2015). To improve "low-performing" schools, teachers needed more voice, more control, more opportunities to collaborate, and stronger teams. Teacher agency in the right direction would lead to more innovation, effective reforms, and better outcomes for students and schools. Teacher agency would allow teachers to decide what their students need for school improvement. According to Casey's (2006) theory, teachers could work within a certain framework, like state teaching standards, and still make appropriate decisions for their students while also positively affecting student efficacy and learning.

High-Performing Teachers

There are plenty of studies of "low-performing" schools but few, if any, of "high-performing" teachers in their role for school improvement or reform. My conceptualization of high-performing was informed by my experiences as an administrator, as I witnessed multiple teachers in "low-performing" schools who excelled with their students and also provided exceptional suggestions for ways to improve student performance overall. In this study, high-performing teachers were defined as teachers with full-time classroom responsibilities who achieved success in the classroom as determined by outside confirmation such as bonuses for performance on end of grade tests or outstanding student growth. The teachers I identified as high-performing in my study were some of those I have personally observed. My observations confirmed their abilities to reach students where others struggled. These observations were also supported with student achievement data. I have seen their results on tests for elementary school students and know that most of the teachers involved have surpassed state standards to the point of receiving merit pay or bonuses for their teaching outcomes. Moreover, high-performing teachers exhibited attributes recognized in school reform such as relationships with their students, collaboration with colleagues, agency, urgency, expertise, and a vested interest in leadership outside the classroom (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Parrett & Budge, 2020; Payne, 2008).

Teacher Leadership

The scope of this study goes beyond what these high-performing teachers achieved in the classroom to examine what effects their agency had outside their classes and what teachers have learned from their experience. One of the outcomes of teacher agency was teacher leadership, defined as the agency of classroom teachers outside their classrooms for school improvement.

Many studies addressed the necessity of teachers acting outside their classes for school improvement in formal and informal roles. Teacher leaders were in a unique situation to understand the complex nature of the classroom and lead for change and reform due to their special insight (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Smylie and Eckert (2018) agreed with the need for teacher leadership as schools move to a more nimble, adaptive, organizationally flat model with increased level of teamwork. They found that many agreed that teachers should have a leadership role at school in decision-making and school improvement to address complicated, strategic issues rather than just procedural ones. Bryk (2010) emphasized that for schools to improve, professional teaching capacity and collaboration were essential. Furthermore, Johnson et al. (2014) confirmed that teachers in high-poverty schools could help envision, create, and lead improvement outside of their classroom and schoolwide.

In order for teacher leadership to succeed, the teachers needed to work in the right context with the right principal (Smylie & Eckert, 2018). Teacher leadership did not thrive where the principal refused to share leadership. Principal control could reduce teacher control (Podjasek, 2009). According to Johnson et al. (2014), teachers relied on the principal's institutionalized leadership to determine their own role in school leadership. Teachers took a leadership role through their informal authority and teaching capacity after being given access by administration. Johnson et al. (2014) highlighted that the underlying principles of leadership success in schools came from the quality of interdependency and investments in empowerment rather than the controlling and driving of teachers as instruments. School climate would have to be conducive to teacher leadership, otherwise negativity would rise up and work against teacher's initiatives or efforts (Wenner & Campbell, 2017).

Teachers have to overcome many hurdles including the principal's approach, peer interactions, and gender roles in the structure of formal leadership. Many teacher leaders faced time pressures to complete all their responsibilities inside and outside the classroom (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Significantly, they also experienced peer pressure to limit their leadership, resistance from colleagues who did not want to comply, and deteriorating relationships with other teachers as they stepped into the forefront. Wenner and Campbell (2017) explained that school "egalitarian norms" hindered teachers from taking the lead at times (p. 17). Jealousy, workplace tension, and personal struggles with doubt about their competency for the demands of leadership could rise up and work counter to teacher's initiatives or efforts. Podjasek (2009) highlighted one female teacher who felt her emotional nature limited her ability to lead because she did not have the strength to speak up but instead would become upset. She could not lead through her tears. Podjasek (2009) identified the presence of power conflicts in teacher leadership in elementary schools between female teachers and male administrators. She detailed the historic marginalization and isolation of female teachers in elementary schools and the top-down power structure of schooling, traditionally led by males.

In spite of all these challenges, teachers could be leaders in several different ways. Smylie and Eckert (2018) saw teacher leadership taking many forms including,

> teacher leadership for classroom and instructional improvement, school organizational improvement, parental involvement and school–community relationships, among other leadership domains…participative decision making, collaborative work, initiation and implementation of improvement efforts, development of professional community, and cultivation of teachers' individual and collective capacity for serving students well. (p. 558)

Teacher leadership took on many roles, including as a leader in the classroom, doer of dirty work for the principal, a nurturer of other teachers, mentor, serving on special committees, Positive Behavior Intervention and Support representative, grant writer, advocate or vocal leader, grade level leader, school improvement team leader or representative (Podjasek, 2009). Leaders also made informal teams, learning communities and generated shared purpose among colleagues.

Podjasek (2009) endorsed this constructed, collaborative leadership as opposed to the top-down power structure, and called for schools to create an inclusive culture.
She found that teachers desired a "power-with" situation with collaborative, relational leadership opposed to the institutionalized "power-over" dynamic. Many teachers experienced a growth in confidence, empowerment, improved relationships with teachers and administration, and enhanced personal and professional capacity through leadership opportunities (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). They provided professional development that built classroom pedagogy, improved content for lessons, support for teachers, and partnership networks that reinforced schoolwide efficacy.

Developing teacher leaders takes resources and commitment. Bradley-Levine (2012) discovered that it was difficult to move teacher leaders from theory to practice, from study, dialogue, and reflection to taking actions in the schoolhouse. A facilitator was necessary for guidance and direction and potential teacher leaders required encouragement and multiple opportunities to practice. According to Smylie and Eckert (2018), schools should specify what resources they need to help develop leaders, such as time, social support, funds, space, and materials. Teacher leadership development should be based on adult learning research and consist of new idea generation, "actionable feedback," and practical validity in its application (Smylie & Eckert, 2018, p. 566).

Some factors reinforced teacher agency and leadership while others repressed it. On the one hand, some principals tried to maintain their workforce and fight against teacher attrition, so they used teacher leadership as one tool to retain teachers. The accountability system called for leadership as a criteria for evaluations and a requirement for enhanced student performance. On the other hand, the standards movement measured teacher effects and sanctioned those who failed or performed at low levels, thus creating disincentives for spending time outside of a teacher's classroom on leadership and discouraged teachers from taking responsibility for other teachers' test scores. Furthermore, the "egalitarian norms" in the schoolhouse conflicted with leadership recognition and merit pay plans which made teacher leaders stand out above their peers (Wenner & Campbell, 2017, p. 17). District priorities and staff likely shaped principal leadership decisions about teacher leadership and responsibilities outside of the classroom, especially in "low-performing" schools where pressures to improve increased with time. The threat of sanction and job loss in "low-performing" schools may have also fostered a negative climate counter to leadership where teachers were risk averse, isolated from their colleagues, focused on survival, and fearful of failure (Payne, 2008).

Future research should include ways to connect teacher leadership to student learning. In order to answer Wenner and Campbell's (2017) call for more quantitative research, my study will create recommendations for policy actions that schools could attempt in order to study the quantitative results of exploring the experiences of high-performing teachers who lead in "low-performing" schools. Smylie and Eckert (2018) saw the need for more study about teacher leadership in action. They exposed a gap for future research, writing, "Of course, it is also important to continue to examine the outcomes of teacher leadership practice on teaching and student learning, school organizational change and effectiveness, and teacher career attitudes and

decision making" (Smylie & Eckert, 2018, p. 571). They called for qualitative studies to further explain teacher leadership capacities and practices in order to better understand teacher leadership development. Wenner and Campbell (2017) indicated that there was still a need for teacher leadership studies related to school reform and equity and diversity issues. In this present study, I sought to use qualitative research to further explain teacher leadership in inequitable, "low-performing" schools by examining high-performing teachers specifically and their leadership actions.

Dissertation Contribution to Research on Ways to Improve "Low-Performing" Schools

I sought to contribute to the knowledge base about student learning and teacher leadership by presenting and proposing solutions from experts in the field, high-performing teachers who have overcome the challenges of the accountability era with "low-performing" schools sanctions and circumstances. The gap between theory, policy, and practice was great. My study sought to document the recommendations of high-performing teachers for school reform to fill the need for better solutions, better policies, and better perspectives. It centered the voices and experiences of teachers who have been identified as not only successful in schooling environments where teachers are the target of blame but who also embraced teacher agency as a means to improve school culture and student learning success. Time after time, officials, policy makers, and even researchers have made top-down decrees and recommendations, but few have asked high-performing teachers what they would do. By centering these agentic teacher leaders in my study, I hoped to elevate their experiences as potential solutions to ongoing challenges in "low-performing" schools and strategies for responding to a call for a "sound basic education" for all students (Oakes et al., 2019).

Chapter Summary

The accountability era and the standards movement have labeled many North Carolina elementary schools “low-performing” and perpetuated the phenomenon. They have failed to provide large scale changes in a timely fashion for students in diverse settings. The *Leandro* case has stretched into its fourth decade. Meanwhile, high-performing teachers have excelled in their classrooms and spread their agency beyond their doors. Teacher agency and teacher leadership held promise for effective school reform and the need was greater now than ever for the increasing number of “low-performing” elementary schools in North Carolina. There was plenty of knowledge from overseas and researchers in the United States which suggested the central role teacher leaders embody in successful schools, but how to implement teacher agency remained elusive in an Americanized system that deprofessionalized educators (Goldstein, 2015). New ideas and new perspectives of lived experiences of agentic teacher leaders were essential and this study’s focus on high-performing teachers in “low-performing” schools attempted to provide a necessary perspective and recommendations.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

This multiple case study sought to contribute to the field of school improvement for "low-performing" schools in several ways, first by presenting the experience of high-performing teachers as they attempted to improve their schools beyond their classrooms. By better understanding their experiences, high-performing teachers shared the meaning of their struggles. The reflections of high-performing teachers produced recommendations and ideas to help "low-performing" schools in North Carolina and beyond. This study found methods to enhance equity in schooling by increasing the chances of success for students in schools labeled "low-performing." Furthermore, it searched for a better comprehension of teacher agency and explored how high-performing teachers led schools for change.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experience and opinions of high-performing teachers who exhibited agency and leadership for reform outside of their classrooms to improve "low-performing" elementary schools in North Carolina. My hope was that a better understanding of the experience of such teachers would enlighten the field of school improvement. High-performing teachers had already demonstrated success in their classrooms, though peer pressures in "low-performing" schools sometimes disallowed them from sharing or being recognized outside their classroom doors (Payne, 2008; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Still, many high-performing teachers used their agency to lead initiatives that affected more than their students. They chaired professional learning communities and school improvement teams, collaborated with colleagues on curriculum, or participated on task forces, or offered professional development (Podjasek, 2009; Poplin et al. 2011; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). In their agency to improve their schools, they gained lessons about "low-performing" schools that might help many others.

The reason for this study was to uncover the experience of high-performing teachers as they exhibited agency and leadership for reform outside of their classrooms to improve "low-performing" elementary schools in North Carolina. This study entailed four guiding research questions:

1. How did the experience of becoming a high-performing teacher in a "low-performing" elementary school inform the teacher's agency for change and leadership outside their classroom?
2. What factors did high-performing teachers identify that promoted or hindered exercising agency to influence change in "low-performing" schools?
3. Based on their experience and the theory of teacher agency, how did high-performing teachers in "low-performing" schools describe their strategies for school improvement, transformation, and equity?
4. How did the model of teacher agency frame high-performing teachers' experiences and opinions?

The significance of this study lay in the multiple gaps present in the research. Many have studied and discussed what happens inside the four walls of a high-performing teacher's classroom in a struggling school, but few have ventured with the teacher outside of the classroom into the realm of school improvement. Scholars have recommended teacher leadership in the schoolhouse, but not enough have studied the experience of teachers as they enacted their leadership, especially in "low-performing" schools (Parrett & Budge, 2020; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Furthermore, there was a gap in studying teacher leadership from an equity or social justice perspective as "low-performing" schools presented a unique opportunity for research ideas to improve the performance and prospects of oftentimes diverse and low-income

families (Oakes et al., 2019; Wagner, 2019; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Many researchers used quantitative methods to test theories about school improvement, and others used qualitative to make sense of the world of "low-performing" schools, but few have asked high-performing teachers what they have learned and what they recommend to improve the outcomes of such schools (Schueler et al., 2020).

Chapter Three describes the research design that I used to complete this study, embarking with a presentation of the qualitative multiple case study research design and an extended discussion of the in-depth interview protocol (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2006; Yin, 2018). The subsequent section presents the setting of the research, the participants, and the sampling procedures. Next, I address my process for data collection and analysis, followed by a discussion of strategies for quality and my positionality. The last section concludes with an overview of the study design.

Research Design

The research design of this study of high-performing teachers reforming "low-performing" schools began with Dewey's pragmatic approach and epistemology. Dewey argued that experience confirmed knowledge and that theory and practice should be closely related. He wrote, "I suggest that the problem of the possibility of knowledge is but an aspect of the question of the relation of knowing to acting, of theory to practice" (Dewey, 1897/1977, p. 54). The potential and value of knowledge depended on how it worked in reality. This study presented an opportunity to investigate the practical experience of teachers in order to test the theories of how to improve "low-performing" schools, including the theory of teacher agency. Dewey explained that ideas were evaluated under the conditions of lived experience:

> *If* ideas, meanings, conceptions, notions, theories, systems are instrumental to an active reorganization of the given environment, to a removal of some specific trouble and perplexity, then the test of their validity and value lies in accomplishing this work. If they succeed in their office, they are reliable, sound, valid, good, true. If they fail to clear up any confusion, to eliminate defects, if they increase confusion, uncertainty and evil when they are acted upon, then they are false. Confirmation, corroboration, verification lie in works, consequences. Handsome is that handsome does. By their fruits shall ye *know* them." (Novack, 1975, p. 256)

Dewey argued that practical application would enlighten the worth of theories and systems. This study took Dewey's approach to scrutinize the experiences of high-performing teachers to determine which ideas, initiatives, and programs were "reliable, sound, valid, good, true" and recommended to improve "low-performing" schools. Some ideas were already been tested in "low-performing" schools and found wanting and others emerged from this research and require further study.

Multiple case study provided a productive methodology for this study through its emphasis on pragmatic application and in-depth study. Stake (1995) defined a case study as "the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances" (p. xi). Yin (2018) expanded on this definition and stressed the need for empirical detail and depth in a case study including the context for the case. He also wrote that case studies were well positioned to answer how and why questions, which in my study, addressed how teacher agency functioned in a "low-performing" school and why agency did or did not produce results or reform (Yin, 2018). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), a case should be explicitly defined as a "bounded system," such as one school or one situation as

one case (p. 37). In my study, each teacher was a single case. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that the case study was similar to other qualitative approaches in its emphasis on an inductive approach to examine the depth of the topic: “Thus qualitative case studies share with other forms of qualitative research the search for meaning and understanding, the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, an inductive investigative strategy, and the end product being richly descriptive” (p. 37).

Multiple-case study increased the understanding of high-performing teacher agency in a “low-performing” school through the dynamics of looking at more than one case and comparing them. Stake labeled multiple-case study as “collective case study” (p. 4). A collective case included several case studies that shared a particular theme. When researchers sought specific topics to learn from a case beyond the individual case, Stake (1995) defined that as an instrumental case study. More than one instrumental case study, seeking a similar theme in several cases provided the impetus for the collective or multiple-case study. The technique of collective case study helped specify the topics for examination. “In collective case study, an early commitment to common topics facilitates later cross-site analysis,” as Stake (1995) recommended. In my study, some pre-topics were the roles of teacher agents or leaders outside their classroom or the parts of Imants and Van de Wal’s (2020) model like context, outcome, agency, individual practice, and reform. Yin (2018) recommended multiple-case study as more rigorous than a single case study. He explained that multiple-case study research relied on the same logic as conducting multiple experiments so as to strengthen the findings through replication (Yin, 2018). Furthermore, multiple cases provided the researcher the opportunity to analyze across cases and use cross-case synthesis to compare and contrast aspects of each case (Yin, 2018).

Crotty (1998) recommended identifying the four elements of qualitative research from epistemology to theory to methodology to methods. I began with a pragmatic philosophy to obtain practical or instrumental knowledge about school improvement using the theory of teacher agency, that teachers have the potential to act for school reform (Casey, 2006; Dewey, 1897/1977; Imants & Van de Wal, 2020). Multiple case study research provided the most apropos methodology to search for the detailed, experiential knowledge of high-performing teachers through the methods of in-depth interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2006; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). This research methodology aligned with the purpose of this study and its research questions in attempting to describe the background of high-performing teachers, their agentic experiences outside the classroom, and their conceptualization of strategies to improve "low-performing" schools. In this study, I pursued sufficient descriptive information from the teachers to provide strategies to improve "low-performing" schools and used interpretation to prioritize and evaluate the effectiveness of implementing their ideas on a larger scale.

Setting, Participants, and Sampling Procedure

The setting for this study took place in "low-performing" elementary schools in North Carolina where certain teachers had achieved recognition for high-performance. The "low-performing" school sites were defined by the state performance grade system as a D or F school, and not exceeding growth goals (North Carolina State Board of Education, 2023). The specific locations were kept anonymous in order to protect the confidentiality of the participants and allow them to answer the interview questions and share their opinions with minimal risk to their employment or repercussions for their career (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). All the participants taught in urban settings within the last three years as defined by location within a large district in North Carolina with over 20,000 students (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction,

2023b). I sought participants that provided suggestions for change and reform through their experiences as high-performing teachers acting and leading to improve “low-performing” schools. Over my career as an educator, I have made contacts with many teachers, including those in "low-performing" schools, as defined by the state of North Carolina. I sampled from teachers who did not work at my current school. I am currently an administrator of an elementary school. Any teachers who work as employees at the school I am assigned as principal were not eligible to participate in this study. I used the selection criteria below to choose five teachers for in-depth interviews:

- The participant has been an elementary school teacher in North Carolina.
- The teacher has taught within the past three years in a “low-performing” elementary school as designated by the state of North Carolina. For example, the teacher has current experience teaching in a “low-performing” school at least as recently as 2020, if not more recently. The three years apply to the teacher’s career, not the school.
- The teacher taught for at least five years in a “low-performing” elementary school as designated by the state of North Carolina. In other words, the teacher has five years of experience teaching in a “low-performing” school. At some point within those five years, the school received the label of “low-performing” by the state. The five years was a measurement for how much time the teachers have taught in a “low-performing” school.
- The teacher has been high-performing based on the researcher’s previous observation and has achieved at a level above average according to state test scores, like the end of grade tests, which the teacher has already shared with the researcher. I have observed many high-performing teachers in the classroom in multiple “low-performing” schools over my 18 years as an administrator. I have witnessed many eligible teachers during their

instruction already. Further observations were not part of this study. This study was focused on interviews with teachers who met these criteria. I also have previous confirmation of test scores from my own knowledge of teachers' data that I have had access to or the teacher has shared with me.

- Teachers represented a variety of diversity characteristics such as different genders, or ethnicities.
- The participants were at least 22 years old.

For participants, this study proposed to conduct in-depth interviews with high-performing, elementary teachers from North Carolina. High-performing teachers were defined as teachers with full-time classroom responsibilities who achieved success in the classroom as determined by outside confirmation such as observation, bonuses for performance on end of grade tests or outstanding student growth. These teachers may have received recognition by the state or district for their exceptional performance of their students on state tests such as the end of grade tests. I have observed all the participants to confirm their performance. The participants all taught in a North Carolina "low-performing" school for five or more years and within the past three years in a "low-performing" school as defined by the state performance grade system.

This study used purposeful sampling to determine the participating teachers. Ravitch and Carl (2021) explained that purposeful sampling was the most common method used in qualitative research in order to take advantage of the specific knowledge of a particular group. This sample was a unique sample as well, as there are a limited number of high-performers in "low-performing" schools, by definition. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "A unique sample is based on unique, atypical, perhaps rare attributes or occurrences of the phenomenon of interest. You would be interested in them because they are unique or atypical" (pp. 97-98).

In this study, I interviewed a select group of high-performing elementary teachers who I have met over the course of my career while working in "low-performing" schools. All will be personal contacts. Serving as a teacher and administrator for over twenty years in North Carolina, I observed and worked with many teachers who met the criteria, though I did not select any of my current employees.

The teachers in this sample had access to special knowledge of how to succeed in a challenging environment and they had experience with acting to improve their schools. The unit of analysis was the high-performing teachers as recognized by assessment data that showed them outperforming their peers, who taught in "low-performing" elementary schools in North Carolina recently, within the past three years. These teachers had special insights into "low-performing" schools and how to transform them. I sought a diversity of participants based on ethnicity, gender, age, and orientation. I had contacts who met the criteria and some of whom varied from the predominant demographic of White, middle income females. I contacted them by phone and talked about their interest in participating in this project.

This strategy for purposeful sampling took advantage of my personal connections and knowledge of high-performing teachers with stories to tell and a higher likelihood of lessons to share. These teachers possessed a special expertise, similar to high-performing experts in other professions, as Merriam and Tisdell (2016) highlighted:

> Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned. Chein (1981) explains, "The situation is analogous to one in which a number of expert consultants are called in on a difficult medical case. These consultants—also a purposive sample—are not called in to get an average opinion that would correspond to

> the average opinion of the entire medical profession. They are called in precisely because of their special experience and competence." (p. 96)

In this case, there was an emergency situation in the "low-performing" schools calling for the top-notch professional insight of the high-performing teachers. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) wrote that "interview subjects are often chosen because they have special knowledge about a setting or a specific social practice, and they are thus positioned as experts" (p. 113). My intention was to locate teachers with this "special knowledge" who could share it with others to help "low-performing" schools to succeed.

The number of participants in qualitative studies depends on the amount that it takes to answer the research questions sufficiently and credibly (Ravitch & Carl, 2021; Seidman, 2006). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) asserted that "the crucial factor is not the number of respondents but the potential of each person to contribute to the development of insight and understanding of the phenomenon" (p. 127). Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) emphasized that the quality of a study and the quantity of participants were not related. They pointed out that, "A general impression from current interview studies is that many would have profited from having had fewer interviews in the study and instead having taken more time to prepare the interviews and to analyze them" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 140). After interviewing five participants in-depth, I reached saturation, or the point of diminishing returns. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) defined "saturation" as,

> Reaching a point of saturation or redundancy means that you begin hearing the same responses to your interview questions or seeing the same behaviors in observations; no new insights are forthcoming. It is impossible to know ahead of time when saturation

> might occur. In order to recognize that your data is saturated, you must engage in analysis along with data collection. (p. 101)

Later in this chapter, I addressed my plan to follow this recommendation and conduct data analysis concurrently with the interview process. The in-depth three interview process encouraged saturation through lengthy conversations about the topic from many perspectives.

Data Collection

The methodological foundation of this study was qualitative multiple case study research using interviews as the primary method. Thoroughly interviewing high-performing teachers over multiple sessions was a productive way of drawing out the meaning of their experience in "low-performing" schools. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) promoted using interviews to address non-observable behavior, such as inner thoughts, feelings, and opinions. Sharing personal experiences and perspectives through interviews provided a productive way to find answers about the challenges of high-performing teachers in "low-performing" schools. Brinkman and Kvale (2015) highlighted the opportunity for exchange in the interview process, "An interview is literally an inter-view, an inter-change of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest" (p. 4). Through listening to high-performing teachers, I was able to draw out their approaches to school reform in an interchange over our shared concern.

Ravitch and Carl (2021) argued that interviews help a researcher outline the context of the participants, bring together several independent points of view for comparison, and glean sufficient and rich explanations from participants of their experiences and meanings. I used interviews to obtain the stories and insights of these teachers and compared them to consolidate conclusions or ideas for practical strategies. Ravitch and Carl (2021) continued demonstrating the possibility of interviews for comparing responses of multiple participants and generating

themes:

> If planned for and approached well, the interview becomes a process by which you can explore people's perspectives to achieve fuller development of information within and across individuals and groups while keeping similar lines of questioning that help you look within and across experiences in ways that help decipher meaning, experience, similarity, and difference. (p. 126)

I hope that I gave these teachers a voice so they could express their ideas and that I found some useful points of comparison.

In-depth interviews fit as a method for this research because they fulfilled the goals of multiple case study research and were likely to produce complete and detailed answers to the research questions (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Mertens (2020) wrote how "multiple, in-depth interviews build bonds and provide the opportunity to share transcripts and interpretations" (p. 268). Seidman (2006) explained how in-depth interviews address what participants have to offer:

> Every research method has its limits and its strengths. In-depth interviewing's strength is that through it we can come to understand the details of people's experience from their point of view. We can see how their individual experience interacts with powerful social and organizational forces that pervade the context in which they live and work, and we can discover the interconnections among people who live and work in a shared context. (p. 130)

I chose in-depth interviews because of these advantages to uncover the essential information for this study about the confluence of "context" and the "powerful social and organizational forces" that came between teachers and their striving for improvement. Finding solutions for "low-performing" schools required a close examination of the precise aspects of high-performing

teachers' experiences. As they worked at the forefront of a political and legal struggle over standards, coercion, and state sanction, interviews divulged their encounters with the practical effects of the accountability system and a reconsidering of societal assumptions and slogans. Furthermore, the experience of high-performing teachers in "low-performing" schools presented complicated, internal, social interactions and dynamics that required in-depth interviews (Payne, 2008).

Seidman's (2006) method of a series of in-depth interviews provided the necessary level of understanding of the experience of high-performing teachers in "low-performing" schools. The in-depth interview technique structured three 90-minute interviews spaced three to seven days apart over a two to three-week period. These interviews allowed for the interviewer to develop a comprehensive grasp of the context of the participants' experience, an essential component for multiple facets of qualitative research (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). According to Seidman (2006), the first interview focused on the participants' experiences over the course of their lives to this present point, such as how the participant became a high-performing teacher trying to improve school outside of the classroom. This foray created a connection to the important contextual component of the theory of teacher agency, seen in the model of Imants and Van der Wal (2020). The second interview addressed the present experience of the participant and called forth stories and specifics, such as what it was like to be a high-performing teacher trying to improve the school outside of the classroom. This allowed an exploration of Imants and Van der Wal's (2020) factors of teaching practice, reform, and teaching outcomes. In the third interview, the participant reflected on the experience to construct meaning. The high-performing teacher considered the acts of trying to improve the "low-performing" school and next steps or the future direction of reform, or school improvement. Seidman's (2006) process possessed a

useful rationale to address my research questions and develop internal congruence with each interview concentrating on each research question for research quality.

For this study, I conducted three approximately 90-minute interviews with each participant over the course of around three weeks. Within three months, I interviewed four to six participants, using Seidman's (2006) in-depth technique. The three, in-depth interviews were semi-structured interviews and addressed the three research questions. I chose semi-structured interviews so as to be specific enough to address the research questions and flexible enough to find the most useful answers. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) underscored the advantages of using semi-structured interviews:

> In this type of interview either all of the questions are more flexibly worded or the interview is a mix of more and less structured questions. Usually, specific information is desired from all the respondents, in which case there is a more structured section to the interview. But most of the interview is guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, and neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions is determined ahead of time. This format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic. (pp. 110-111)

The process of in-depth interviews provoked expansive reflections by the teachers and required some adaptability to capture the rich possibilities of the participants' experiences.

The first interview concentrated on the participant's background and how they became a high-performing teacher. The topic of the second interview was the experience of being a high-performing teacher in a "low-performing" school in North Carolina and acting beyond the classroom for school improvement. The concluding 90-minute session addressed how to make

sense of the experience and lessons learned from the effort to transform “low-performing” schools. The interview questions were included in Appendix A, B, and C.

The proposed schedule for research began in late May of 2023 after obtaining Institutional Review Board approval in order to begin the interview process. The schedule for the three-interview series was two teachers each week in May, June, and July. The data analysis process occurred concurrently with the interviews and continued into August and September.

The interviews took place virtually. Over the three interviews, each participant chose a pseudonym for confidentiality. I used Zoom for virtual interviews with the transcription function. I recorded the interview on Zoom to compare the transcription with the spoken word. As Ravitch and Carl (2021) endorsed verbatim transcripts as more accurate and trustworthy, I strove for a high degree of accuracy in transcription and to minimize interpretation. I reviewed the transcripts to make sure they captured the details, essence, and meaning of the participants. I did edit for clarity and punctuation. After each transcription, I shared them with the teachers for their confirmation by emailing the interview text to the teacher for review and comment about accuracy. All recordings were destroyed at the end of transcribing.

Many researchers recommended a pilot study to aid in refining the interview process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2021; Seidman, 2006). In this study, I did not perform a formal pilot study due to the in-depth nature of the work and the inherent flexibility in the research design. I vetted the process and interview questions in my dissertation proposal class and with my writing group in the spring. Furthermore, I rehearsed the questions and transcription process with a teacher who was high-performing but could not be part of this study. Ravitch and Carl (2021) recommended rehearsing the study “to check for flow and clarity of wording, sequencing and content of questions, and relationship of the number of questions to your ability

to include follow-up questions and probes for individual meaning and terminology" (p. 90). They emphasized that the goal was to use an iterative process to refine the instrument strategically, intentionally, precisely, and clearly (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The goal remained a rigorous, high quality study.

Data Analysis

Ravitch and Carl (2021) assigned analysis to three categories: engagement, organization, and writing. I began engaging in analysis after I finished the first transcription of the first interview by writing an analytic memo about that teacher. Then, I conducted the second and third interviews of the first teacher. I continued to engage in the data analysis by adding to the analytic memo. After completing the interviews with each teacher, I synthesized the analytic memo and incorporated long excerpts from the interviews.

I organized the analysis with open coding and axial coding (Ravitch and Carl, 2021; Saldaña, 2021). I used an electronic spreadsheet to organize the data and thematic codes (Charmaz, 2014). Then, I reviewed all the data, reflected on codes, and themes arose in my understanding. The goal was to find the meaning in the careers and actions of these high-performing teachers that was helpful to other "low-performing" school teachers and leaders through a process of condensation (Saldaña, 2021). As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described, "making sense out of data involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read—it is the process of making meaning" (p. 202). I immersed myself in the data to grasp select aspects of teachers' experience and recommendations that resonated as most useful to other teachers, leaders, and policymakers. I followed this process through five teachers.

After coding each interview and determining the themes for each teacher, I wrote five separate case studies. The themes provided the structure for each case study. Then, I coded each case study in order to determine codes across cases and eventually themes across the cases, using the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2014). I searched for a deeper understanding of the backgrounds, experiences, and recommendations in the individual transcripts and compared them one to another.

I used Yin's (2018) cross-case synthesis approach to analyze and reconstruct themes, patterns, and recommendations. According to Yin (2018), analysis relied on argumentative interpretation not quantitative documentation and included reviewing all the data, considering other explanations, deciding on the most substantial meanings, utilizing the individual researcher's expertise, and not just following a "cookbook procedure" (p. 170). He demonstrated that using theory to drive the study and analysis should guide the study and improve rigor by helping identify rival theories or explanations (Yin, 2018).

As Ravitch and Carl (2021) emphasized, the researcher looked for ways the data diverged and for counterexamples, for "it is important to not just look for what you might call outliers but also to look for evidence that will challenge and complicate your findings" (p. 285). Each case study presented many convergent and some divergent codes and themes. Eventually, common themes appeared across the cases and showed some suggestions for school improvement and new approaches to "low-performing" schools. I wrote a cross case analysis section to capture these themes. Then, I examined the themes as I tried to answer each of the research questions and shared preliminary findings with the participants as part of the validation strategy. Last, I compared the findings to recommendations from the literature to see how the perspectives of the high-performing teachers differed.

I reviewed transcripts, analysis, and findings in a recursive or iterative manner and reflected upon the process in analytic memos (Charmaz, 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Charmaz (2014) wrote of memo-writing as a garden of ideas where researchers could free write or journal, but they needed to critique, compare, and contrast their insights. Both analytic memos and research journals provided the opportunity for contemplation, analysis, and documentation that could be used as data in a qualitative study. Ravitch and Carl (2021) contrasted the two techniques: "Unlike memos, which are written at selected moments throughout the research process and focus on specific topic areas, the research journal is an ongoing, real-time chronicling of your reflections, questions, and ideas over time" (p. 116). I began a research journal in 2022 that included some longer, memo-like submissions. I have kept a personal journal for years and now split time between the personal and research journals. To harness another way to process information, I used "dialogic engagement" with my weekly writing group to discuss findings with them and sought their input or feedback on a regular basis (Ravitch & Carl, 2021, p. 118).

Unlike Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) recommendation to begin the analysis after each data or interview session, Seidman (2006) counseled against looking at the transcripts until all the interviews were complete. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) thought that waiting until the end made for difficult management, "Without ongoing analysis, the data can be unfocused, repetitious, and overwhelming in the sheer volume of material that needs to be processed. Data that have been analyzed while being collected are both parsimonious and illuminating" (p. 197). Data collection and data analysis should be concurrent for efficiency and organization and to allow participants to respond to the suggestions of other teachers or participants. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) elaborated:

> Data collection and analysis are simultaneous activities in qualitative research. Analysis begins with the first interview, the first observation, the first document read. Emerging insights, hunches, and tentative hypotheses direct the next phase of data collection, which in turn leads to the refinement or reformulation of questions, and so on. It is an interactive process throughout that allows the investigator to produce believable and trustworthy findings. (p. 191)

I followed these suggestions, deviating from Seidman's recommendations, and began analysis at the same time as I began interviewing in order to manage the data and to be more prepared for the next round of interviews. As aforementioned, this aided with determining saturation. I also took a different approach to analyzing data electronically. Although Seidman (2006) recommended reviewing interview transcripts in hard copy, I have coded electronically on a screen before and respect his caution but felt the computer process was efficient, captured raw words, and produced codes fluently. I did this myself without qualitative data analysis software.

Strategies for Quality

I followed several of Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) suggestions to increase the trustworthiness of my research study. They prioritized methodological and interpretive rigor as a standard for authentic and useful qualitative studies. Using the iterative process of in-depth interviews, a deliberate coding process, and a reflective journal and memo process increased validity. The validity of a qualitative study was based on its value and accuracy, what many in qualitative research refer to as its trustworthiness (Ravitch and Carl, 2021). I proposed an intentional and thorough process to provide credibility for this study with several ways to triangulate the data to allow for the possibility for productive sharing or transferability.

In-depth interviews fostered triangulation or crystallization in their inherent structure and

procedures. Ravitch and Carl (2021) underscored that, “researchers should understand the crucial need to seek out and engage with multiple perspectives in order to answer the research questions” (p. 174). In-depth interviews examined different points of view based on interviewing at length at different times with different people, and in this case, those who worked in different “low-performing” schools. According to Seidman (2006), the first interview established the context of the participants’ experience. The second allowed participants to reconstruct the details of their experience within the context in which it occurred and the third encouraged the participants to reflect on the meaning their experience held for them. In-depth interviews took place over several weeks or months for 90 minutes each and generated the ability to compare different participant’s experiences and interview statements. In-depth interviews took advantage of “within-methods sequencing” to encourage coherent questions over the course of each interview and the rigorous method where each interview built on the previous interview’s statements and ideas (Ravitch & Carl, 2021, p. 179). Each interview provided an opportunity to more closely examine a topic and follow up on any inconsistencies.

The plan to conduct semi-structured interviews with multiple participants also offered the possibility of comparing responses and modifying interview questions to find more specific information. For example, one participant recommended one course of action and the researcher asked other participants about their opinions on that idea. According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), interviews with multiple participants in multiple settings allowed for the researcher to circle back to test concepts, reflections, and proposals with other participants.

Moreover, in-depth interviews allowed for the researcher to compare individual responses over time. As this study progressed, I was able to share recommendations from one high-performing teacher with another teacher for his or her opinion or analysis, thus

strengthening my ability to confirm statements or triangulate opinions. Furthermore, this study also sought perspectival triangulation by sampling different high-performing teachers from different settings and backgrounds (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

As another part of triangulation, member checks or participant validation increased levels of credibility, according to Merriam and Tisdell (2016). Ravitch and Carl (2021) described member checks or in their terms, participant validation strategies, to be essential to establishing research credibility. Researchers should seek to clarify any misunderstandings or misinterpretations in interviews, assumptions, and code selection. Ravitch and Carl (2021) encouraged researchers to work with participants to seek feedback on transcripts, interpretations, and findings. After producing the transcript, I shared a copy with the participant for accuracy. Likewise, I shared a copy of the case study with the subject of the case study and the preliminary findings with each teacher. Participant validation helped ensure accuracy for this study.

Ravitch and Carl (2021) recommended examining the data for contrasting examples that deviated from the dominant narrative and highlighting those as a way to establish more believability. This approach in addition to peer review provided explanations and connections between the findings and the data obtained through the interviews. Sending a copy of the preliminary findings to the participants by email allowed for member checking and further reflection by the participants, as well as confirmation of accuracy and clarification of understanding. I sought to promote agency in the participants beyond the interviews. The member checking process promoted personal reflection and professional growth for the participants as they reviewed the preliminary findings.

The utility of qualitative research was important because of its ability to offer applications for others. For example, the high-performing teachers in this study had

recommendations or suggestions that might be meaningful to other "low-performing" schools. Although generalizability was beyond the capabilities of this qualitative research, findings could provide lessons learned. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) demonstrated how qualitative results could be considered "working hypotheses" or "extrapolations" for readers who could find meaning in the specific situation: "The general lies in the particular; that is, what we learn in a particular situation we can transfer or generalize to similar situations subsequently encountered" (p. 255). Ravitch and Carl (2021) demonstrated how a series of in-depth interviews with varied participants could create "internal generalizability" (p. 173). In this case, the participants' responses helped me see how they compared or contrasted to one another in the similar situation of a "low-performing" school but across different actual schools in North Carolina. Qualitative studies moved beyond the quantitative goal of external validity, and exhibited their potential in other ways. According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), "Despite not generalizing to the entire population, research from qualitative studies can help to make important decisions and suggest applications to a broader population" (p. 84).

Thick description provided a detailed context for study and aid in transferability and credibility (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Transferability in qualitative research was largely about establishing the context for the study so as to provide possible relevance to other situations. For example, some high-performing teachers in other "low-performing" schools in North Carolina might better identify viable recommendations based on understanding how the context of the study relates to their particular context. In-depth interviews used the entire first interview to establish the background of the phenomenon, in this study's case, the history of how the teacher became a high-performing teacher with agency. This level of thick description might aid the reader of this study in determining how the findings apply to the reader's "low-performing"

school.

I also used analytic memos and a research journal to aid with my reflections and personal understanding of this study. This internal exploration and commentary helped in analyzing the data and recommendations of the participants. Reflexivity was an essential part of investigating sources of research bias critically (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Using analytic memos or a research journal was a strategy to encourage reflection and personal analysis of inner direction, guidance, and its impact on the study. Also, memos and researcher journals helped provide a way to audit the investigator's process.

Ethical Considerations

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) pointed out risks in qualitative research for participants such as recalling negative experiences as well as the possibility of threats to their profession or reputation. Benefits included self-knowledge and reflection through the process. Anonymity in qualitative research may be difficult as some inside an organization could identify the participants. I took this into consideration as I wrote the transcriptions, as some discussions needed to be redacted for confidentiality, and when I composed the findings, so as to preserve anonymity and participant dignity (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). In writing and presenting the research in the next chapters, I sought a balance between thick description and participant anonymity. I wanted to use enough description to share important information, but protect the participants' professional reputations and careers.

Positionality Statement

Many recommend a clear statement of the researcher's perspective and approach to a study, including Seidman (2006) who highlighted the importance of investigative disclosure to help both researcher and reader recognize positions and pitfalls:

> Equally important, researchers must identify the source of their interest in order to channel it appropriately. They must acknowledge it in order to minimize the distortion such interest can cause in the way they carry out their interviewing. An autobiographical section explaining researchers' connections to their proposed research seems to me to be crucial for those interested in in-depth interviewing. (p. 32)

My connection to this research was deep-seated and personal, growing from a career-long commitment to school reform and improvement at the classroom and schoolhouse levels.

I began my career as a social studies teacher because I believed that I could help students' humanity and development as productive and informed citizens, making the nation a better and stronger place. I had served in the Marine Corps as an infantry officer where I was taught the effectiveness of delegating responsibility, trusting and training your subordinates, striving for excellence, and looking out for the welfare of your troops. Trust was an essential part of successful warfighting, as units performed better when there was vertical and horizontal confidence. Moreover, one must trust and respect the viewpoint of the person engaged in the fight, battling it out in the trenches. In fact, the Marines taught me that all leadership and other roles were committed to support the infantry, the fighter on the ground, at the front.

As an assistant principal and principal in elementary schools, I saw these same principles, I had been taught in the Marine Corps, flourish in the classroom and schoolwide. I tried to treat my teachers the way I had wanted to be treated when I was a teacher: with respect, trust, and openness. I saw my teachers as the Marine Corps saw the infantry, as front-line units that deserved the support of the rest of the school and district. In time, the culture of teamwork and trust generated award-winning school performance with innovative, creative practices using technology, makerspaces, and project-based learning. The teachers used early and effective

intervention to maximize student learning gains on tests like mCLASS and STAR reading. Teachers and families grew unified in joint dedication to help students grow.

Serving as a principal at so called “low-performing” schools, I saw the forces of accountability intensified to the detriment of many of those successful principles. I experienced the opposite of the successful times I had seen as a teacher, coach, and Marine. The pressures of the accountability system of high-stakes tests combined with state punishments for schools with low test scores—determined with high correlation to student socioeconomic status—reduced teacher agency, hindered trust building, and increased resentment. I witnessed the silencing of teacher voice, student advocacy, and cooperative excellence or efficacy.

This study sought to learn more about the dynamics of what some call “low-performing” schools through the lens of the current political climate. Teachers were at the forefront of the issues of accountability especially, in “low-performing,” elementary schools. Teachers in these grades confronted high-stakes testing and threats without the voice or agency found in other high-performing schools. Throughout this work, I have placed “low-performing” in quotations to recognize the term as a pejorative label assigned by the state based on summative end of grade tests. “Low-performing” did not reflect what I had witnessed in the dedicated efforts of many committed educators nor in the performance of schools based on other measures such as family engagement or student growth on other tests. I used the concept of high-performing teachers in contrast with the state label of “low-performing” schools. Furthermore, I recognized that there was more to teaching than attaining high scores on standardized tests. Some of the participants provided other growth measures and teaching successes beyond state assessments. Nevertheless, all of the participants had achieved within the system and thus could speak as one who had been successful in spite of the system and not slandered as a “low-performer” or dismissed as a self-

interested teacher who was using the circumstances of a “low-performing” school to make excuses.

I understood that my current role as a principal created a power differential in working with teachers as participants. I tried to put the teachers at ease, ensure their anonymity, and include them in discussions about the direction and findings of this study. Overall, I sought to learn more about how high-performing teachers take action to improve their “low-performing” schools and what they suggested for next steps for school improvement. In the end, my goal remained the same: try to find ways to help students and teachers be better citizens and make this nation and the world a better place.

My bias lay in my ideal and sense of urgency to provide a “sound basic education” for every North Carolina student, especially those in “low-performing” schools. I also have every sympathy for the teachers who work hard every day to help these students. I have seen students and teachers suffer the effects of decisions at the school, district, and state level. My decisions and biases have affected my career path, job assignments, and reassignments. I take full responsibility for my decisions as a principal and my attempts to improve education and the career consequences I have faced. I want to avoid putting anyone else in jeopardy for their commitment to student improvement that ran counter to district and state directives or the accountability system in general. Perhaps a strict adherence to confidentiality and seeking to provide productive recommendations would allow for positive results for many students, teachers, and administrators in North Carolina.

Conclusion

This qualitative study used a multiple case study and an in-depth interview design to examine high-performing elementary teachers in “low-performing” schools in North Carolina so

as to better understand how they became high-performing, what they experienced in their attempts to improve their schools, and what they recommend for other “low-performing” schools today. I collected data through a series of three interviews with several participants. I used thematic coding strategies concurrently with data collection and triangulated the data with analytic memos and participant validation. Thick description promoted a level of rigor for credibility and transferability.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

In this chapter, I will present five case studies, one cross case analysis, and the findings in relation to the research questions. I designed this study to investigate the perspectives of five high-performing teachers in "low-performing" elementary schools through three in-depth interviews. With 90 minutes allotted for each interview, the teachers were allowed time to explain the context of their experience (Seidman, 2006). The series of three interviews provided for flexibility to explore the topics from different angles. Through the data analysis process of editing the transcriptions for clarity, writing analytic memos, and coding the transcripts, the main themes of each of the teachers emerged from the interviews. I wrote a case study for each teacher using the themes and within case analysis. Then, I coded each case study to determine the cross case themes. Finally, I employed cross case analysis to answer the research questions and determine the findings of the study.

All words or phrases in quotation marks in each case study come from the actual words of the teacher in the case study. They are not outside references. The term "low-performing" schools remains in quotation marks, as it has throughout this study, because of the questionable accuracy of the label.

Michelle

Michelle is a White female who has worked in schools in North Carolina for 26 years. She grew up loving reading and learning and feels teaching is the "coolest job in the world." She began her teaching career as a teacher assistant, working five years in two schools while finishing her degree and obtaining her teaching license. Then, she taught at one "low-performing" school for a few years before moving to another where she would spend 19 years, honing her craft and gaining recognition as a very successful teacher. Still, she struggled to share

her success and spread it throughout the school. Michelle experienced some positive agency as a high-performing teacher but much frustration in a “low-performing” school.

I spoke with Michelle over three occasions for approximately 90 minutes in each session. Over the interviews, several major themes developed that Michelle expounded upon in detail. First, Michelle explained that in becoming a high-performing teacher, experience mattered. Second, poor decision-making at the school, district and state levels demoralized teachers at the “low-performing” school and hindered their ability to do their job effectively. Third, teacher agency and relationship-building drove success in a “low-performing” school.

Becoming a High-Performing Teacher, Experience Matters

Michelle learned multiple lessons in her first years as an assistant and then as a teacher that gave her the knowledge to be a high-performing teacher. Michelle began as an assistant working with a skilled, master teacher–a “rock star teacher” in her words–who provided her an invaluable foundation about how to manage a classroom. She drew more lessons from observing and following the successful practices of other classroom teachers than from her college coursework. She did see her preparation in school and college as key to her success. Her preparation as a teacher assistant and taking education classes at the same time allowed her to practice what she was learning in class:

> Having that experience and also simultaneously doing it while I was a teacher assistant, it made a huge difference for me. I feel like I had an understanding of what was going on and what was being taught, you know, simultaneously because even though I wasn't the classroom teacher. I was in that school environment already. And so that was huge for me. And like even my first-year teaching, while it was challenging, for other reasons, I think I felt like I had a leg up because I’d already been in the school system for five

> years. And so I felt that my transition was pretty easy. Comparatively to what I've seen a lot of other first year teachers go through who haven't had that same experience. So. I would highly recommend that, if anyone has that option. It's, it worked out well for me.

She was able to try out strategies in the classroom that she was studying in college, for example, guided reading groups. Furthermore, the preparation prevented what she called “early teacher burnout,” which sees in younger teachers a good deal now. After moving to a “low-performing” school, she benefited from the continued support from her college professors, some of whom worked in her district. She would see them in the hallways of her school and receive collegial encouragement from them.

Early on Michelle understood how being “firm but fair “would help students become successful. She shared how discipline and management were essential in a “low-performing” school to help provide the students with a predictable, reliable, and fair environment that many lacked at home. This approach was the foundation of improved teacher-student relationships:

> I took a class last Monday, an online all-day class, on working with kids of trauma and who have high anxiety and it's something that I'm pretty passionate about because I do think it's such an important piece of being a good educator. So, there's a lot of layers, but I think, first of all, relationship building with your students is incredibly important. Like, It is, it's the top thing. If you don't have their trust, then it will be very difficult for you. I also think that you… again that piece of remaining non-emotional is very important as well. That you can't take things personally from students, that they’re kids and you're the grown up and you have to not act like one of the children. (laughs) But, I believe in being very firm. But fair. And I think that's really important. Kids want consistency, consistency, super, super, super important. They have to know that you mean what you

> say and that you're going to follow through with what you say. And it establishes trust. If they trust, if they can understand that you are gonna say you're gonna do what you say, even if they don't always like it, that establishes trust there. Like, I can trust this person. I can trust that they're gonna do what they say they're gonna do. And I think too often now people equate firmness with meanness and that is not the case. You can be firm and kind. And it does not mean that you are being mean. I don't believe in yelling and screaming. I think that's really important again, like remaining non-emotional. Learning to control. All of that.

Keeping your cool avoided escalating situations with students and lowered the amount of conflict. The predictable nature of consequences and standards helped the students know what to expect and created an interaction with their teacher that led to trust and connection. Michelle's experience in the classroom over time helped her develop a repertoire of skills and perspectives on how to interact with children. She was still learning how to help students in need, students who had experienced trauma. She was reading about restorative discipline and how to help students who attended "low-performing" schools.

Michelle demonstrated how teachers who possessed intentionality learned more over time and could apply the lessons to their classrooms. She diligently studied the standards so she could master the essential elements of the curriculum, especially when she moved to an upper elementary grade with an end of the grade test.

> So, I spent hours studying, making sure I understood those standards. What am I teaching when I go in the next day? Do I understand how to deliver this? So, all those pieces come into play. And I think all of that's really important for a teacher who's working in a Title

> One school, a “low-performing” school. Like, if you want to see growth, those are the things that *have* to happen.

This intentional approach carried over to how she built relationships with families when she saw them out at Walmart by purposely going over and talking to parents about positive aspects of their children’s schooling. She also shared how she admired another veteran teacher who ate with her children every day and connected to them throughout the lunch period:

> And I mean, if you ever talked to any kids who ever had her, they loved her because I do think, you know, in her own, in her way, she built those relationships. She was intentional, and she would tell you, like, “I sit at that table with them at lunch time, so I can talk to them.”

Michelle’s colleague could have spent time socializing with other teachers. Instead, she dedicated her time daily to understanding her students and their lives. This type of intentional action characterized how experienced teachers made a difference with their students through daily improvement of their skills and knowledge through observation, study, and practice.

Over time, Michelle’s commitment for her students and their education grew. As she gained experience, so did her intensity of feeling what her students needed and anger when they did not receive what they deserved.

> There is nothing that really gets me more upset than feeling like a student's needs aren't being met. Or something, an injustice of some sort is being done. That's something I'm very passionate about and I think that is actually grown over the years working in high-poverty schools because you just see so many things and like, you begin as you spend years in that environment, you begin to understand everything that these kids come with and the baggage and the challenges and all those things. And so for me, I think I carry a

> lot of that and, you know, it's the empathy that you have and understanding what everything they're dealing with and so for me to see a kid not getting what they need or to what I feel like is something being done that is unjust. Perhaps, an example will be like mandates from the county or something along those lines that I feel like, "Hey, this is not really what's best for kids."

Michelle's experience exposed her to the potential her students possessed and the wrong-headed decision-making by leaders in the district who imposed unsound directives. Veteran teachers like Michelle had learned over time what their students had to overcome on a daily basis and this only fueled her desire to meet all their needs, in spite of top-down policies by the state and district.

Misguided Decision-Making at the School, District and State Levels Demoralized Teachers

Over much of the three interviews, Michelle conveyed her frustration with leaders who worked outside of the "low-performing" school and consistently made decisions that hurt children and their learning. She told of routine and regular decisions by adults that "wrecked kids" and left them in tears. She asked, "Why are we doing this to children?" Michelle provided story after story to explain her experience of how school, district, and state leadership frustrated teachers and hindered their ability to do their job effectively.

At the school level, she shared about how one school principal created a negative environment where the principal undermined teacher leadership decisions. The principal confronted teachers, targeted them with low evaluations, "chewed them out," and made many afraid to speak up. The principal created a "horrible nightmare" when the school improvement team decided to repurpose the district-provided content teacher at the end of one school year. The teachers argued that the content teacher should support the grade level professional learning

communities and pull small groups of students to help the teachers. The school improvement team voted on the plan and wrote a specific plan for the content teacher's new responsibilities.

When school started the next year, the principal reversed the plan unilaterally and angered all of the teachers. They realized that they had no power at the school. Michelle had been the school improvement team chair. She was shocked that all her efforts to improve the school had been a "big, fat waste of time." After she spoke out against the principal's decision at the first committee meeting, there was a "frostiness in the air" between her and the principal for the rest of the year. He cut her "out of the loop" and "staff morale was in the toilet."

Michelle conveyed how it is hard enough to teach at a "low-performing" school, without the school leadership and other adults working counter to teacher and student interest. She told of how overwhelming it can be to teach in a "low-performing" school with all the needs the students bring to school daily. Michelle explained that there are so many students that need extra support to make learning targets, "there's never enough hands for all, especially at a school like ("low-performing" school). You got so many of those kids." The challenge to be successful, coming from a woman who has been recognized for her results, is "almost impossible."

According to Michelle, the school district made the work even harder and more frustrating. She worked with some personnel from the district who were very supportive and collaborative. Nevertheless, in her last year, the district facilitator was so condescending that Michelle and other teachers could hardly work with her. The facilitator expected the teachers to do what she said even though she had far less experience in a "low-performing" school than Michelle or her colleagues:

> "Well, it doesn't matter that you've been teaching at ("low-performing" school) for 20 years, like you, I still know more than you, and you, I don't, I shouldn't listen to your

> feedback, because, you know, I'm in charge basically." So, for me, there always, there often felt like there was this sense of power that kinda goes to people's heads when they get those positions.

The facilitator acted like she knew better than the teachers at the school even though her decisions were not sound educational practices. Michelle shared how there was "nothing that really gets me more upset than feeling like a student's needs aren't being met." The district facilitator was leading the teachers on the wrong path rather than helping the children and creating extensive frustration.

Furthermore, the district seemed bent on micromanaging the "low-performing" school to the point where teachers like Michelle had no voice. Michelle made a hand gesture in multiple instances that showed how the district made her feel. She raised her hand and wiggled her fingers as she explained how the district was meddling in so many instructional decisions at the "low-performing" school and producing negative results: "That's like, you got your hand in the pot and all the things, right? Like, you've always got to have your hand in it and messing with things." Michelle described interactions with the district as nitpicking and "gotcha" moments where personnel looked for things the teachers were doing wrong: "He's gonna be in your room making sure you're doing what…you're supposed to be doing." At one point, the district proposed a star chart to track teacher compliance with district requirements, or as Michelle called similar items, "silly little things." This instigated extensive anger with teachers who felt they were being treated like children. Moreover, mandate upon mandate wore her down and fostered an "inordinate amount of stress and pressure."

Michelle felt like she was constantly being questioned about her teaching ability and not trusted to do her job. She was never asked for her opinion about how to help her students:

> Honestly, you know, when you have a school like ("low-performing" school), that's not doing well, never in my entire time did I ever have anyone from the administration or the county come in and say, "Hey, guys like, what do you think? What do you think the problems are? What do you think? What do you think is causing duh duh duh duh dah, you know? This, (hand signal for meddling), there's always this (hand signal for meddling), (laughs) yeah, "We're gonna come in and you're just gonna do what we say." But there was never… You were never felt…You were never included in any of those conversations, and that's where I think that's, that's where I think a large part of the problem is…that it's always just, "We're telling you. We're telling you. We're telling you. We're telling you do this, do this, do this, do this," but you're never part of any of those conversations.

The district just made decisions unilaterally in "low-performing" schools without consulting with those who were in the classroom. The county was quick to impose itself but slow to interact with teachers and how learning actually took place at the "low-performing" school.

The district also discouraged teachers by its poor decision-making. The county seemed to jump on the latest "bandwagon" whether it was backed by research or not. District leadership seemed to fall for the next "bright, shiny, new thing" and "put all its eggs in one basket," according to Michelle. The district rejected explicit phonics instruction for years, in spite of teachers like Michelle seeing the value in teaching reading explicitly and knowing that research backed them up. At one point, the district thought it would be productive to pair a "low-performing" school with a "high-performer" and have them meet monthly so the "low-performers" could learn how to improve their practice. Michelle described how this was terrible for morale as the "high-performing" school staff could not relate to the challenges of the "low-

performing" school and talked about how much money and support their parents provided to the school that allowed them to be successful. Furthermore, the "high-performers" shared that the district did not micromanage them and allowed them to make their own decisions. The district also moved school principals from "low-performing" schools too quickly before they could build an effective staff, often in as few as two years. One principal assigned to the school neither understood the elementary curriculum nor cared to learn.

The cumulative effect of all of these district decisions created a wave of staff departures. Nearly all the veteran teachers, including high-performers like Michelle, left the "low-performing" school to teach elsewhere. All the micromanaging, unsound decision-making, and refusal to ask the teachers for suggestions, wore the teachers down and feeling unable to work in such an environment.

State policies also contributed negatively to teacher morale and inhibited effectiveness, according to Michelle. Instead of asking what was not working, the state seemed committed to labeling schools and students through the state report card grade. "Get rid of it," Michelle said. It was comparing "apples to oranges," students who came from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Michelle asked the state to "take away the labels" as they are bad for students and their families, and often not their fault. The state should also do away with the merit pay plan to pay bonuses for teachers who, like Michelle, were high-performing based on their students' high scores on end of grade tests. The incentive lowered teacher morale because teachers were more successful when they worked together. Merit pay "pit teachers against one another," creating such hostility between teachers who did not receive it, that Michelle could not even share openly with other colleagues:

> Like, I know when I received bonuses like, I didn't talk about it, you know, like I didn't share that with my team because I don't, I never wanted to create that feeling of jealousy or I didn't wanna to project any sort of idea that, like, I was better than anybody else or because I think that does destroy teams. It should be a team effort, and it should be a grade level… So, I think those things can also, often create divisiveness within a group of teachers if you're not careful.

Instead of building teacher's morale, the state plans for merit pay and "low-performing" schools fostered mistrust and created incentives for teachers to stop collaborating and cease efforts for school wide improvement.

All of this frustration at the school, district, and state level left Michelle questioning why no one ever asked teachers, particularly high-performing teachers, how to improve schools. She wondered if part of it had to do with gender discrimination:

> Some of it, I think, still perhaps goes back to the role that women have played in society for a really long time and so I think we're still kind of battling that. Whether people realize it or not. You know, it is still largely a female-based profession and I think that that's been such an uphill battle for so long that we are still fighting that battle, you know, which is ridiculous, but, I think that, I do think that's part of it. It's like, "Oh, it's just a bunch of women. You know?" Yeah. (laughs)

In spite of Michelle and several of her colleagues being highly successful teachers on somewhat objective measures as designated by the state such as end of grade assessments, few if any leaders asked Michelle for her recommendations on how to improve "low-performing" schools. In her exhaustion and frustration in striving to succeed in teaching students with extensive needs, she found simple gender bias as one explanation for this systematic failure to help "low-

performing" schools.

Teacher Agency and Relationship-Building Drive Success

Michelle also spoke at length about how teacher agency was an untapped resource in "low-performing" schools. She had lots of ideas about how to improve schools and lots of experience in working with colleagues to help their students as much as possible, in spite of the demands of student needs and the challenges of working with school and district administration. Based on Michelle's interviews, teacher agency and relationship-building drove success in a "low-performing" school.

Michelle argued that teacher autonomy was much needed, but she did not mean complete freedom to do whatever a teacher wanted. She stated, "There has to be organization from the top down, …(I'm) aware of all that." She did believe in teachers working within the district structure and following state standards. Yet, no one in the district ever asked for her opinion on improvement strategies. Michelle experienced very little, if any autonomy outside of her classroom, so she yearned for freedom to make the school she loved better.

Michelle emphasized that the way to improve the "low-performing" school was to promote teacher agency and solicit their perspective in order to provide a sound education. Teachers should be free to be "open and honest" about their ideas, "without fear of repercussion or judgment." Districts needed to convey that "they have your best interests at heart, and they're not out to get you." Rather than following the latest fads, the state and districts should follow research and evidence-based methods. Leaders should value veteran teachers and seek to support their ideas and proposals for school improvement. This would require a change of approach by the state and the districts, but it would improve instruction, school climate, and teacher retention.

Michelle argued that the state needed to value students as more than a standardized test score on a piece of paper.

If Michelle had the agency necessary to make positive change for "low-performing" schools, she would enact several initiatives. She detailed how it was essential to create small class sizes in "low-performing" schools. Currently, the state of North Carolina capped class size in grades kindergarten through third grade, but fourth and fifth grades could be as large as 30 students, with no legal limit. In Michelle's experience, "low-performing" schools needed reduced class sizes to provide their students with the personal and academic attention to inspire improvement. While the state lowered class size, it should also work to "keep veteran teachers and like seasoned teachers and attract them to those schools." Michelle also advocated for a special classroom for students with behavior and discipline issues that a certified teacher could lead with a school counselor available. Rather than suspend students–sending students home and inhibiting their learning–this intervention room would maintain learning while still providing a consequence for classroom behavior.

Michelle's urgent priority was for the state and districts to encourage relationships between teachers and students, teachers and families, and teachers and the community. Michelle outlined how she gained agency and effectiveness through the support of her colleagues:

> I became a better teacher through the people that I worked with. I'm like, "You might have this idea, this planning period, and I might have this…" Like, and we talked about things. "Oh, that's a great idea. Or what if we did this? Or if we tweaked it this way?" I mean that those were the best teams that I worked with.

Strengthening teacher collaboration would lead to improved schools. Making connections at every level would help teachers give students and families a reason to learn and support learning.

She recalled how an exceptional school psychologist made it her personal mission to bridge gaps between the school and families. Her efforts sought to end the cycles of poverty and abuse, too common in the communities of "low-performing" schools. According to Michelle, schools would improve through positive relationships, across the board

> I think the relationships with the parents and students, again, like those to me, that's probably one of the most important pieces in education, period. Like, because it's people and you have to build relationships and there has to be trust among colleagues, among students, among parents and teachers. Like all those pieces they all fit together. So, I would say for me, that's probably the most important piece, is that you're building those relationships and trust there.

Starting with teachers, students and families, the state and district would fuel success if they encouraged positive relationships amongst the stakeholders in schools.

Michelle's concluding message described how teacher agency and voice was essential for success in "low-performing" schools. The district needed to listen to teachers because they had experience in seeing how to help students be successful. If the state and district wanted to improve "low-performing" schools, they needed to seek answers from veteran teachers who have spent years in the classroom and probably have solutions:

> It's really frustrating…We've got to do a better job in the district, I believe, in the districts with having people who spent a lot more time in the classroom, then they have or …at least taking the time to really understand what curriculum is research based and what's effective and listening to teachers, I think. I don't think all these decisions should be made without the input of the people who are your veteran teachers, which are becoming fewer and fewer. You know, having that voice, because experience matters. It does. And you

> can say all the things, but experience matters. And it's because, I mean, I think about, you know, when I started versus now and like all the things that I've learned in between and it matters. Experience matters and those teachers with experience particularly should have, all teachers should have a voice, but especially the teachers that have been doing it for, you know, a while. You should be listening to those people. It's important.

Beatrice

Beatrice, a White female, grew up as the daughter of a thirty-year veteran teacher, but she avoided the profession for many years. She did dabble in being a teacher intern in high school, but as a teacher assistant, had a negative experience with a jaded classroom teacher and left for the business world after a few months. She worked for the corporate side of a pharmacy chain in merchandising, customer service, and loss prevention for almost nine years before coming back to teaching. She and her husband decided teaching would be less travel for her and better for the growing family, so she enrolled in night classes to get her teaching certification. Her student teaching experience at the "low-performing" school convinced her she was in the right place to make teaching her new career. In short time, she realized she had a gift for helping students thrive in the classroom. As she mastered the craft through her high expectations and preparation, she learned that the working conditions in the "low-performing" school made it very difficult for the school overall to experience or attain the same level of excellence.

Over three insightful sessions of ninety minutes each, I met with Beatrice over Zoom and listened to her stories of friendships made and agency lost in her nine years at her "low-performing" school. Beatrice's conversations centered around three major themes. First, Beatrice's high expectations for herself and her students propelled her to a leadership role but also exposed her to the limits of teacher agency in a "low-performing" school. Second, the

district created a "nightmare" scenario through micromanagement that led to large amounts of wasted time and teacher turnover. Third, changing the mindset from blaming "low-performing" schools to finding ways to support them will improve schooling and learning.

Beatrice's high expectations, leadership role, and agency

Beatrice explained on multiple occasions how her high expectations for her students were essential to her success. She pushed her students hard to participate and did not accept students being lazy or shirking their lessons. Students who did not finish math, took it to lunch or recess to finish. Students who caused the class to lose instructional time through arguing or disrupting class or fighting, caused the class to miss recess. Time was precious and a limited commodity, so the work had to be finished. When students did not learn and grow, it was embarrassing to her as a “reflection upon my teaching.”

During her interviews, Beatrice underscored the value of her preparation, too. She insisted on being ready for every day of teaching. She even prepared for the interviews and wrote notes in advance. She told of how useful her student teaching was, as she learned the importance of procedures to sharpen pencils and discard paper in order to avoid student horseplay and distraction. Furthermore, student teaching readied her for all the school routines and how to understand the curriculum and teaching materials:

> ...little things like, how does the copying machine work? What do we do for a fire drill? How did the students get on the bus? What do we do when we have a note from a parent that says they're supposed to go home a different way? All of those things, I mean, we never talked about in class at (college). As well as the programs that (the school) was using at the time. (College name), I didn't look at a math program while I was there. I didn't look at a reading program or writing program. Nothing. So, student teaching was

> just like, here's everything we use. Here's what we're supposed to do. Here's the county guidelines, which was extremely helpful. I had no idea that the county would post, you know, all of the standards and….the pacing guides and the units and what schedule you needed to follow. I mean that was tremendously helpful.

Student teaching had exposed her to what she needed to know, but it was just an introduction. Next, she kept pushing until she had a firm grasp of the content. During her first two years, she spent a lot of extra time learning: "I'm coming in 45 minutes early. I'm staying an hour and a half late. I'm taking all this stuff home. But I mean, I really had to just learn this stuff."

Once she mastered the curricular materials, she wanted to take the next step.

Ultimately, Beatrice desired to be a "teacher to the other teachers." She enjoyed knowing every facet of the curriculum and how to teach it, being an expert in the material. She preferred to make her own plans for her class but she found deep satisfaction in sharing exactly what she was doing with her grade level colleagues:

> The planning with the other teachers, like helping the teachers on my team learn fourth grade, learn the standards, learn the material–I mean, I hope that's the way that I was most effective beyond just that immediate classroom. I feel like I made good friends through that. I mean, like (teacher name), you know, (teacher name), I mean so many that would ask my opinion a lot. And seem to kind of respect me, I guess, in a way. That was a great feeling and I love that they would come to me and ask for stuff or ask for help. Especially last year having the two brand new teachers to fourth grade. I mean, it made me feel important that I could help them and bond with them.

Beatrice developed friendships with her grade level professional learning community and then sought to broaden her leadership.

Beatrice developed ties with a large group of teachers who shared similar goals–they wanted their students and school to succeed. Their collegiality inspired important instructional conversations and reinforced bonds that kept teachers at the school:

> I guess the supportive team, supportive coworkers, although I really couldn't truly measure, I hope that some of my impact for having a positive impact on the overall school was maybe just being friends with some of the people outside of the grade level, where we all felt like we could talk to each other and communicate well, and talk about different ideas… I felt like there was a big group of us like (teacher name) and, gosh! I can't even remember. But a big group of us who would talk a lot about stuff and I'm not sure anything really resulted in that, but just the fact that we were talking about, "Well, what are you all using? What do you think we should do? Well, how does this program work?" Just that communication I feel like, probably had a positive impact on the grade. I think we felt more like a team, and we were there to support each other and help each other, and I think that's why a lot of people stayed, you know, even after (one principal) left and (another principal name), I feel like a lot of people stayed, because of the friendships they had with teachers on other grade levels.

Beatrice shared her successful ideas with teammates and even teachers in other grades. The staff supported each other as friends, chose to stay there teaching together, and began to make plans to improve the school systematically.

Although Beatrice experienced many positive aspects of agency in working with her grade level and other teachers, when she tried to make further schoolwide improvements, she learned about the limitations of teacher agency in a "low-performing" school. The principal selected Beatrice and several others to serve on the Restart Committee where the leadership team

would seek ways to fundamentally change the school. She traveled to Raleigh six times and attended two virtual sessions to re-envision the school and find ways to bring it out of “low-performing” status. After two years of imagining and planning, her committee met with the principal who rejected their ideas. The principal blamed the teachers for lack of results and classroom engagement, rewrote the proposal, and in the end, tabled the idea. Beatrice completely disagreed and stated, “I don't think teachers are our problem here at this school.” After all of that work, “nothing was ever implemented” and “nothing ever came of” the Restart Committee initiatives. Nevertheless, Beatrice did begin to feel more restrictions on her agency and effectiveness that devastated the school staff.

The District Created a "Nightmare" Scenario Through Micromanagement

As she spent more time in the “low-performing” school, Beatrice began to experience increasing limitations on her agency in the classroom and beyond in the form of district requirements. Even though she was a high-performing teacher, who excelled in student growth yearly, the district personnel working in the school refused to listen to her and insisted that she follow exactly what the district specified. To Beatrice, this meant, “...being told you must do this. There is no wiggle room. I don't care what you have to say about it.” The intensity of district officials only increased over time. The numbers of “gotcha” moments when staff visited classrooms increased. County facilitators “bombarded” the teachers with longer and longer checklists of “must, must, must, must do.” No one ever asked Beatrice for her opinion: “Everybody else from the county, I feel like was just there to tell me what to do. Kinda to put me in my place.” Instead of listening to the teachers, the district insisted on their detailed program. Beatrice felt, “those kind of things held us back.” When teachers did speak up, the county refused to listen: “Even though we're saying, ‘This is not enough. Our kids don't know what

they're doing…This doesn't provide enough practice. It's designed more for kids who are already on grade level.' They didn't want to hear that." The teachers' frustration grew.

During the COVID era, the district mandates caused more learning loss. The students were in-person for much of the year for two days per week, but the district still stuck with the routine testing schedule. Beatrice saw the precious little time she had students in the classroom slashed by a demanding testing schedule:

> …we were still testing them like it was a normal year. I mean, we still did pre-test and post-test for units. We still did iReady Standards checks. Oh my gosh, I have forgotten. See another nightmare moment. iReady standards checks. We were still doing all of the North Carolina check ins. We were still doing iReady benchmarks. So, and that's with kids who are only there two days a week. We're still doing all of this testing? So you know, it, lessened our time even more than two days. It really is kind of like a day and a half. And then especially with the virtual day when the county started telling us exactly what we could assign and that it needed to have, oh gosh, it was something like a standard or a learning objective. It needed to have this and this, and each of the, whatever three components had to have, you know, certain criteria. I mean, it was just getting absolutely ridiculous. We were spending all day. Oh, my gaw. Nightmare!

Testing shrank the amount of time for instruction even further. Then, teachers spent hours and hours on the learning platform for remote assignments that many students never completed.

The district seemed intent on wasting the teachers' time. Personnel from the county told teachers they had to write daily end of grade test questions and keep track of how students were doing on the questions. Beatrice told of how much time it took and how impractical it was:

> I spent probably three hours every Saturday morning, one whole year, trying to come

> up with stem questions that aligned to the EOG, for three times a day and track their data. For kids who were nowhere close to passing the EOG. Just that intensity of "You must do what I say. I'm not gonna care. I don't want to hear what you have to say about it. And I'm going to look at the data sheet." So, the fear of being in trouble for not doing it. The fear of not having enough time to do it. And the ludicrousy [sic] of the fact that we really don't even need to do this…Nothing came from it other than collecting data. Well, how much data can you possibly collect when you then don't have the time to do anything with the data? You know, like I can tell you right now who needs help. I can tell you who needs small group. I don't need to collect 500 sources of data to figure that out.

The district facilitator demanded the teachers spend time on tasks that had no meaning but would require hours of personal time. Furthermore, they did not help students learn. They just scared the teachers. In another situation, Beatrice described how the county wrote excessively long planning documents and told teachers to read them all. She said, "There's no way anybody can read all of that. But we're supposed to. They wanted us to. They thought we should." Beatrice needed support, not more demands on her time.

The district decision-making wasted months of time and stymied student progress. District officials eventually would realize that their initiatives were not helping. They would change course long after the fact was obvious to the teachers. The process would have been much more effective if the district had communicated with the teachers. Beatrice shared the pattern: "Then slowly, they did say, 'Okay, you know what, it's not working.' Well, if y'all had listened to us maybe a year, a year and a half ago, that might not have happened." Many times, the district would repeat this cycle and invest in a program or hire a trainer, only too

late to correct the error of their ways. Sadly, much of this could have been prevented by listening to teachers.

Beatrice questioned why the district would not seek teachers' opinions and concluded that it was a matter of power and job security:

> People trying to maybe justify their jobs by creating 8,000 documents with 15,000 links in them…Okay, unit guides are great. But then one of the (academic facilitator) people would make another document which basically took the unit guide and rearranged it, where now there's 15 different more links underneath. And then there's something else coming from the lady who did all the virtual stuff…We used to plan and (the academic facilitators) had so many different documents I could not find, like every time we met, I could not find what document it is…just completely overwhelming, to where I really felt like somebody's just justifying their job. They have too much time on their hands if they are going to take a well-written unit guide and do it again but just a little bit differently.

The unit guides were unwieldy, even for a high-performer. The district staff made unnecessary work for themselves and the teachers. Power may have been involved, too, with some district personnel not wanting to be questioned. In other instances, Beatrice felt the district insisted on using resources only because they had jumped on the "bandwagon" and spent the money on it.

After many years of district micromanagement and impractical or irrational initiatives, teachers started to leave the "low-performing" school in growing numbers. They felt "miserable" and like they were being "punished" daily. The district changed principals four times during Beatrice's nine years. She was working with her eleventh teammate and it was taking its toll:

> And it was hard, and I got tired of the county, but I probably would have continued to say, had it not been for the fact that my two brand new teammates were leaving also,

> (teacher name) was leaving. I can't think of who else, but you know, I just felt like, alone. In eight years, there's hardly, there's maybe three or four people that were still originally there, you know, like, why do I want to continue to stay here? I've got a new principal, I mean, I barely even tried to get to know (principal name), because I thought, "Well, he'll just be gone in two years, you know, like I'm just going to my classroom. I'm going to do what I'm supposed to do. I'm not going to go out of my way to establish a relationship. I mean, I don't know what the motivation is for these people who stay, that's pretty sad.

Beatrice felt more and more isolated as she saw most of her colleagues leave. Her family of friends whom she started with were almost all gone and one of her teammates was leaving, too. District pressure and demands had created a situation where the entire staff had turned over. Beatrice knew she was one of the last high-performers and would be the next to join the exodus. This personnel turnover would contribute to the school continuing to decrease in performance.

Changing the Mindset from Blaming "Low-Performing" Schools to Finding Ways to Support

Beatrice learned that the approach towards "low-performing" schools was reinforcing school failure and largely to blame was the approach to needy schools in the first place. The attitude and assumptions were all wrong. The state should shift its direction and promote teacher agency and assist teachers rather than punish them. Beatrice began by critiquing the concept of a "low performing" school based solely on end of grade test scores:

> …"low-performing," I don't think, you know, it just goes to data, which is sad. I mean, my hope is that it will become less of a focus on test scores…is a low-performing school really low-performing, if they are showing more growth than (high-performing school name)?

Test scores do not capture all the work that teachers invest. They only capture part of the growth that students achieve in terms of mental health and character. Furthermore, the state prioritized proficiency over growth which did not capture the high-performance of some schools which were very skilled at improving student performance from the beginning of the year. Beatrice questioned how a school could be labeled "low-performing" if it helped students grow more than another school, which according to the state could be declared "high-performing?" The state process was overly reliant on test scores and then biased towards proficiency and not towards student learning and teacher transformation of student achievement.

Beatrice went on to challenge the notion of grading schools on proficiency. She called out the state for not acknowledging the well-documented connection between socioeconomic factors and student grade level performance. Beatrice cast doubt on the label "low-performing" school: "I know they're not showing as much proficiency, but do we expect as much proficiency from a school that is surrounded by poverty versus one that's in the wealthiest of all neighborhoods?" Beatrice was a high-performing teacher because she believed in high expectations for all students, particularly those from difficult backgrounds. She believed that all of the students could score proficient on the end of grade tests and she often had nearly all of her students pass the math tests. Beatrice was not condoning low expectations. Rather, she was pointing out the obvious fact that grading schools based on the wealth of their neighborhood was unfair to students, teachers, and families. The correlation between test proficiency and income was too predetermined for the state to use such an assessment as the basis for its policies to improve schools.

If the state would reconsider its assumption that it should grade schools based on end of grade proficiency, it should then examine how to change its approach to school reform. If the

state recognized that schools were not to blame for low-proficiency, then they could look towards other solutions. If the teachers and schools were not at fault, then how could the state address the root causes of student performance. It would require a new mindset about how to address schools with high diversity and high needs. Beatrice compared the approach to what she or another high-performing teacher would do in the classroom:

> I hope, I really, really, really, really, really hope that there will be less of an emphasis on EOG scores. I know they have some value, and they need to…. We need some comparison to see how we're doing. But the whole fact that we're getting an F on a report card should…Would we do that to kids? You know, if we know that they come into a grade level and they're not ready, we help them. We scaffold, we model, we give read aloud, we do all kinds of instructional strategies to help the kids so that they're not just making Fs all the time, because that would be unmotivating for them. Maybe some of that can be applied to the county report card, too, you know? If that school's getting F, F, F, F, Fs, let's figure out a way to provide some more support instead of another checklist. Like how many years will it go on in the same direction, until they realize like the checklist, and the extra work for the principal, and the extra work for the teachers isn't really working?

How many years will this go on until the state stops telling teachers that they are at fault? Beatrice demonstrated that the system was not working nor did it make sense. This was not the way to treat children or schools. Based on the experience of a high-performing teacher, the reasonable approach was to provide more support and more help, not criticize the student or find ways to decrease her motivation to succeed.

There needed to be a new mentality. Beatrice's hope was that the district and the state

could discard the old “checklist” way:

> Just from what I've experienced in the last couple of years, I don't know that there is a whole lot of hope, unless the parents and community try to get more involved and make some changes somehow. Or you know, someone really high up decides, you know, we are really going to fix this. It kind of feels like, just like the checklist thing. You want me to try to fix this, but you're going to tell me how to fix it, and you're going to, you know, assign me a hundred sheet check-off list.

The way to reform would be through new thinking about the definitions and causes of school failure. Another checklist was not going to improve schooling for students in high need. The state would need to ask teachers, students, and parents what they needed:

> You don't really have that much of a voice in the school system, because I definitely think it starts with the you know, the people who are involved: the students, the parents, the teachers, the administrators. That's where the information should be gathered from–a go up the ladder instead of down the ladder with curriculum reform and decision-making based on schools.

The hope for schools in Beatrice’s perspective was an entirely new way of thinking about the problem: new assumptions, new data, and new policies. Most importantly, the state would have to listen to the voices of the stakeholders.

The state and the district would also have to establish a different climate to encourage teachers agency. Beatrice identified that many teachers were targeted for expressing their opinions due to the pressure brought to bear on districts to improve performance. Beatrice spoke out a few times, particularly when she was on the school improvement team and she had to represent the opinion of her grade level. Even then, she was reticent and flushed red in the face

when she had to speak out. Otherwise, she saw retaliation against her colleagues, so she kept quiet. Beatrice was not naturally confrontational, in spite of her expertise in the classroom. For the state to draw out teacher voices, teachers would have to be encouraged to speak and overcome the status quo of top down directives.

Beatrice explained that increasing teacher agency would lead to better results in the classroom. In her early years at the "low-performing" school, she experienced excellent communication and teachers sharing helpful ideas. Promoting teacher voice and seeking advice from top teachers was a key starting point:

> I think that the district should look at some of these people and ask for their opinion and their input, and actually take that into consideration to help school improvement. Which I don't feel like that was ever done,…Well, I know, like (teacher name), her test scores were good, I think from what I've heard. I don't know that they ever listened to her own stuff, or valued her opinion either… there is something where her [sic] and I have had some success. We have to be doing something right. So, the county should, I think, listen to us when we wanna make changes or implement something, or if we want to share our opinions, or our resources that we're using, things, instructional tools or methods, or whatever we're doing in the classroom, like we should be sharing those with the rest of the school and allowed to implement them, even if it's not necessarily what the county has pre-approved.

Changing the mindset from blaming teachers to seeking their suggestions would launch more effective school improvement, especially recognizing the opinions of the high-performing teachers. Organically, teachers could spread practical methods and advance positive change in their classrooms and professional learning communities. If the teaching technique worked,

encourage it to grow.

Beatrice shared how her experiences with autonomy led her to improved teaching. She spoke of autonomy, but her ideas were more like the concept of agency. Beatrice thought teachers should be empowered to act in a positive way to help their students and schools. Their freedom to act functioned within the system of standards and school structure:

> So I think it needs to be a balance, because I know administrators have certain things that they are required to do, and certain things they are required to look for. And they have programs that are supposed to be implemented and they're there to hold the teachers accountable to make sure the teachers are teaching and not building bird houses all day. But with that said, I do think there needs to be a balance because their ultimate goal should be to support the teacher, not just to ensure the teacher is on point at all times.

Teachers needed to utilize their agency within the framework of the state standards and with the state or district goals for student learning: “I think the standards are helpful, otherwise I'm not sure how the teachers would or how the county would pick programs. I'm not sure how the teachers would know that they're being effective in teaching what they're supposed to.” She knew that some teachers needed direction. She admitted that some “don't want anybody to tell them what to do, no matter what.” That was where accountability measures were necessary. Nevertheless, there was plenty of room in the accountability system for teacher empowerment and decision-making.

When she received the freedom to teach, her results soared. Beatrice left the “low-performing” school and went to another Title One school. The administration and district left her alone and she maximized the opportunity. When her test scores came back, she had some of the

highest in the district. She credited her newfound agency and enthusiasm as driving her success:

> This is really my first experience with having complete autonomy. It did allow me to be more creative and bring in things that I thought were fun. And I think the kids really got into some of the activities we did because I had so much enthusiasm for them. I really feel like since I was so excited, they were excited, too. And because of that excitement and my ability to choose things I liked, it probably made me more inclined to plan. You know, make sure I had my ducks in a row, make sure I knew what standard I was teaching, even though nobody was checking on me. I wanted to make sure I was teaching the right thing.

When given more autonomy, Beatrice reacted with agency and produced even higher outcomes. The context of her teaching changed and her students were the beneficiaries. Beatrice still felt responsible for preparation and teaching standards. She taught within the state framework and used her freedom to make an even more positive impact on learning.

When Beatrice could act with agency, she could be more nimble in her teaching and address student needs promptly. She contrasted her flexibility with materials with the years when the district denied her agency. She showed how she was the one in the trenches and knew what the students required:

> I'm the one in the classroom. I'm the one seeing what they're doing with the core resource. I know it's not enough. I need to pull other stuff. And those were probably the years where scores were not as high, as years where I was allowed to pull some, to pull some additional supplemental resources.

Students benefited from Beatrice's judgment and skill more when she was allowed to use them. She felt that when she had more control over her resources and her schedule, her students also had more growth and learning.

Beatrice also called for help beyond a new mindset and encouraging teacher agency. Teachers could not reform the entire system on their own. Beatrice had seen that the "low-performing" school demanded much more help than another Title One school, even though the state supplied them with the same funding:

> A low-performing school usually has the same resources that a lot of other schools have. Like for example, the school I am at is completely different but it's a Title One school too, so you know (the "low-performing" school) and my school probably have some similar resources. But the school I'm at now does not have near the need for those resources that a school like (the "low-performing" school) or like a low-performing school truly needs.

The state had to increase the funding for the "low-performing" schools to address the magnitude of challenges. Beatrice recommended more pre-kindergarten options, more afterschool programs, more tutors, reading interventionists, and counselors.

Her primary suggestion was to reduce class size to 15 students maximum to cut down on behavior issues. Beatrice explained:

> ...behavior is an issue. It's a distraction. It's causing loss of instruction in the classroom. Class sizes are too big, you know. These are things that I hear constantly, I mean just over and over again. When will someone listen to the people who were in the trenches?

The state did not have class size limits for fourth or fifth grade. Beatrice has tried to teach with thirty students in her classroom before and struggled. During COVID, she was able to teach with

few rules at all as she only had 8-10 students in her class per day. She saw the difference small classes can make for students who are in need. Beatrice listed many options for the state to find ways to support schools. Smaller class size and other proposals notwithstanding, the critical first step was to reassess the school grading system. Beatrice called for a complete reconsideration of the process of blaming teachers for student proficiency. She argued that the state should adopt a new mindset of listening to teachers, promoting teacher agency, and supporting schools rather than labeling them failures.

Sarah

Sarah grew up in southern California before moving to North Carolina and finishing high school. Her family immigrated to the United States from Mexico and sacrificed for Sarah to be a first-generation college student. Sarah felt a strong sense of responsibility to her family to be an effective teacher. She explained, "I grew up in a home where I was pushed…, 'Okay, we have been through all of this for you to have a better life. Now you have to take advantage of the opportunities that we have offered you.'" She overcame many challenges to succeed in high school and college and embodied a fierce commitment to help her students rise above their circumstances. Three themes emerged from conversations with Sarah about her ten years at a "low-performing" school. First, Sarah's high expectations and strong grade level team led to her agency and high-performance. Second, Sarah viewed the district implementation of the "low-performing" schools policy as utterly ineffective and suspiciously wondered if the failing policy was intentional. Third, Sarah saw clear solutions for "low-performing" schools including a culture shift to trust and common sense.

High Expectations and a Strong Grade Level Team Led to Agency and High-Performance

Sarah shared repeatedly how her high expectations led to her students learning at high

levels. She experienced the joy of seeing her students learn, even if her students came to her classroom far behind state standards. Sarah viewed their deficits as an opportunity:

> I fell in love with teaching and I just feel like it's a very rewarding profession. Just to see where your kids begin, and just to see where they end. I know that a lot of teachers feel discouraged whenever they see how low their kids are. But for me it's just like there's a lot of room for growth. So I feel like the lower they come to me, the more room for growth there is.

The opportunities for student growth motivated Sarah to push her students. She learned from her students that they had been through difficult times but she held fast to the same commitments her parents had given her. She realized if she held students accountable to a high standard, they would exceed what anyone expected:

> a lot of the stories that I learned from my kids start shaping me until like, okay, well, you know, just because you come from a family where your dad is in jail,
>
> and you were taken away from your mom, or you grew up on drugs, or that kind of stuff…Does that mean that you weren't gonna be anybody when you grow up? I feel like I believe in every single one of my kids, and I have high expectations…I'll have kids that would come to me and say, “Well, I'm a bad kid. Well, I'm not good at reading. Well, I'm not good at math,” and I would tell them, “Well, in my classroom we don't say that. In my classroom, we're going to work hard.” So, I just feel like starting to hold high expectations for all of my kids. So, I love my kids but it, wasn’t like they're gonna come, and I'm going to be like, you know, “It's okay. You don't have to do this, you know”...I just felt like everybody or every single kid had to be given that opportunity just because they come from a rough family situation didn’t mean that we were going to be like, “Oh,

> well, this kid isn't going nowhere." So, I just feel like that has motivated me a lot like, "Okay, well, you can do it. Like I'm gonna push you and…, I'm gonna push you until you can give me everything," because I know, they can do more than what they really show or want us to know.

She was determined to drive her students to excel and grow beyond what others would have imagined. Other teachers may have let students slack off or quietly fall through the cracks, but Sarah would insist every student took their hood off, stayed awake, paid attention, and finished their work.

In Sarah's experience, classroom management followed right behind her high expectations. While other teachers started with the academic standards first and then tried to keep order in the classroom, Sarah started with learning habits and procedures:

> I feel like the first step is for you to have high expectations, and your classroom management. Whenever you get those things down, or whenever you have those two things, then you can move on to, okay, what am I gonna do to teach the standards? Or how am I going to make sure that my students are, you know, understanding or doing well on this standard?

Other teachers were impressed with how quiet it was in Sarah's class during instruction. She related that her high expectations helped with the management of students paying attention, following phonics lessons, and contributing to discussions.

Sarah learned many of her methods from fellow teachers on her grade level. She credited her teammates, "a lot of the things that I have learned have been from PLC." She grew very close to her colleagues and they became close friends. After a decade, she decided to leave but she described her emotional connections when she said goodbye, "I cried and I cried and I

cried,…because it was really hard for me to leave. Like I love that place. I love the friends that I had made, the friendships, the family." One aspect of the intimacy developed as she worked with veteran teachers that shared productive strategies even with those on other grade levels. In her first year, the experienced teachers told her:

> [this] is your first-year teaching. We're gonna hand everything to you. We're gonna help you. We're gonna hold your hand. We're going to share all the lesson plans, resources, everything. But, the second year we expect you to, you know, help us out, because you'll have, you know, at least you would have a year of experience with the curriculum, with the students, with the school.

The veteran teachers had a reciprocal plan. We help you survive your first year, then you help us thrive in years to come. Sarah felt that in her upcoming years, she would need to make sure that she did "something too, for the grade level team."

Sarah explained how collaborating well, teachers could help each other strategize and their students learn more. She described how her professional learning community analyzed data from assessment results:

> we would just go over them and you know, we would look at the whole grade level and then we would be like, "Okay, can I see mine? Can I see how, you know, we did, just each class? And I mean I don't think…I have never worked with a teacher who does not want to share their scores. They're gonna be like, "Oh, well, we didn't do so well here. We did great here."…I feel like whenever we would get our data like, we always share with one another like, "Oh, my kids, like 60% were proficient on this standard or 80% or I think we need to reteach this standard because only 20%..." You know, "How did your

> kids do?" And then we like to discuss because we want to know if this is happening across the grade level.

Sarah portrayed her colleagues as open and willing to share data and discuss ways to improve student learning or class performance. Teachers sat together, trusted each other, and were willing to risk sharing ideas and how their students did on tests–these habits were essential to Sarah's success in the classroom.

Sarah began to take a leadership role at her "low-performing" school and helped other classrooms be successful. She shared more of her ideas with her professional learning communities and she accepted the principal's request that she move from a primary grade to a tested grade. As she began to help her students prepare to pass the end of grade tests, she felt the responsibility to have her students perform well as now they represented the entire school. She translated at parent nights and during parent conferences for Spanish speaking families. As veteran teachers left the school and Sarah felt like the school was going "downhill," she stepped into a leadership role on the school improvement team and advised the principal on personnel decisions. Sarah's experience with high expectations and effective learning team propelled her into agentic leadership roles schoolwide, where she encountered difficulties with county plans to fix "low-performing" schools.

District Implementation of the "Low-Performing" Schools Policy: Ineffective and Intentional

Sarah taught at the "low-performing" school until she could not take the pressure any more. When she began teaching–the same year the "low-performing" schools policy went into place–her team was anchored by strong and experienced teachers who worked well together. As the years went on, those veterans gradually left the school until all the original teachers had

moved elsewhere. Many of the teachers remaining were new to the profession or international teachers from other countries. As Sarah reflected on the state policy and district implementation of the low-performing schools policy, she concluded it was not working at all and suspected it was designed to fail.

After she left the school for another Title One school, she learned that not all Title One schools were the same. Her experience at the new school was unlike hers at the "low-performing" school. She had agency in her classroom and in her school to speak up for school improvement. Teaching at the old "low-performing" school was such a struggle, she was determined not to let her new school slip into "low-performing" status. When her new principal warned that the school might drop to a D or F on the school performance grade, Sarah insisted the school redouble its efforts to avoid assignment as "low-performing."

> Now that I'm at (school name), like, we get so much freedom compared to where I was at ("low-performing" school). I feel like when you're a low-performing school like the whole, everybody from the county looks at you, and they're like, "Okay, well, this is the way I want you to teach these kids how to read. Or this is how I want you to teach math and I'm gonna come back and I'm gonna come back and see if you're doing it the way that we're telling you to do it." I feel that there's no freedom for us to adapt the curriculum to our student needs…I tell the teachers at (school name), "We don't want to be labeled as low-performing," and I think we are at a C. But it's like, you guys don't know how it is or how the county treats these schools and these teachers.

The district had adopted a direction that to help schools they would tell teachers what to do and then closely supervise compliance. This pressure and resulting negative school climate led Sarah, and many others, to leave the "low-performing" school.

The state set the “low-performing” schools policy and then the district proceeded to drive the schools “downhill,” according to Sarah. The initial district and state assumptions started with placing blame for “low-performance” on teachers and then proceeding to “punish” them, in her eyes. She explained how the district thought they would help schools by telling the teachers what to do. When matters or scores did not improve, the district would institute more changes, but they would be “really not making it better.” In fact, “whatever the county tries to do, just makes things worse.” Sarah clarified when she told of the competition for teaching positions at the “low-performing” school years ago and how the state performance grade system and decisions by the county have contributed to the teacher shortage at “low-performing” schools:

> it was just hard, because everybody wanted to be there, and all of a sudden, and there's tons of positions in schools like (“low-performing” school) and (“low-performing” school), and (“low-performing” school) and (“low-performing” school). It's just sad because that label is making teachers leave the profession because they're treating teachers as if they don't know what they're doing or like, “Oh, well, you are not doing it right. That's why your kids are not passing EOGs. So, this is how you do it.” So basically, they're, they're giving them, they’re making them robots. Like, “Okay, this is what you have to do. And you have to do it exactly like we're saying. And we're gonna come and watch you do it.”

The district treated teachers “like they don’t know what they are doing,” blaming them for school failure, and subsequently trying to make them into “robots” who just do what they are told to do. By eliminating teacher agency, “things are worse and worse like every year,” in Sarah’s eyes. “It's not getting better, we're not getting out of the low-performing status,” she said.

The district reduced teacher agency in the classroom and concurrently moved to weaken

grade level teams. For example, the state and the district created incentives for teachers whose students performed well on the end of grade tests in grades three through five. Sarah saw this plan backfire as the bonus plan created disincentives to collaborate:

> I feel like some teachers just don't want to share. I feel like sometimes when it goes to the upper levels it gets a little competitive, especially with those bonuses that they give. It's like, "Well, I'm gonna keep it to myself because I want to, I want to get like"… in fourth and fifth grade, I think they do bonuses for math and reading. I think third grade, it's only reading. So, some teachers just don't like to share. They just keep everything private, and I feel it's very important for us to share with one another, so we can improve the school performance as a whole, and not only your grade level.

The merit pay or bonus plan increased competition and diminished the quality teamwork that had been the cornerstone of Sarah's high-performance. She continued to do well but saw other teachers struggle. Policies like bonuses for end of grade test scores deteriorated the quality of instruction at the "low-performing" school and agency for school improvement.

Another faulty assumption by the school district was that students at the "low-performing" school should receive the same lessons at the same pace as other schools. Certainly, some students were on grade level and teachers should provide that instruction. Nevertheless, the county tried to micromanage daily lesson plan delivery and Sarah countered, "I feel like they think, like one size fits all and that's not the way it works." Sarah contrasted the different schools and students across her district:

> when sometimes they try to make something mandatory across the board or a curriculum or a scripted lesson, you know, it doesn't work. Why? Because we have…like even, like, (school name) is a Title One school, ("low-performing" school name) is a Title One

> school, but it's like, completely, like, it's different types of Title One, like it's not the same and I'm sure if I [go] to (other school name), I'll see, you know, a big difference between our (school name) students and (school name). So just, you know, just (district name) county has such a diversity, you know, of students that attend and our parents in our families that we're not going to… we can't just teach the same lesson, you know, to every single student that attends (district name) because it's just not gonna work. It's not gonna meet their needs. I feel like we need to teach to their needs.

The diverse backgrounds and different levels of learning English rendered many elements of standardized instruction ineffective for students at "low-performing" schools.

The district and the state both disrespected teachers and created untenable levels of frustration. The state performance grade was degrading to schools and families. Sarah felt when the state assigned failing grades,

> the community, would be like, "Oh, well, that school sucks," or "Those teachers suck," well, you know, we just don't… It's awful to have that label, and I hate that they have to assign or give a letter grade to schools because it's, I mean, it's awful.

Sarah described the top-down process of labeling schools "low-performing" and then micromanaging them as a "chain reaction" of pressure on top of teachers at "low-performing" schools. The state further demeaned teachers with "joke" proposed pay raises of $20 for veteran teachers. Meanwhile, teachers like Sarah had to endure parents "cussing her out" and students who "put their hands" on her and threw paper at her and the district telling the school not to suspend students excessively. Just getting through an ordinary day at the "low-performing" school was a challenge: "at the end of the day it was like, '(exhales deep breath) We made it! We made it!'" The "low-performing" schools policy encouraged teacher attrition and principal

replacement without recognizing that district implementation may be the true cause of school failure. Sarah summarized her feelings:

> I think the change of admin every two years, now I don't know why they did that, but it just feels like they just keep changing people around, and I just feel another big one is the behavior problems. I feel like the teachers just can't do it. They just felt too stressed.
>
> I had a teacher reach out to me in the middle of the school year because they're like, "I'm just done. I don't know what to do. Like, this is ridiculous."... like it was the behavior, too, but now it's like the county, the county is punishing the school for students not exceeding growth or being a low-performing school. It's like, okay. Well, now, the teachers feel punished, and that teacher was like, "I can't do it. There's always a person like almost every day watching me. What I do, and to see what I'm doing, right or wrong." I know that there was a point where one of the content teachers was actually typing a detailed lesson plan for this teacher. So, I feel like teachers feel that they're not valued, that they, I mean, that they don't know what they're doing. And…they just go somewhere else, like to a non-low-performing school or non-Title One. I feel like what the county is doing to them, because of the label low-performing, is a one of the big reasons. And then the second one is because of the behavior problems. And there's, I don't feel like there's really nothing being done about the behavior… at least, when I was there. I feel like I was like, I had a student who came and try to hit me, or threw a paper at my face, and like nothing was done, and for me that is like, wow, if I can't have a child respect me, and not have serious consequences, then I think I need a like I need to go somewhere else.

The district and principals did not support teachers including high-performing teachers in some

cases when they were disrespected or even assaulted by students. They treated teachers like they were at fault or to blame and that “they don’t know what they are doing.” The district punished teachers, stripped them of their agency, and encouraged staff to script lessons for teachers. The increased pressure and stress coupled with diminished agency led to teachers leaving the “low-performing” school until it could hardly find replacement teachers.

The steady duress of the county and the state led Sarah to question whether the harmful effects wrought upon “low-performing” schools and their teachers were intentional. She thought the district justified its decisions by rationalizing that they were assisting schools: “I just feel like the county sees low-performing schools and then they quickly start thinking like, ‘Oh, we need to help our teachers,’ but to them, helping teachers is telling them exactly what to do.” The assumption that the teachers were to blame led the district to micromanage day to day instruction. As Sarah explained earlier, this failed to meet student needs which led to continued poor performance. As a response, “I feel like they're just gonna put more pressure on the teachers. That's all. I feel like that's just their easy, easy way out.” Rather than doing the hard work of examining the root causes of low test scores, the district would punish the teachers even more. Sarah wondered how the district could not notice all the teachers who transferred out of the “low-performing” schools and mused whether “they don't really want them to stay.” Sarah questioned whether it was the better for the state coffers if the veteran teachers left and the state would not have to pay for “all those years of retirement.” “It seems like they're against public schools,” Sarah said, “Because I feel like they're just taking away all the money from public schools. I feel like, that we need the money and public schools to improve.” Meanwhile, the state continued to label schools with failing grades. Sarah saw this through a teacher and parent’s eyes: “Oooh. That school’s an F. Oh, that's a bad school. You don't want to go there.” Sarah

argued that the plan of the "low-performing" schools policy was obvious in its results: to drive expensive teachers away, make students and families want to avoid such schools, and save money rather than truly fix or support or invest in these schools and communities.

Clear Solutions for "Low-Performing" Schools Including a Culture Shift to Trust and Common Sense

If the state or district really wanted to improve the schools, Sarah had lots of suggestions. Sarah saw clear solutions for low-performing schools including changing the approach from one of blame to one of trust and common sense or reason. The state found the teachers and principals at fault for not achieving at higher levels. North Carolina turnaround school policy called for teacher replacement and principal firings. Sarah felt the state and the district should recognize the many needs that students brought to school and their lack of preparation in "low-performing" schools compared with higher-income schools.

To make up for the student readiness needs and many students learning a second language, Sarah recommended more money for "low-performing" schools to pay for additional teacher assistants, mentors, tutors, after school offerings, and small classes:

> Smaller class sizes for…K-5, not only, you know, well there's a cap for K-3, but that's not even, like we need smaller classes. Like I wanna say 15 the most. Have a teacher assistant for each classroom. And provide tutors for the third, the fourth and fifth grade. And just have more money to be able to do, you know, Girls on the Run, and maybe, you know, more extracurricular activities.

Fourth and fifth grade classes lack a cap, so that would be an immediate first step. More personnel will give students more attention and more personal connections to school. Afterschool activities would develop student interests and give them more motivation to be at

school and involved in academics.

Another shift would be to strengthen school culture through improved teacher agency, collaboration and trust. The state and districts would have to trust teachers to do the job they were hired to do and encourage teachers to work together to improve all classes in a grade level and the entire school. Teacher agency would be the conduit through which this improvement would flow. Sarah pointed out that districts would have to commit to strong administration in each school. Administrators would continue to develop trust and a positive culture that created, as Sarah said, a "second family." Recalling the close-knit collegiality of her first professional learning community, she underscored, "it wasn't like, it's a job." Sarah said "I cried and I cried and I cried" when she had to leave because her fellow teachers were her comrades with whom she had worked to make the school better. That was the element that the district had torn from the school. That mindset needed to be replanted.

Ultimately, Sarah saw the way to improve "low-performing" schools as a common sense approach. She explained that teachers in "low-performing" schools were paid the same as teachers in other Title One schools or even high-income schools, but had more challenges to manage including disrespectful student behavior and parental attitudes. The "low-performing" label and turnaround policies from the state only increased the levels of disrespect and disincentive to work there. Then, the state created a "chain reaction" where it pressured districts to treat teachers like "robots" and moved principals frequently, destabilizing the schools. Why would a reasonable teacher teach in such a school? Sarah clarified:

> As a teacher when you think about it, if you're getting paid the same, working in a school like (school name) and you're getting paid the same as working in a low-performing school and you have all these behavior problems and these kids being disrespectful at you

> and parents like cussing you out and blaming you for everything that is happening to their child and then you have the county looking at what you're doing every time you turn around, then as a teacher…or I'll tell you like, I'd rather work at a school where they're going to leave me alone and where I can actually teach and then enjoy what I'm doing.

Considering the high-performing teacher's perspective, the solution to "low-performing" schools was simple: make the school attractive for skilled teachers through supportive administration and district personnel; promote teacher agency so teachers could respond to student needs and modify instruction; and empower teachers to work together to spread the most effective teaching techniques. The state would need to reverse current policies to increase funding, personnel, trust, and teacher agency to turnaround "low-performing" schools.

Sergio

Sergio began his teaching career after first serving in combat with the United States Army during the Iraq War. He enlisted just before 9/11 and rose to the rank of sergeant before he graduated from college in North Carolina with a minor in Africana studies. As a Black male who grew up in Washington, D. C., Sergio moved to North Carolina in his teens and brought a different perspective to our time together during the three interviews.

Over four and a half hours of conversation, Sergio shared many stories with energy and enthusiasm. Three topics composed his primary themes. First, Sergio became a high-performing teacher through his passion to help his students overcome their circumstances. Second, Sergio felt some teachers and district officials worked against school reform through, in his words, a "sadistic" mentality. Third, the state policies towards "low-performing" schools fostered "segregation," according to Sergio's experience.

A High-Performing Teacher Through his Passion to Help his Students

Sergio's army experience fueled his passion and taught him how working as a team furthered success. He told stories of being a noncommissioned officer and leading physical fitness training for overweight soldiers. He shared memories of developing expertise at weekly "sergeant time" where fellow noncommissioned officers shared technical and leadership skills to broaden senior soldier capabilities. His most relevant lessons were how to be a teammate and how to collaborate on joint goals. He remembered how being "forced to work together" in his unit led to "brother and sisterhood camaraderie" that turned the soldiers into a "family." As a close-knit unit, his soldiers pulled together as a team to complete their missions in Iraq and win the war.

After his military service, Sergio overcame hurdles to pursue his dream of becoming an elementary teacher. He worked as a teacher assistant at the intermediate level for a few years before making the move to teach at a "low-performing" school. He struggled in his first year to teach the curriculum and prepare his students properly for the end of grade tests. In his second year, however, he received support from the district as one district official saw his potential and sent reading and math facilitators to model lessons for him for a week. Seeing exactly how it should be done propelled Sergio into the ranks of a high-performing teacher. "Someone watching over me" helped Sergio master the material and instructional techniques and receive awards for his personal growth and his students' improvement and engagement.

Sergio's passion fueled his agency in the classroom. His drive developed early in his life. In high school, he his energy found expression in involvement in numerous activities:

> I made straight A's and B's through high school. I was one of the most involved people in my high school. I was on student council all four years. I was in marching band. I was a

> drum major. I was on the newspaper staff. I was an editor, one of the editors of my newspaper, my junior year in high school. I did like all these really cool things.

Sergio continued his highly motivated ways in his Army service. He summarized, “I am a United States Army veteran that has been to war, that has gone through boot camp, that has had to endure situations that a lot of these teachers will never have to experience.” The Army inspired him to press on no matter the challenges:

> it's kind of like no matter how hard it gets keep on going don't stop. If you need to slow down, slow down, but don't stop. If you need to crawl, crawl, but don't stop. If you need to take a nap, take a nap, wakeup, and then get going again.

In the “low-performing” school, Sergio kept up the pace, regardless of any setbacks. His attitude was able to inspire others and set the daily tone. He explained that on a scale from one to 10, his positivity was always top notch:

> I'm always on 10. 10, 10, 10, 10, 10, 10, 10! “Good morning! How are you doing? Today's gonna be a good day. Dah dah dah dah dah. All right, guys, you know, turn to the dah dah dah dah dah, five, four, three, two, one. Let's do this. All right. Let's line up. We're gonna head out dah dah dah. All right, you know. That's me. The entire day, and at the end of the day, I'm so used to it now. I'm conditioned.

Sergio’s battle-hardened enthusiasm inspired his agency in the classroom and provided the foundation of his high-performance. It also carried over to leadership in the school.

Sergio served on the Positive Behavior Intervention Support committee. He had learned the importance of parent engagement in his classroom instruction and he sought to broaden family participation across the school. He proposed an idea where the school would feed the family members first and then they would come to the classroom for a demonstration lesson

from the teacher. The students would act as assistants to help the parents complete the math problems. The committee decided to host the event and Sergio described it as a tremendous success with many families in attendance and a new appreciation for the subject matter, the teachers' dedication, and the students' learning.

Sergio's passion helped his students overcome many obstacles, academic and social. He embodied a commitment to upholding the humanity of his students which undergirded his high-performance. He explained that:

> My goal in school is to make sure, number one, that this student is working and learning in a safe learning environment. Number two: that this student is able to engage in a classroom where they can have experiences outside of sitting in a chair and writing all day. That there is some kind of STEM, or STEAM is what we call it now, experience where students can have hands-on experience in math.

Sergio prioritized safety and engagement. He also recognized the challenges that the students had to surpass just to walk into the classroom daily. He described that his students "live in communities where they hear gunshots. They live in communities where their parents are selling meth, drugs." Sergio's students grew up among "hard adults," some of whom were "alcoholics," in "jail for abuse," or essentially "non-existent." He learned from his students that,

> they craved love. They craved attention. They craved learning in an environment where they did not feel lesser than (others). Even though I did have students that were on like, you know, a 504 plan, that they were part of the EC program, they didn't wanna hear that. They don't wanna know that they may learn differently. They just wanted to know that they could learn: "I'm a part of a group of students in my class that we're all learning together and I did get pulled out for small groups. But when I went back to (Sergio's)

> class. He made me feel so welcome."

Sergio's students felt empowered and special in his class. They admitted to Sergio that they could not read or did not know how to write. Sergio underscored the importance of understanding "the emotional aspect of a student that's in the classroom." He continued:

> Take into consideration that there are learning gaps. Consider the fact that they have, or are living in currently, situations where they may be, they don't know if they're gonna get food. They don't know if they're in a safe learning environ–place to live. They don't know if they're going to be able to see their parents in the next year. And I take all that into consideration.

The strength of his character and his understanding of his students' struggles gave Sergio a unique perspective on teacher agency and his impact on learning, but also student spirit. It also stoked his passion to defend his students and speak out against anyone who did not have the social-emotional interest of students at heart.

Teachers and District Officials Hindered School Reform Through a "Sadistic" Mentality

Sergio experienced interactions with colleagues that led him to see them as highly "unmotivated" with poor agency. He witnessed teachers "flake out" by not showing up to work at crucial times of the year. He saw teachers that were "lazy" and spent time on their phones rather than being present with their students. They viewed the job as just a paycheck. He criticized, "My job is not a part-time job. My job is a full-time job and I don't work at Rack Room Shoes." Sergio explained that "an unmotivated teacher is going to be a teacher that complains a lot." He went on, "Oftentimes, a lot of educators…the things that they complain about are things that they can fix themselves." Rather than employ effective agency, like Sergio,

many of his colleagues were more focused on finding what was wrong rather than making a positive change in the school.

Sergio's colleagues' ineffective agency made his attempts to develop and spread his agency beyond his classroom even more difficult. When Sergio attended professional learning community meetings with his grade level, he often encountered put downs and push back. When he asked for help, fellow teachers would demean him "uppity" responses and ask why he did not know already. They acted as if the effort required to help him was too much to bear. It was almost too much for him:

> When you have a classroom of students that are already… that have a lot of behaviors, and you have faculty members that kind of match those behaviors in a different way, it's unmotivating. It's unsettling. And I was beginning to hate my job. I was beginning to be one of those people that's just like, "Screw it." It wasn't the teaching. I'm like in a workplace environment, if you're not… the people that you work with, they can make your job a terrible place to work where you just wanna leave and go to a different place, like I will find another place to work at.

The work context that some of the teachers created drained Sergio and made him reconsider his decision to work there.

Sergio contrasted his experience at the "low-performing" school with teaching at summer school. He told stories about asking for help and his summer colleagues offering resources and documents readily. They shared ideas and ways to use materials. His fellow summer school teachers became his friends and his partners in caring for the students who were struggling. "I felt more at home in these last three weeks of working as an educator than I have in the last six

years that I have as an educator," Sergio said as he underscored how professional learning communities should function.

Some of his fellow teachers at the "low-performing" school not only limited his agency, but they also seemed to take pleasure in criticizing and punishing the students. Sergio witnessed teachers yelling at students and "attacking" them verbally. They overreacted over issues like how students walked down in the hallway. The teachers insisted students walk in a line silently, like in the military. Sergio complained, "these students are walking down the hallway like this," and acted like he was a robot marching stiffly. If the students talked at all, teachers and staff pounced on them and berated them for talking in line. Sergio thought it was dehumanizing and unnecessary. When he was at summer school with similar students, they were allowed more leeway to just walk down the hallways quietly and the students remained orderly and safe.

Sergio observed the strict approach in the "low-performing" school as one example of what he called a "sadistic" mentality of some teachers. The end of grade test provided an opportunity for those teachers in the "low-performing" school to demean students and treat them harshly. Many of the students did not pass and already faced the disappointment and often tears or emotional embarrassment of failure. Sergio responded with compassion and told students, "I want you to know you're still gonna do well and you're still gonna keep going and do great things." Other teachers seemed to relish in the students' failure and used it as an opportunity to further castigate the students:

> I hate the fact that there are a lot of educators that are okay with making students feel like they're being punished, just because they didn't pass the test, just because they did not, they're not proficient. And I almost feel like some educators get like a thrill out of telling students, "You didn't make it. You didn't pass, so therefore, here is your outcome."

> And I think that's weird. I think that's thoughtless. And I think that that's sadistic, to feel great about telling a student, "You didn't pass. So therefore, this is what's your outcome." It's ridiculous and I don't like that.

Sergio felt that teachers were "sadistic" when they insisted on taking a punitive attitude with students who had been labeled failures by the state and who had done their best in spite of all of the challenges of their home lives. Many had overcome absent, abusive, addicted adults to learn as much as they could. Sergio praised them for their growth and improvement.

Others emphasized that they had failed and were below proficient. Sergio explained that some teachers felt it was their responsibility to bluntly tell the elementary students that they were below standard. He felt like his colleagues were "sadistic" because they were completely unaware of the conditions his students endured. He elaborated:

> Not beating a dog when it's down. It's super important, like, if a kid is down, don't beat the like… Don't like kick 'em in the shin and say, "Well, you know you're not proficient because you failed the EOG and we need to work to get you up in proficiency." I think that that is uncalled for. In my opinion, especially for, like elementary school students, there's a way to deliver it, and I know that there are some hot heads out there that (say), "You need to make sure you let the students know that they're not proficient. And we need, they need, you need to work on…" Like, yeah, I get it.

Sergio wanted all of his students to be proficient. But he also knew that if a fourth grader started the year at the first grade level and made it to a third grade level, that was cause for celebration. In the mind of other teachers and the state, the child was a failure and needed to be reminded of that callously.

Sergio saw some of the district officials as “hot heads” who increased the pressure on teachers for students to pass with little understanding of how to make that possible in “low-performing” schools. Sergio was a high-performing teacher whose students exceeded growth expectations. Yet, he still experienced the pressure from the district and administrators who did not recognize the students’ humanity. He mocked their opinion:

> “I don't care where they come from! I don't care what they're going through! We need to make sure that they're growing! I don't care! You need to reach the student! You need to be doing this! You need to…on, on, on! (making a clapping noise) You need to be doing this as an educator! Don't stop. Don't stop. Don't stop!”

Sergio conveyed the intensity of the demands from the district office and how they really felt about the students and their lack of respect for their diversity.

The district certainly did not honor Sergio’s agency either, even with all that he had accomplished in the classroom. Sergio gave an example of how he would pull small groups of students to work with him in the classroom depending on their specific academic needs according to the standard they were learning that day. District officials who were looking at outdated data would come to his class and tell him he was working with the wrong students:

> those content people from the office...It's those people that come in and see who's sitting with me, and they're looking, and they're like, “Well, you should be pulling that (other student).”
>
> And I look at her, and I'm like, “No, I'm not. This person is here because they don't understand what I'm teaching this week. So therefore, I'm going to work with them in this group so that we can…

(facilitator): “Okay, just want to make sure that you make sure that you get them… (urgently speaking)

“No problem. I got you. I got you.” (laughs) That's what I mean.

Sergio had to laugh about the facilitators not respecting his ability to determine who needed extra help. He felt the pressure from them but was able to retain his agency in the classroom, in this case as he knew better than the facilitator.

According to Sergio, district personnel seemed to enjoy being in power and making teaching harder for teachers rather than finding ways to support “low-performing” schools. Even when the grade level professional learning community was trying to work together with “camaraderie,” district pride and power ignored teacher agency:

> I need for people in the county office if they are and instructional facilitators, if they are…the people that write the curriculum for all of (district name) because one of those people love to tell us on a daily basis when we have our grade level planning periods that, “I'm in charge of, I'm in charge though. You know, I'm the one that puts the math in there so you want to do it like this.”
>
> Okay I get it. I understand who you are. However, I would like it more, if you would let the fourth grade teachers slash fifth grade teachers, take the reins of our PLC, and actually be able to have those conversations. “What are you doing? How did you show this problem? What are some other modifications I can make to these students because I've got students that are in EC and they don't get it. What are you doing?”
>
> Let us have those conversations instead of, (impersonating district official) “Well, remember you know, I'm the person that makes…you know this is what we need to do.”

> We get it. Thank you. Do you want, do you want balloons? Do you want me to get you some Starbucks? Do you want me to get you this? We get it. I know you. I know. I know. I know who you are. But we're working in the classroom. And this is the kind of camaraderie when you're gone, we still are a bubble of math teachers that still need to build from each other. Yeah, I know you work… Yeah, so you're cute. I know. I know. I know you do. But you're not in the classroom with us. You're not the one struggling. We need to have a conversation and we want you to be there for us to help us and show us what are some modifications. What are some other things or if I have a student that can't learn, based off what we're teaching, how can we treat small groups? This student that has these behaviors, what can I do? How can, what are some things that I can use to control the students because they have ADHD? They're supposed to be on medicine. They're not on their medicine. These students have parents who don't care about them and they know it. How can I reach these? What can I do? Because you're supposed to be the professionals. You're supposed, you got this degree and that's why (district name) helped you. So why don't you help me out?

Sergio illustrated how the district personnel were more concerned with being in charge, with seeing their plans implemented, than with helping the teachers address the needs of their students. Sergio and his professional learning community wanted to act with agency, to "take the reins," and to have instructional discussions. Instead of being part of the solution for "low-performing" schools, the district facilitators made the team's work more difficult.

In some ways, their attitude towards teachers was similar to the "sadistic" approach that Sergio had witnessed from some teachers towards their students. He recalled district facilitators making his teammates in his professional learning community feel defeated, rather than inspiring

them to improved performance:

> Motivation. It would be so nice. We don't like to always feel, like me personally, I don't like to always feel so beat down when I have a PLC. Because I walk away from some PLCs sometimes and I'm just, I'm unmotivated. And I get it. Students aren't growing. This is what's going on. But when you're beating a horse when it's already dead... It doesn't help us out. And 9 times out of 10, these people from the county office that are coming to be a part of our PLCs that are part of our planning, they already know this. But for some reason they feel their flex. It's sadistic. It's like sadistic behavior. (imitating district official): "I know you're feeling bad, but I'm gonna make you feel *worse*. Ah, ah, ah, ah!!! Yeah, take a look at these Schoolnet scores. Look at that. Look at that. Look at that. You're doing bad. I know you're feeling bad, but I'm here to make you feel worse. Ahhhh! Yeah, baby!"
>
> And then walk away feeling so good about themselves. Meanwhile, we have teachers that are going through it already. We had teachers that have students flipping over desks. And I look at them and I say, "Please walk away. Please just walk away." And then when we get into our PLC and they are like, "Well, I didn't like how you handled that, Mr. (teacher name). You know what I do?"
>
> I take the high road, ignore. It's sadistic and they know what they're doing. They are just, "Oh, I'm gonna make it feel worse. Yeah! You said he wanna fight you? I know he's not learning. Yeah! I'm gonna come in and do this. Yeah!"
>
> Get off my back, you know?

The teachers in the "low-performing" school regularly had students with extremely disruptive behavior like tipping over desks. Teachers like Sergio tried to act with agency to address the

situation only to be criticized by the district officials who did not understand the severity of the troubles the student was trying to manage. In many cases, no help from the district would have been better than discouraging the teachers and making them “feel worse.” These so-called “facilitators” did not make the teachers' instruction easier, but were quick with “sadistic” insults that stymied school progress and teacher agency.

State Policies Towards “Low-Performing” Schools Fostered “Segregation”

The “sadistic” approaches at the district level might have derived from the discriminatory policies of the state towards “low-performing” schools. Sergio felt the state was biased against students’ socioeconomic status. He had experienced “low-performing” as a euphemism for poverty. He viewed the state approach as racially biased and ultimately promoting “segregation.”

Sergio felt the state equated “low-performing” with high-poverty. He believed that the state knew that “low-performing” was correlated with socioeconomic status. Sergio shared that “when people say, like those low-performance and poverty level, they use that a lot in the same sentences or in the same conversations.” People recognized that they have the same meaning: “low-performing” meant low-income.

Therefore, Sergio viewed the solution for “low-performing” schools and their students as building bridges to improvement and protecting them from harmful labels which smeared communities. Sergio gave an example of how sending students to summer camp was a way to help them perform better in the coming year rather than a way to punish them or emphasize that they failed the end of grade test. He explicated about “low-performing” schools:

> First of all, I don't like that term. I would prefer that we didn't say that out in the open, because I feel like there's like, negative connotation that comes with that.

> It's kind of like…I'm currently teaching (summer) reading camp. There are students that are involved in the camp that may not have passed the EOG, but however, it's not my job to say, "You're in this camp because you didn't pass the EOG." Because it's not about that. We are filling in some gaps of those students that unfortunately may not have been proficient on the EOG. They may have made growth, however, they just didn't pass the EOG, but we're also going to allow them to proceed to the next grade. But this is kind of like that little filler, to kind of like, bridge those gaps that needed… to work on some phonics, some, you know, to work on some reading, to get them to the next grade, so when they show up in the next grade, they're prepared. They're good. Low-performance, saying low-performance is like saying, in my opinion, because you're poor, because you're poor, and you come, you live in this area where you don't have much, it means that maybe, unfortunately, you're not able to learn as well, or you won't get as much or experience an activity throughout learning as some other schools that are not in that umbrella of low-performance.

Sergio argued that the way to improved student learning was through focusing on growth opportunities and positive ways to turn end of grade performance into a bridge to success. The state was taking the opposite tack and degrading students by labeling them due to their socioeconomic status while also casting slurs against the communities that raised such children. The state knew where these students came from and then underscored their circumstances by labeling them "low-performing."

Although the state was quick to disparage such schools as "low-performing," North Carolina leaders showed their lack of experience in "low-performing" schools and their communities. According to Sergio, "low-performing" schools remained in that status from

administrators and state officials who failed to know the students and so they failed to meet their needs:

> I was able to take time with these students, and learn about where they came from. Consider where they came from and take into consideration that their parents are dirt bags. Their parents are in jail. They're living with their grandparents or they're living with friends of the family and I could finally sit with these students and listen to them.
>
> "(Teacher name), I don't know how to write."
>
> "(Teacher name), I can't read."
>
> "(Teacher name), I don't live with my parents and the only thing I can do is be on my Chromebook, or on my computer."
>
> And I'm like, this is why America is failing. (clapping hands emphatically). This is why America is failing. This is why America is failing and this is why these big, big ball and shot callin' hot dogs that are in administration, they forget once upon a time you were a teacher. Give me a break!

Sergio knew his students and where they came from. He shouted that America was failing because the nation neglected to address the needs of students and their families in certain communities. North Carolina educational leaders did not understand the backgrounds of the students in "low-performing" schools and they did not remember what it was like to teach them, if they ever did. State leaders designated schools as "low-performing" because they were ignorant of the impact of socioeconomic factors on schooling.

Sergio emphasized the importance of comprehending the scope of the challenges for teachers in "low-performing" schools. He begged,

> I need someone that understands, like, the emotional aspect of a student that's in the classroom and what these low-performance schools are going through. You talk about low-performance schools. I feel like a lot of these people that are working on the state level brush over performance schools.

To improve schools, decision-makers would have to have a better understanding of the needs of the students and schools. Instead, the state named the schools "low-performing" and then took little action to support them.

Sergio believed racial discrimination was a factor in neglecting to help "low-performing" schools. He envisioned that the only way to save "low-performing" schools was to bring attention to them through wealthy Black leaders or White philanthropists. He imagined that someone,

> in the limelight that has money to go to this little low-performing school, preferably White that's a head of something with a Brooks Brothers suit on and a little comb over to say, "Ar, ar, ar, ar, ar. They are great. They are doing things here." And then leave.

Sergio joked that people would pay attention if some rich White guy in a fancy suit would shine a light on "low-performing" schools. Otherwise, the powers that be would overlook students of color and their circumstances and schools would just keep on being "low-performing."

Sergio did speculate whether this was part of a larger plan to recreate "segregation" in North Carolina. As a Black male, he knew what segregation looked like and he saw designating certain schools as a way to discriminate against students of color and separate the races:

> I'm still trying to understand how you can assign a school and like an A through F. I feel like it's kind of like…What can I like equate it to? It's like, segregation. I don't know. I mean, I understand how segregation works. I 100 percent fully understand how

> segregation works… I do know that there are some teachers that will quit a position to move to a school that is like an A-plus school or a B school, just so that way, they don't have to be a part of a school that is a D or an F. And I don't understand that mindset because I'm like, "So you're running away?"
>
> There are people out there doing this. There are people doing this, 100%. And I don't understand that mindset and it's almost like a negative connotation.

Sergio saw the state policies of labeling "low-performing" schools as a way to drive some teachers away from certain schools and by extension, some families, too. He saw the policies as producing negative effects on many levels including discrimination against certain communities based on their socioeconomic status and "sadistic" pressure against certain students and teachers.

Elizabeth

After raising her children, Elizabeth started teaching as a second career. As an older White female, she started in a Title One school as a teacher assistant where she taught multiple grade levels and learned how much she wanted to teach. She went back to school to obtain her teaching license and started teaching upper grades in another Title One school. After the district closed that school, she taught fifth grade in a "low-performing" school where in a few years she received a bonus for her students' growth on the end of grade reading test. Her students were also very successful in science, her favorite subject.

Elizabeth shed light on the challenges of trying to save a "low-performing" school. In her three interviews, she discussed her hopes and frustrations as she led her professional learning community and school improvement team. Elizabeth's first theme was that she succeeded as a high-performing teacher through high expectations for her students, strong relationships, and belief in student potential. Elizabeth encountered a different approach in the district's efforts to

prevent the “low-performing” school from falling to an F school. Her second theme described how the district created intolerable pressure on teachers and students that only led to a worse “mess.” Elizabeth’s third theme proclaimed that it was time for a “wakeup call” for the state.

Elizabeth Succeeded Through High Expectations, Relationships, and Belief in Student Potential

Elizabeth explained the importance of high expectations for teacher success. When she started teaching, she believed in her students’ possibilities:

> And I just jumped in with great expectations. I think that it's all about what you expect. You get mostly what you expect out of people. And kids are just people…But you have to expect a lot out of them and then you get a lot out of them.

Elizabeth’s vision set a high bar for her students and most strove to meet her standard. The state recognized her with a bonus for how much her students grew.

Elizabeth admitted she demanded hard work from her students. She demonstrated that her determined approach bore fruit, not just in fifth grade, but in life:

> I had a recent kid from (“low-performing” school) reach out to me and say I was her favorite teacher ever, which most kids didn't like me as a teacher. I was hard. I was tough. And I mean, “Don't you dare come in here and play. We're in it to win it. We are working,” you know? But it, you know, you don't do it for the popularity. I don't, I didn't. But you still don't know what kind of impact you may have made until they're in college.

Elizabeth was a high-performing teacher because she convinced her students, “We’re in it to win it.” Success required hard work and discipline. Even years on, students recognized that Elizabeth was a difference maker.

She held herself to a high standard and sought to improve daily. She practiced a regular habit of reflection about her performance:

> I do reflect a lot. I write in a journal. I do think that we need to reflect when we're that, when we make that kind of impact on a human being, I think we do need to reflect. And you can't change what you did, but you can try and do better the next day.

Elizabeth made self-improvement an essential strategy in her high performance, especially given the magnitude of trying to teach her students and help them understand the material.

Another aspect of Elizabeth's personal high expectations included her dedication to mastering the subject matter. She came to teaching later in life so she knew she had to pour over the standards and texts so she could be effective:

> When I started teaching fifth grade, I was not young. It had been a long time since I was in fifth grade. I studied. I brought books home. I brought their book home. I asked how do you do this math problem because I don't even know how to do fractions…I think you need to learn the curriculum. I think if you change grade levels, it's your job to jump in there and learn it. And again, I know not everybody has the time. But I do think that it shows when a teacher knows the curriculum. You can observe a teacher that doesn't know the curriculum versus the teacher that does. And if you don't know it, there's no way you can teach it effectively.

Elizabeth cautioned that it was obvious if a teacher was not prepared. Their results would reflect how well the teacher understood the material. One of Elizabeth's core beliefs was that teachers had to make a full commitment to the curriculum to succeed at a "low-performing" school.

Another core tenet of Elizabeth's high-performance derived from her close relationships with teammates and colleagues. She learned how she could only truly succeed through learning from her colleagues:

> Teacher collaboration is good. (Teacher name) and I worked on a problem that was on a check-in. Neither one of us could figure out how to do the math problem. We were like, "How do you do this?" We were grabbing teachers coming down the hall to come in and show us. Collaboration and finding your group to support each other even, not in just academics, but in the, "Oh my gosh. Did you say what he did today?" I think that's huge. And I think that it is a bond for life...When you're in that kind of situation and you're together that many hours, you really do… I mean, I have relationships with teachers that are very close relationships. And I think that is also a key to being a successful teacher. I don't think you can be out there on an island. I can't. Maybe it's just my personality, but I can't be successful and be out there by myself.

Elizabeth underscored the essential nature of teachers working together in order to achieve high student performance. Throughout the day, teachers might share stories about events or ways to solve a math problem. Ultimately, they needed each other and their "close relationships" to teach at a high level.

Elizabeth highlighted how professional learning communities were crucial elements for organizing relationships to improve instruction. Grade level teachers in productive professional learning communities could innovate and formulate ways to support each other:

> PLCs should be more of a time where you share good ideas…Teachers sharing ideas is huge. It needs to be more of a…maybe planning small groups? Small groups are the way to go. We have got to do better with small groups…That's when we could do, "Let me

> pull your dah dah dah dah dah, and I'll teach this math concept because I know how to do it and I'm really good at this. Let me pull those kids and it needs to be more of a, more fluid, not, "We're going to do this for the next nine weeks." "Let's try this next week and see how it works and come back and talk about it." I think it needs to be more of a sharing ideas than more of a led by people outside the classroom that are giving us duties to do.

Instead of district facilitators directing the agenda, the professional learning community should be a time to conceptualize and work together to address individual student learning needs through small groups. Elizabeth became a high-performing teacher through embracing the possibilities of her professional learning community and collaborating with colleagues, in addition to her personal habits and dedication.

Elizabeth embraced the challenge of teaching in a "low-performing" school and overcame through her belief in student potential. She felt her personal strengths were made to teach in a Title One school. She said, "I don't think I'm a good fit for anything else. I did it… I like a challenge. I love fifth grade…But I think I'm a Title One teacher." She had a special connection with the students in the "low-performing" school that she learned early on. Despite their struggles, she shared a two-way connection with her students:

> I realized that as a TA. They had my heart. I realized that when I found out that they might be poor but they're sweet kids and they appreciate me a lot. They, maybe I needed them as much as they needed me, but at the end of the day, I like to help people. And it gives me that feeling of I think they come to school because they have fun. We have fun conversations. You know, I think it was a mutual need satisfied. My kids had gone and,

> you know, it just felt good and I still enjoy that age group. I love the third, fourth, and fifth graders. So, I think I found it out as a TA, that I wanted to stay in Title One.

Elizabeth needed the invigorating and lively presence of her students. They also required someone like Elizabeth who recognized what they were up against.

Elizabeth also felt the urgency of trying to help her students rise above their circumstances. She explained, "You feel like you're making a difference. You feel like that child may not have been educated." Without her attention and belief in their potential, her students would have been consumed by failure. By the time they arrived in her fifth grade class, many had failed end of grade tests for several years. They expected to fail. Elizabeth changed that:

> I think most of them come into my classroom with a defeated attitude already, "Well, I've never passed a class before." I mean… Hope. They need a lot more hope than they have. And I want to give them the hope.

Elizabeth set high expectations and her students rose to the occasion. Their circumstances and their past did not matter to her. She was focused on success. She knew it was possible. She learned that believing in your potential would pay off. She related how "a lot of people pass the science EOG, because they believe they could. I convinced them they could. I said, 'You can do this. You can do this. I've seen it done.'" Elizabeth's belief in her students became a reality and reinforced the principles of high expectations, commitment to reflection, dedication to mastering the curriculum, and working together with your colleagues.

The District Created Intolerable Pressure That Only Led to a Worse "Mess"

Elizabeth encountered a different attitude in the way the district tried to prevent the "low-performing" school from falling to an F school. In time, Elizabeth grew tired of the "rat race" that the county personnel constructed for teachers in the "low-performing" school. She left the

school after seeing dozens of other teachers–some veteran, some high-performing–leave in droves, only to be replaced by beginning teachers, non-licensed newcomers, and international teachers. Elizabeth concluded the district created intolerable pressure on teachers that only created a worse "mess."

Elizabeth clarified the difference between teaching in a Title One school and a "low-performing" school. She had taught in Title One schools for years but still had freedom to teach and share the joy of camaraderie with her fellow teachers. She remembered having fun and enjoying the support of the community and business partners. She shared how family engagement events generated support from parents and how that improved student attitudes towards school. Yet, in the "low-performing" school, she found a singular focus on end of grade test scores that negatively impacted teacher agency, school climate, and teacher retention.

Elizabeth described how the district brought tremendous pressure to bear on teachers to comply with district direction. In her mind, the state and the district created the demands on district and school personnel. She said, "it starts at the top. They've got somebody else demanding that they do this." The district prioritized pressuring the teachers to improve end of grade test results from the first teacher day. Elizabeth contrasted how much more effective a different goal setting could be: "I said, maybe we need to start out with more short-term talk about what we're going to do this month. Instead of focusing on how many kids are going to pass the EOG! Talk about that on day one." Before the year began, the district prioritized end of the year outcomes:

> Not whether we're teaching them to love to read or whether we're teaching them the love of science...All that matters is, this many people have to pass the EOG, what are you going to do to make that happen? And it's presented to the teachers that way pretty much.

This singular focus eliminated any other school goals and consideration of child development. The district committed to improving “low-performing” schools by relentless directives and supervision to create “pressure from the county, day in, day out to get those kids to pass an EOG.”

The pressure fell directly on the teachers and students. Elizabeth described how “there's too much pressure on this school grade” to the point that one teacher “lost her mind.” The intense scrutiny drained all the joy from the school:

> The last year was not fun. The last two years at (school name). And I don't know if it gets that way at every Title One, low-performing, that's about to hit an F grade. But it felt like it. It felt like it. The content teachers, I guess, they imposed their stress and pressure down on us, and it didn't feel friendly and fun at all. It was not a fun place to work. It was extremely stressful.

The pressure flowed downhill and overwhelmed the teachers. The district’s desperation to avoid the F grade made the school a place where few teachers wanted to work, even high-performers like Elizabeth. She felt “under a microscope.” She continued, “the county, they were watching us so closely that if they caught us doing something that was off of their pathway for us, there would have been some ramifications.” The district brought pressure and the threat of punishment with their myopic focus on end of grade scores.

One of the most traumatic experiences for Elizabeth was the “star chart” that the district staff created to monitor teacher adherence to county rules and directives. Elizabeth explained the process, “we had a star chart, we had PLCs where we were told, ‘You need to be doing this when we walk in the classroom. We better see you doing this or else.’” The district threatened teachers

if they did not comply with the star chart. Facilitators would insist on following the expectations on a particular schedule:

> "You get a star if we walk in your classroom and you're doing this at the right time." I mean, they had that down to the minute and you better be on that, what you were supposed to be on at that minute. Didn't matter what happened in your class during the time before, you better be on that when they walked in, because they were taking notes and looking to make sure you were on the right subject and the right track you were supposed to be on.

The concept behind the chart was to force teachers to stay on the district script without any variation based on teacher judgment or student individual need.

The district decided the star chart would spur improvement, not teacher agency. The district and school content teachers tracked teacher compliance with a series of district expectations and posted them on a board for all other teachers to see:

> They were there to grade us on whether we were doing this checklist that they were checking to see. You need to do this and this and this. Are you doing this? That just doesn't feel good. It takes away the autonomy of the teacher. It feels uncomfortable and (teacher name) was very, very disturbed by it and she's a really good teacher. But then they put up this checklist in the content teacher room and you got stars by your name whether you were meeting their expectations. That one did not go over well at all… It doesn't feel good for the county to be the watchdogs that they were.

The district removed all teacher agency over instructional decisions by using public humiliation of how much they were following the district's checklist: "did you differentiate? Did you pull small groups? Did you follow the curriculum?" Did you use the district mandated personalized

learning platform? Elizabeth summarized, “They were just looking for their rules to be followed…. We were trying to manage the behaviors in the classroom which you know can get out of control…it just felt like we were being watched.”

The district pressure campaign corrupted the professional learning community process and the school improvement process. It changed professional learning communities from opportunities to share ideas, plan interventions, and innovate, to a series of “to do” lists that added more work onto teachers’ plates. Teachers like Elizabeth wanted to use their agency in their professional learning communities to improve learning at the grade level. Instead, the district took over the agenda and ran the daily meetings:

> I think it's a difficult job to lead a PLC when you are, you've got somebody coming down on you: “You need to get this done. You need to get this done.” And then you, you know, put that off on the teachers, “You need to get this done. You need to get this done.”

District demands crowded out any teacher agency to collaborate to differentiate instruction for their students. Elizabeth illustrated how district pressure eliminated innovation and creativity through excessive demands:

> “This is what you need to do. Get your notebook. This is what you need to do this week. You need to do dah dah dah dah dah.” It doesn't need to be a time of just being told what you need to do.

Ultimately, the district requirements removed any opportunity to create plans together to address pressing needs. Elizabeth showed how the district corrupted the teachers’ planning time: “PLCs felt more like, we were given more work to do when we left there. When we left there, we'd look at each other and go, ‘Gaw, how are we gonna do that?’”

District pressure and directives poisoned the school improvement team process as well. These meetings deteriorated into “bitch sessions” as the teachers railed against district pressure and demands on the “low-performing” school that the teachers had no agency to change. Elizabeth served on the school improvement team and explained how:

> we would take problems that teachers had shared with us that they didn't like, but they were county mandates or they were required, so there wasn't a lot you could do about it, so it ended up kind of just being a fuss session.

The teachers tried to air their feelings about all the pressure that the district was bringing upon them and how it was not helping their instruction. Nevertheless, they were facing county directives that were nonnegotiable. Their inability to enact their agency led to increased frustration.

The end result of all of this pressure was a poor learning climate and worse working environment. Teachers began to resign from the school each year in growing numbers. The pressure to improve scores and comply with initiatives like the star chart was too much:

> (Teacher name), (teacher name), (teacher name), (teacher name) (had) years at (school name). They loved (school name). They felt like a family. They felt like home. But the conditions were so bad and stressful. When you see all of those teachers that have left there, that should be a wakeup call to our county. And it was not admin that pushed people out. I promise you that…It is just the pressure from the county, day in, day out to get those kids to pass an EOG.

Experienced teachers who had been part of the school family for years left the school. All the district efforts did not improve the “low-performing” school, but just pushed out the teachers

including the high-performers, allowing inexperienced teachers and teachers from other countries to replace them:

> Anyway, I'm not gonna get into all that, but the morale went way downhill. And good, good teachers left…And teachers come in that don't know the curriculum, and are struggling. It's not that they're not trying their best, but it's a big hurdle…. Because the teachers don't know the math, the subject matter to teach it…A lot of them. I mean, they're learning the language. They're learning English. And in their defense, that's not their fault. But when you add that to, I don't know, it's just a mess right now.

The district had prioritized test score improvement, pressured teachers to the breaking point, and eliminated teacher agency all to see the school fall from a D to an F anyway and end up in a complete "mess."

Time for a "Wakeup Call" for the State

The district had created an utter "mess" out of the "low-performing" school. Yet, the county's decision to increase pressure on the teachers was largely following the directives of the state. As Elizabeth had pointed out, "it starts at the top." She said the district micromanagement was "coming from the state that comes to the district, that says, 'You've got to improve these schools' performance.'" The state narrative of blaming the teachers and principals for school failure only reinforced school failure. Elizabeth felt the state needed a "wakeup call" for its part in perpetuating the "low-performance" of such schools.

Elizabeth reframed the problem of school improvement by recommending a different approach. "Let's change the narrative. Let's talk about the school. Let's talk about something besides low-performing," she proposed. "At the end of the day, that's all they talk about, whether or not they're going to pass the EOG," so Elizabeth suggested asking the teachers what should be

done. It “doesn't feel like most, for the most part, they do (ask teacher opinions),” she said. Teachers, she insisted, “also are in there day in and day out, and we oftentimes know what's best.” Teachers could be part of the solution for “low-performing” schools, if the state and district respected teacher opinions and expertise and sought their advice. If the state were to “believe in me and (gave) me that autonomy to do things, try new things in the classroom,” Elizabeth could have been more innovative at her school and with her teammates helped the state avoid poor decision-making about school reform.

Another crucial improvement would be to reconsider the effectiveness of the end of grade test and determine a more fair process of assessment. The state was putting too much stock in the test. End of grade results were predetermined by socioeconomics, according to Elizabeth. Teachers felt that they did not reflect what the students learned so much as how long they could sit and take the test. Elizabeth explained:

> And we have to have a way to measure their development and their growth and we have to have grades but if we're going to test, it needs to be revised. It needs to be a subset of questions from this and this and this and maybe a total of 25 to 30 questions for a third grader. It does not need to be such a test of, can you sit still for 180 minutes? Cause that's really hard.

The length of the end of grade test was an issue. The questions were also biased against students who had not grown up with advantages. Elizabeth argued:

> Well, we've got to do better at measuring it without a three, without a 180-minute multiple choice question test that by time they're at the, you know, at break, or by the time an hour has passed, we need to be finished. It needs to be an hour-long test. I don't care how many questions. It needs to not be as long and the questions need to be more

> fair. I'm not saying less rigorous necessarily, but not as confusing. I mean… until we change that part of our measurement of school performance, I don't think we're going to be successful. Especially when they don't have conversation at home, they don't come to us with a lot of background knowledge that incorporates vocabulary and that sort of thing. So those questions are not fair. They're just not fair.

The questions assumed the students possessed a certain prior knowledge, according to Elizabeth, and they made the tests a poor representation of student learning. The state should shorten the tests and concentrate the assessments on material the students could learn in class rather than what they brought from home.

Elizabeth felt the end of grade test was flawed and needed revision for equity. If the assessments provided poor information to score student learning, the state performance grade should be replaced as well. The state performance grade was fundamentally unsound as it was based on the end of grade tests. Elizabeth demonstrated that in reality, poverty levels determined end of grade results which in turn produced the school performance grade:

> I think low-performing, I mean we say, "Okay, you're a D or an F school." And that's based on the numbers that passed the EOG. And I realize that we have to have some measure. Just like we have to have grades. We have to have some measure of achievement. But something has got to change. Something's gotta give because too much emphasis is put on that…Okay. How can we do better? How can we do better at labeling our schools? I mean, we pretty much know by the neighborhood whether it's, how the performance is gonna be. You know it's socioeconomic. I mean we're not kidding anybody. So if you live in a better neighborhood you're going to have, you're going to go

> to a school that has a grade probably of at least a C or B. I don't know. I don't have the answers, but I'd love for it to be different.

The state needed to do away with the school performance grade because it was so closely related to the income level of the students, rather than their learning.

Moreover, the school performance grade also drove teachers and families away from "low-performing" schools by labeling them as failing schools, when the grade really reflected the demographics of the attendance zone. Elizabeth showed how the grade deterred teachers from choosing to teach in a school labeled "low-performing":

> I think it makes it difficult to get a lot of teachers. A lot don't want to go to a D or F school if they have a choice. You know, unless they feel that they are up to the challenge, most teachers want to go somewhere that not so much pressure is put on them and where they are looked under a microscope...So that takes away the teachers' autonomy because then the county specifies, "You must do this, this, this and this, because you are a D school and you have to do this, this, and this." And the teachers lose their autonomy and their freedom and their flexibility in the classroom. Which is exactly what I saw happen at (school name) last year. You know, I mean, when people relocate and they move to a town, if they have kids, they look up the grade of the school. You know, generally speaking, it's associated with your income because the neighborhoods that feed into (school name) are, you know, they're poor neighborhoods. They're low income neighborhoods…You know, (school name) is mostly apartments or low-income housing or that sort of thing and that just I mean, you know, it goes hand in hand with the grade the school's going to be.

The state was just grading the income level of the neighborhoods and then signaling to the teachers' market that the D and F schools would be under particular scrutiny with little teacher agency or hope for success. The D and F schools would be "under a microscope" and unattractive places for most teachers.

Thus, the state needed to end the practice of grading schools based on the summative test scores. The school grade just locked schools into "low-performance" by discouraging informed families and teachers from coming to the school and casting a negative pall over the school. Elizabeth questioned if it was a never-ending cycle:

> I just don't know how you ever get out of low-performing status. Once low-performing, are you always low-performing? I mean, I never gave up hope. But I also think that it's tiring for teachers that are young mothers who may even have student loans and yada yada and, you know, are not making what they should make as a salary to begin with, I think it's tiring. I think it's tiring and I don't know how they ever get out of low-performing status …I don't know the answer. But I feel like I just feel like it's gotta change.

It was challenging enough for teachers to try to succeed in a "low-performing" school without the failing label and the lack of support from the state and district. The pressure and demands of teaching in such circumstances wore out many promising teachers creating a revolving door of instability and permanent "low-performance."

Elizabeth did see a different path forward. As she said, "I never gave up hope" in spite of all of the hurdles she strove to overcome. Elizabeth made numerous recommendations on how to improve "low-performing" schools that she hoped would be a "wakeup call."

The first step in school reform should be to decrease class-size for struggling schools. Elizabeth emphasized that "small class size is number one" in terms of making a difference in "low-performing" schools. Reducing discipline problems and increasing opportunities for small groups would be the results of smaller classes. "We have big class sizes because we don't have teachers," Elizabeth said. She also identified the practical hurdle of having to attract quality teachers to the school as well in order to reduce class-size. The state should seek ways to encourage more teachers to sign up to teach in "low-performing" schools.

Improved pay and benefits would promote a better teaching force in such schools. Elizabeth critiqued the state track record, "they can't keep cutting teachers' benefits and not giving raises and expecting people to teach coming out of college." The state was shrinking, not expanding, the teacher workforce. Elizabeth said finances were part of the solution:

> The state level is going to have to give more incentives. The state level needs to bring back Teaching Fellows. They need to bring back more benefits for teachers. And of course they need to increase pay. We need better pay. We need better benefits. We need more incentives…I mean, I am not against diversity, but this reaching out to international (teachers), you get what you pay for. And if that's a cheap route to go, I'm not sure that's the best answer.

Cutting salaries was forcing schools to have to hire teachers from other countries without North Carolina licenses to fill vacant positions. Elizabeth felt like the state was shortsighted in trying to save money on salaries. Teachers used to have more satisfaction in earned benefits but, "now you can't even say, 'I've got good benefits.'"

More than just teaching positions, the state also should fund more tutors and teacher assistants. "That's what keeps kids engaged…it's bodies. It takes teachers. It takes the manpower

to do it. But that is what I see as the way to make the school day more successful," Elizabeth argued in favor of more adults on campus to help students. She contrasted her experience with proper staffing in the "low-performing" school with her time teaching summer school. In the "low-performing" school, "kids were bored. We're not doing enough to keep them excited about being in class." Summer school took a different approach: "Those kids were moving all day. We were doing something with them and then the TAs were coming in and we were rotating all day long. Now it takes a lot of manpower. But that really was successful." More teaching staff injected more energy into education and provided the individualized and small group attention that students in "low-performing" schools needed. Elizabeth championed more staff for after school activities too like Girls on the Run and robotics to improve relationships with students and increase student motivation for schooling.

After obtaining the proper amount of staff, the state should focus on creating positive school climates and tight-knit professional learning communities. Elizabeth described how she was a more effective teacher and productive teammate when she felt supported and motivated by her colleagues:

> if you're happier, I think, the community of teachers really helped me. You know, that's just something that you have to help teachers when they're, you know, everybody has their problems and their low times and to lift those teachers up during those times, is really huge.

Being part of a family of teachers that cared about each other made an important difference for Elizabeth and informed her opinion about how "low-performing" schools could be successful. In her experience, expanding the teacher bonds to include the support of families and community

members provided the additional layers of relationships and support that further propelled school success.

Elizabeth hoped the state would rethink the purpose of school. Education was about more than passing the end of grade test, but enjoying learning. The state policies consumed with “how do we get him to pass the EOG” were “just killing a dead horse all the time” and draining the passion and inspiration out of “low-performing” schools. Elizabeth explained that

> all that really matters, and you know it's true, is whether or not kids pass the EOG at the end of the year. Not whether we're teaching them to love to read or whether we're teaching them the love of science.

The state policy needed a “wakeup call” to switch directions and shift to improving education through teachers sharing their passion for learning.

Elizabeth believed and achieved. The state pressured and the school plummeted. Elizabeth experienced teacher agency in several instances during her career and she saw its productive effects. She saw teacher agency as optimistic, encouraging, and hopeful for other teachers and students, and ultimately the entire school. She related a story of when teachers created an “EOG camp” in preparation for the end of year test. It was extra work but the teachers were inspired to put the time in for the students to improve their scores. They even brought in community members to encourage the students and to make the experience enjoyable:

> EOG camp we worked some long hours to set it up at and then at (school name), we had a group of men come from some church and greet the kids the morning of. I think the more that we cheer them on, even in low-performing schools, the morale and the attitude that they can do it. I believe in all that jazz. I really do. I think we need to, since we have to do it, let's make it as much fun as we can.

Having fun was crucial to teacher agency for Elizabeth. She reasoned, “You spend a long time in that classroom. It can be a long day, if you're not laughing some. So, I do believe that it needs to be fun.” She provided two alternatives, “School should be fun, fun, fun. Should be a great time for kids, not, are you gonna pass the EOG?” For “low-performing” schools to be successful, they needed to deemphasize the test and reemphasize the enjoyment of learning. They also need to rekindle teacher agency as a belief in all the ways students could be successful. Elizabeth illustrated, “We need teachers that believe in the kid…that's how teachers need to approach each day is: ‘I believe you can do this.’”

Cross Case Analysis

In this section, I will compare and contrast the case studies of five high-performing teachers. After writing each case study, I coded them and identified the open codes. Then, I compared the open codes for each teacher side by side and determined axial codes across the cases. During cross case analysis, the main themes emerged: 1) all five of the high-performing teachers were passionate about teaching, held high expectations for their students, and recognized the importance of building relationships with their students and their fellow teachers for effective teaching and high performance; 2) all the teachers tried to reform their schools but the district limited their agency while making the schools worse; 3) the state policy for “low-performing” schools was ineffective, discriminatory and harmful for children and the state needs a “wakeup call” to change direction immediately; 4) the new direction for “low-performing” schools should increase high-performing staff, promote teacher agency, foster teacher collaboration, and ensure school stability; and 5) the teachers’ experiences shed light on teacher agency theory.

Passion for Teaching, High Expectations, and the Importance of Building Relationships

Even though the five teachers were somewhat diverse with one Black male, one Latina, and one older teacher, all five agreed on several crucial points. I use the general term "older" for decorum's sake to mean over 50. The teachers may have used different vocabulary and brought different personalities to their teaching, but all five were committed to their students and their success. The five high-performing teachers were passionate about teaching, held high expectations for their students, and recognized the importance of building relationships with their students and their fellow teachers for effective teaching and high performance.

The five case studies revealed that each teacher held high expectations for their students. They were demanding, tough teachers who asked for complete commitment and dedication from their students. "Don't you dare come in here and play. We're in it to win it. We are working," Elizabeth said. Michelle subscribed to the "firm, but fair" philosophy. Sarah told her students she was going to "push" them. The teachers were dedicated to encouraging their students because they understood the circumstances that their students had to overcome to master the material. Teaching in a "low-performing" school was difficult with student behavioral and mental health issues, but the five teachers met the students where they were and looked to grow them regardless. They did care where the students were from and what they endured. They recognized those real obstacles, unlike the district and state which expressed, "I don't care where they come from! I don't care what they're going through!" in Sergio's estimation. The five teachers did not think the end of grade tests were effective measures of student performance and learning in "low-performing" schools. They saw many other ways where students were successful such as in learning growth, personal maturity, and progress in study habits.

All five high-performing teachers brought a passion for teaching to their classrooms and schools. They shared their enthusiastic attitudes and joy for student learning. Elizabeth spoke of the importance of having "fun" in the classroom to fight boredom. Sergio emphasized how being a teacher is more than a part-time job at Rack Room shoes, that it took commitment and drive. Sarah told of how she "believed in her kids" and the other teachers shared the sentiment. "I want to give them the hope," Elizabeth said about her students and how they needed to hear the mantra daily: "I believe you can do this."

Another crucial commonality was the importance of building relationships with students, families, and the communities but especially fellow teachers. The teachers enjoyed spending time with their students and seeing their progress. Michelle stressed the foundational nature of the teacher-student relationship and how being firm and fair helped the students know what to expect and gave them consistency which was sometimes lacking in their daily lives. Sergio burst forth with exuberant stories of his students at summer school and how he touched their lives with a self-made, celebratory video about the class. The teachers recalled how connections with parents and community partners helped improve student attitudes towards school.

Nevertheless, the most important relationships were those with their colleagues. Fellow teachers supported one another, even beyond the grade level and provided connections and encouragement for improved teacher performance. Sergio underscored how effective supportive relationships could be, like those he experienced at summer school, in contrast to how some of his colleagues at his "low-performing" school limited his agency through their negativity, hostility, and arrogance. His "unmotivated" and "lazy" colleagues could make themselves part of the problem through their incessant complaining and reduce his ability to make a difference outside of his classroom. The other teachers relied on their colleagues to share ideas, plan

lessons, and offer suggestions for ways to reach difficult students. Michelle, Sarah and Elizabeth credited their colleagues with helping them become high-performing teachers in the classroom. Beatrice and others tried to lead their professional learning communities and spread their success throughout the grade level and beyond through connections with colleagues.

District Attempts to Reform Schools Limited Teacher Agency and Made the Schools Worse

All the teachers in this study struggled to make their school better. They attempted to reform their schools and make fundamental changes to improve instruction and student learning. Sergio led an initiative through the Positive Behavior Intervention and Support committee to strengthen school and family partnerships and help students share their learning with their parents. The other teachers worked closely with their professional learning communities to share ideas and help each grade level raise the quality of instruction. Beatrice spoke out at school improvement team meetings to address grade level concerns and Sarah collaborated with administration on personnel decisions. Beatrice even took the lead on the Restart Committee and traveled to Raleigh to formulate ideas and plans to reform her school. Nonetheless, her efforts were spurned by the principal and ultimately "nothing was ever implemented."

Beatrice's experience was typical of the five teachers. All of the teachers felt district decisions and plans to reform the "low-performing" schools limited their agency. Michelle and Elizabeth both served on the school improvement committee. Michelle called it a "waste of time" where teachers had "no power" and Elizabeth said it was nothing more than a "fuss session." District mandates were non-negotiable, so any changes the committee sought to adopt were rejected at first blush. Teachers had no voice or authority on the school improvement team. In time, districts stripped the professional learning committees of agency, too. Elizabeth demonstrated how district personnel met with grade levels daily and controlled the agenda. The

entire planning time shifted to the district personnel telling the teachers what to do: "You need to get this done. You need to get this done." Beatrice tried to collaborate with her professional learning community but had to continually adjust to 11 new teammates over her time at the "low-performing" school. With every new colleague, she had to start over trying to share her ideas and high-performing expertise. The amount of attrition depleted the knowledge base that Sarah explained was so important to learning how to reach all her students. Sarah eventually gave up on trying to improve the school outside of her classroom. She just told the district what they wanted to hear, closed her door, and taught how she knew would help her students. As collegiality collapsed, teacher attrition increased, and more and more teachers, even the high achieving teachers departed.

The district had created a "nightmare" and a "mess," according to Beatrice and Elizabeth. District "meddling" utilized "gotchas" and checklists and the infamous "star chart" that tracked teachers like Elizabeth and her compliance. Districts micromanaged the teachers and threatened punishment and retaliation for teachers who did not adhere to their requirements. The districts' obsession with end of grade tests drove their plans and mangled their results. Sarah felt the district was calculated in its decisions and expressed how she imagined their perspective: "'Oh, we need to help our teachers,' but to them, helping teachers is telling them exactly what to do." Districts decided more pressure and direction would improve performance. Teacher agency was a threat to school improvement, as these teachers understood the district mentality. District decision-making, power, and insistence on compliance were the path to turning around "low-performing" schools. Sarah conceived of the process as intentionally dehumanizing teachers, turning them into "robots" in order to implement the state plans. She called the state pressure on the districts and district pressure on the schools a "chain reaction." Elizabeth said, "it starts at the

top.” Sarah speculated that the state was looking to cut expenditures by forcing out veteran teachers. “It seems like they're against public schools,” Sarah accused. Without teacher agency, all of the high-performing teachers in this study either left their “low-performing” school or made plans to leave.

Current State Policy is Ineffective, Discriminatory and Harmful for Children

The state policy for low-performing schools was not working, according to all five high-performing teachers. It was steering districts and schools in the wrong direction. The state needed an immediate “wakeup call” because the policies were harmful to children and discriminatory.

The “low-performing” school policy hurt the children it purported to educate. It “wrecks kids,” Michelle said. Beatrice told of how the policy stymied student progress by delaying teacher responsiveness to student needs. Elizabeth related tales of students in tears and humiliated upon receiving their end of grade scores. She witnessed the testing program instilling a “defeated attitude” in students after they failed tests year after year. Sergio called the state approach “sadistic,” as it made children feel worse about themselves.

The “low-performing” school policy was not functioning to improve student learning. This policy of grading schools based on their performance was distinct to “low-performing” schools and created dysfunctional micromanagement compared to even other Title One schools. Sarah criticized the state’s treatment of the teachers in schools labeled “low-performing” as if the teachers “don't know what they’re doing.” It seemed to her that the state was intentionally failing schools and making schools go “downhill.” The state was restricting teacher agency, demoralizing teachers, and creating instability in schools through teacher attrition. Sergio agreed with the other teachers that “low-performing” policies were not working. Beatrice said the policy

“held us back” and questioned, “how many years will it go on in the same direction, until they realize like the checklist, and the extra work for the principal, and the extra work for the teachers isn't really working?” Elizabeth speculated whether a “low-performing” school could ever rise above the label. In its attempts to turnaround her “low-performing” school, the state had just created a “mess” with high teacher turnover, ineffective professional learning communities, and an impotent school improvement team.

Several of the teachers shared that the “low-performing” schools policy was discriminatory. Sergio called it similar to “segregation” and separating students by race. He criticized the negative connotations of labeling schools and by extension communities as “low-performing.” Sarah concurred that the labels were “awful” and a slur against families and a detractor, saying in effect, “You don't want to go there.” Michelle complained that the policies ignored the agency of teachers because the teachers were largely female. Gender discrimination blamed teachers for the “low-performing” status and discounted teacher voice and opinions about how to fix the schools. Elizabeth agreed that the state did not ask her opinion. Furthermore, she demonstrated that the “low-performing” policy and labeling schools was racially and economically discriminatory: “I mean, we pretty much know by the neighborhood whether it's, how the performance is gonna be. You know it's socioeconomic. I mean we're not kidding anybody.” Unfortunately, the legislature had fooled enough people to put this discriminatory policy into law. The testing outcomes were predetermined based on race and income. In its “low-performing” schools policy, the state had created a segregated system to discourage people from attending certain schools based on a label about the community’s racial composition and socioeconomic level.

New Direction for "Low-Performing" Schools

The students, teachers, and families of "low-performing" schools deserved a new approach. All the teachers in this study thought the label of "low-performing" was inaccurate and damaging to schools and communities. The state needed to create a new policy and the proper first step was to eliminate the label "low-performing" school based on end of grade test proficiency. Elizabeth thought it was time for a "wakeup call" and sought to "change the narrative." The state needed a new mindset, as Beatrice described, where the state would support schools that needed more assistance rather than destabilizing and punishing them. "If that school's getting F, F, F, F, Fs, let's figure out a way to provide some more support instead of another checklist," she proposed. Rather than blaming principals and teachers for school deficiency, the state should support teachers in their efforts to improve the schools.

According to the high-performing teachers, the state should increase staff in schools formerly labeled "low-performing." Michelle explained that there would never be "enough hands for all" to meet every need of every student in such demanding circumstances as those presented in some neighborhoods. Nonetheless, more funds for more manpower would begin to address many of the needs. Most of the teachers in this study mentioned the immediate importance of reducing class-size to 15 to minimize behavior issues and maximize teacher-student interaction. They also proposed designing incentives in the form of pay and benefits to attract more high-performing teachers and teachers with experience to schools in need. More funding should be used to hire more teacher assistants and tutors to work with students in small groups and one-on-one to address their learning requirements. Afterschool programs would allow the students to pursue extracurriculars and develop their interests and skills.

Along with more staff, the teachers in this study also advocated for an improved school culture. Schools with high needs would have to become places where teachers would want to teach. State policies should reverse the initiatives that led to attrition in order to draw expert teachers to these schools and stabilize the teaching force. The new school culture would encourage teacher agency where teachers could act to improve their classroom, grade level, and school. Teachers should be able to collaborate with their professional learning communities, share ideas, and enact the best ones. Furthermore, teachers should have a voice in district and state decisions about the direction of their schools so decisions about curriculum and resources would be responsive to student needs. The state would have to begin trusting teachers rather than blaming them. More funds and staff for schools once labeled "low-performing" would be a positive step, but true transformation would also necessitate a culture shift to make these schools attractive, collaborative, and supportive places to learn, grow, and succeed.

Teacher Stories Shed Light on Teacher Agency Theory

The five teachers in this study acted with teacher agency in different ways, but with similar results. Michelle gained agency through her long teaching career and used her agency to support learning and improve relationships with her students. Beatrice led her grade level through extensive preparation. Sarah viewed her agency as reciprocal and based on her responsibility to her colleagues and school "family." Elizabeth enacted her agency through her leadership to make school "fun" and to find enjoyment in learning. All four of these teachers ran into limitations on their agency to improve the school due to state, district, and administrative restrictions. Only Sergio was able to take advantage of his passion and personality and make schoolwide changes through the Positive Behavior Intervention Support team. His principal endorsed his efforts, even when his grade level colleagues resisted his leadership. Ultimately,

even Sergio's agency to fundamentally improve his school fell short due to the single minded focus of the state and district on end of grade scores and the school performance grade. As these teachers expressed their struggles with agency, they revealed several insights about the components of teacher agency, factors that influence agency, and challenges to teacher agency.

Components of Teacher Agency

The case studies expressed how teacher agency consisted of several components. The teachers showed how they intentionally made plans for success and invested the preparations necessary to make a difference. They also demonstrated how they acted on their own with little outside direction to strive for excellence and analyze their circumstances through constructive reflection.

Intentionality. The teachers in this study knew the standards and set even higher expectations for themselves and their students. They recognized the need to create foundational relationships with their students and families that would support their agency in the classroom. This was particularly important to Michelle who continued to reiterate relationships as the essence of education. Michelle intentionally spent time with students and families in order to propel her students to advanced learning.

Preparation. Another aspect of teacher agency was the ability to plan ahead and strategize. The teachers spoke of knowing the intricacies of the curriculum so they could be effective teachers, but also so they could be expert leaders. Beatrice wanted to be a "teacher to the other teachers" through her study and readiness. She preferred to plan on her own first and then share with her colleagues. Sarah spent her first few years as an understudy to her grade level teammates in preparation for her role as a teacher leader. The teachers prepared for many contingencies except for the amount their work context would compromise their agency.

Initiative. The teachers in each case study described their own personal ability to take action on their own without direction from the district. Sergio with his passion and personality pressed ahead irrespective of challenges. Beatrice talked of how she took advantage of the autonomy she gained when she left the "low-performing" school. She also commented on how she and her colleagues anticipated results and made adjustments well ahead of the district. If only the county had allowed them to be proactive, they could have been much more effective and efficient. Sarah explained how the teachers analyzed and reflected upon data as a team without outside direction. These teachers acted with personal drive and initiative without being told to do so.

Self-reflection. In each of these five case studies, the teachers were aware of their own core beliefs and values about teaching. Elizabeth explained how she reflected daily on her lessons and ways to grow as a teacher. Others articulated their visions and analysis of the challenges in "low-performing" schools. Sergio incisively vocalized the root causes of failure and inequity in the "low-performing" schools strategies and explained they were "sadistic" and similar to "segregation." Sarah foresaw the future of "low-performing" schools as part of an intentional state plan that would drag her school "downhill." Like the other teachers, she struggled to remain at her school and eventually chose to leave.

Factors Influencing Teacher Agency

Each of the five case studies presented factors that shaped the teachers' agency. Temporal factors arose that determined how much agency teachers enacted based on their experience. Personal factors included how high-performers all had different personalities that affected their agency in different ways. Nonetheless, they showed how significantly context impacted all of their agency.

Temporal factors. The teachers revealed that agency developed over time. In their early years, they learned from the experts on their grade levels. Sarah described how her team told her to listen and learn and then she would have a chance to contribute and lead later. She talked about how her grade level had a reciprocal understanding of leadership and sharing the workload. Sergio had to master the curriculum in his early years before he could advocate for change. Even Elizabeth who came to teaching later in life spent her first few years following the lead of her professional learning community.

Personal factors. Each of these teachers possessed personal factors that led to their agency. Michelle's outspoken personality paired with her success as a teacher assistant and beginning teacher drove her leadership. Beatrice's competitive streak and desire to excel shaped her agency as she shared her preparations with others. Elizabeth's belief in the joy of learning and the intrinsic "fun" of being in school underlay her actions to improve school. Sarah's deeply held beliefs about family and responsibility were a large part of her agency. Sergio's passion and highly motivated personality were other examples of how individual factors shaped agency.

Contextual factors. The particular school or district environment shaped teacher agency. School leadership either supported these teachers or denied them their agency. The districts created the culture in which the teachers could neither act nor lead. The state policies hindered agency from the outset and the district and some school principals fell right into line with the accountability culture of blame and restrain.

Challenges to Teacher Agency

These contextual factors presented multiple challenges to the teachers' agency. The teachers in each case study presented how as they tried to act to improve their schools, they faced pressures from beyond the schoolhouse door. When they attempted to step out of their

classrooms, they confronted external constraints, institutional cultures, and insufficient resources that prevented them from the teacher agency necessary to change "low-performing" schools.

External constraints. The accountability system produced multiple restrictions on teacher agency. The hyper focus on end of grade scores in "low-performing" schools made all other instructional decisions secondary. The state drove the districts to limit the curriculum to lessons that would raise test scores. Threats of job loss or reassignment for failing to meet testing benchmarks gave the teachers fewer opportunities to take action outside of the shadow of the testing requirements.

Institutional culture. The teachers testified that the districts had created cultures that limited teacher agency. District personnel rationalized that they were helping the "low-performing" schools by "telling them what to do," writing teacher lesson plans and tracking teacher compliance on a "star chart." Some school principals supported teacher ideas, like Sergio's administrator when he proposed the family engagement event. Other principals acted like Beatrice's who canceled the two-year restart plan. District and school culture affected the development and expression of teacher agency.

Lack of resources. Limited access to professional development opportunities, proper staffing, and supportive teaching networks constrained teacher agency. The teachers in this study described many mandates but few opportunities to develop their agency through professional training. Standardized testing drove the district and school decisions about teacher development. The teachers also felt overwhelmed by class sizes and student behavior. The state did not provide enough staff to meet the student needs. The teachers expressed the need for more teachers, teacher assistants, tutors, and afterschool programs. Without the proper staffing, the teachers were trying to survive and exercising their agency became a luxury. Furthermore, the district

steadily eroded the ability of teachers to collaborate and act together through professional learning communities. Elizabeth told of how the district personnel took over the agenda for each meeting and left the teachers no time to plan, or for agency.

Teacher agency was pivotal for both teacher and student success. It was based on the professionalism and expertise of teachers, and that they should have a voice in school plans and decision-making. The teachers in this study revealed how teacher agency would not be fully realized without systemic support, both in terms of professionalism, culture and resources. They shed light on several aspects of teacher agency theory and its hope for "low-performing" schools.

Findings

Not Enough Agency (For it to be Done)

The first research question sought to identify: How did the experience of becoming a high-performing teacher in a "low-performing" elementary school inform the teacher's agency for change and leadership outside their classroom? These teachers felt that they possessed the knowledge and initiative to lead their classrooms, but that they were largely unsuccessful beyond their classroom doors. In my analysis, they were ineffective with schoolwide reform because they did not have enough agency to implement change.

The five teachers in this case study became high-performing through several effective traits and habits. They held high expectations for their students, they believed in the potential of their students, and they were "hard" teachers and strove to "push" every student. All of the high-performers were passionate about learning, teaching, and student growth. Several prioritized meaningful relationships with their students and also made important connections with families. Some like Elizabeth used daily self-reflection to improve her instruction. All insisted on the preparation involved in mastering the curriculum, studying every element of each subject, and

being able to share the intricacies of the standards with their colleagues. All of these high-performing teachers agreed that close collaboration with their grade level colleagues led to their improved performance and expertise. Planning together, sharing ideas, and learning ways to reach all their students were common experiences for all of them. Several of the teachers also noted the importance of making connections and friendships with teachers in other grade levels. They spoke of the bonds of having a "family" of teachers as a crucial support in overcoming the daily challenges of teaching in a "low-performing" school.

All of these teachers made dedicated efforts outside their classrooms to improve their schools. They worked with their professional learning communities to raise their grade level performance. They served on the school improvement team to make changes schoolwide and to lead the entire school to better outcomes. Sergio volunteered to be part of the Positive Behavior Intervention Support committee and inspired his school to institute a curriculum night for family engagement. Beatrice was appointed to the restart committee for two years to work with the state restart initiative to reform her school.

Nevertheless, much of the teacher agency in these efforts was limited by district restrictions that seemed to grow in intensity over time. Most of the teachers had fewer and fewer opportunities to exercise their agency beyond their classroom. The restart efforts ran into an administrator who wanted to blame the teachers and stop any changes that Beatrice proposed. Moreover, the state restart policy did not provide any additional funds, so few of the ideas could move beyond the conceptual stage. District staff began overwhelming the professional learning community meetings with endless duties, tasks, and checklists. They turned planning sessions into "to do" lists where teachers had no time left to talk about curriculum together. The school improvement team lost its collective agency and voice as district directives were immovable.

Teachers railed against the harm that their districts were doing to their school improvement efforts, but they could not change much because the districts set all the rules. The meetings became a time to blame the district for not trusting its teachers. District policies reduced teacher agency at the school level to the ability to complain and district officials paired their mandates with threats of retaliation and punishment to reinforce their power and control over the "low-performing" schools.

Meanwhile, students suffered from out of touch decision-making. As Beatrice explained, her district made numerous poor instructional decisions that the teachers knew would not work. Yet, no one asked the teachers. Then, the teachers had to wait for months, if not years, before the district realized the error of its ways and reversed decisions about curriculum. The teachers had known all along and had predicted as much, if someone had only asked them.

Ultimately, the teachers had possessed many of the answers to improve their schools but they required more agency to act schoolwide. They all took action and made repeated attempts to improve their schools. They knew what could improve learning in their classrooms, grade levels, and even districts. For example, several pointed out how they knew balanced literacy was an inferior strategy to phonics-based instruction long before the district or state finally returned to evidence-based reading programs. Nevertheless, the teachers' efforts depended on the imprimatur of the principal and administration. The principal held the key to driving schoolwide change. As Sergio made clear, he succeeded in his efforts because the principal was behind the initiative. Beatrice told how the restart committee failed because of the principal. When the principal denied teacher agency in combination with the district plans to eliminate teacher voice, teachers increasingly lost agency over time until their only option remaining was to leave the school.

As a principal, I learned that these high-performers were experts in their profession and possessed special potential to guide school improvement. They were passionate, hard-driving people with the presence and capacity to command respect. They knew their craft and how to improve instruction. They led a "family" of fellow teachers who followed their recommendations and as an administrator I was wise to align myself with teachers like these high-performers. Nevertheless, as classroom teachers, they lacked some of the training and authoritative knowledge of an administrator. Few knew the machinations of the district bureaucracy or the legal requirements of Title One or even restart. Unless they could win over the principal as an ally, their agency would affect only their classroom or possibly grade level. Even certain teachers with immense leadership capacity like Michelle and Sergio struggled to overturn directives from above. When confronted with the district demands and the policies of the accountability behemoth, the high-performing teachers were not endowed with enough agency to resist the force of the state.

Why it is Not Being Done: Ignoring Research and Practice

The second research question asked: What factors did high-performing teachers identify that promoted or hindered exercising agency to influence change in "low-performing" schools? The teachers did speak of some factors in the "low-performing" schools that aided with their agency and efforts to improve their schools. Largely, however, they were deterred in their agency by the district directives and state policies that ignored research about school improvement and the voices of teachers who were involved in the daily practice of improving student performance.

Some of the teachers credited administration as helping with agency. Sergio notably described his efforts with the Positive Behavior Intervention Support committee. He suggested

the idea for a family engagement event and his principal endorsed the proposal and worked with the committee to make his vision come true. Sarah and Elizabeth also credited their administrators with "doing all that (they) can do" to encourage their agency to reduce teacher attrition and improve school climate. In a "low-performing" school, a supportive principal made some impact on teacher agency.

According to all five teachers, the strongest bulwark of teacher agency in a "low-performing" school was a culture of quality of relationships amongst fellow teachers. Having supportive colleagues to share their daily difficulties became an essential network. Elizabeth summarized many of the teacher's emotions about their colleagues, describing them as a "family" who felt at "home" at a school they "loved." Beyond the robust, multifaceted, personal relationships, the teachers encouraged each other's agency to improve instruction during their time together in professional learning communities. There, they were able to innovate, experiment, and collaborate on ways to help students and each other. According to Michelle, they shared ideas to reach students who were behind. Sarah told of learning from her colleagues as a new teacher and becoming a leader later in her time at her school. Beatrice led multiple teams of teachers over her years as the grade level chair. Together, these teachers lifted each other up, planned rigorous lessons, showed each other particularly effective methods, and analyzed data for better interventions.

While professional learning communities possessed the potential to enhance teacher agency beyond the classroom to the grade level, many other factors in "low-performing" schools impeded teacher agency. Sometimes the colleagues of high-performing teachers did not share their dreams and motivations. Sergio explained how he struggled to work with some of his teammates who were negative and unhelpful. He contrasted some of his fellow teachers in the

"low-performing" school with the particularly collaborative and encouraging teachers at summer reading camp. In the summer program, Sergio's colleagues wanted to help him and went out of their way to provide him with resources and suggestions. His "low-performing" school colleagues seemed bitter, judgmental, "lazy," and unmotivated in comparison. Elizabeth explained that a "defeated attitude" could fester after year after year in the "low-performing" school. Being beaten down continually by the state and district, combined with the annual Sisyphean task of trying to increase proficiency, led to negativity and hopelessness in some teachers.

District "meddling" stifled teacher agency significantly by creating a negative culture with multiple external constraints. Michelle repeatedly made a hand signal like an evil spider weaving through the school's functions until they failed. She said her district's micromanagement interfered with teacher ability to make decisions to help students learn and teachers improve the school. District policies made the school improvement team not a productive decision-making body of teacher leaders, but a "waste of time." Elizabeth said her district made the school improvement team no more than a complaint session about district restrictions on learning and teacher agency.

At the professional learning community level, districts dismantled once purposeful and proactive grade level planning meetings. District officials attended meetings daily, created their own checklists and made teachers complete useless tasks rather than making learning plans or intervention schedules. Districts told the teachers to adhere to their directives and schedules "or else." Elizabeth described the "star chart" where district staff would give teachers stars for complying with district expectations and post the chart in the staff room for all to see. One of Elizabeth's teammates was so insulted that she insisted that the district stop treating them like

children. Sarah accused her district of wanting the teachers to possess no agency whatsoever and just be “robots.”

While some administrators promoted teacher agency, the high-performing teachers shared stories of some administrators who rejected concerted efforts of teacher leadership. Beatrice told of her time working on the restart committee for school reform, only to be denied by her administrator who blamed teachers for poor school performance. Michelle related how she had worked for months with the school improvement team to re-allocate the school’s Title One money to reduce class size, only to have her administrator unilaterally reverse the team’s decision and purchase another content teacher position instead. Some principals actively torpedoed teacher agency in their “low-performing” schools.

All of the teachers in this study depicted their school district as a primary deterrent of teacher agency through its external constraints on agency. District directives stymied teacher agency in professional learning communities, on the school improvement team, and between grade levels. Sergio argued his district utilized a “sadistic” approach that punished teachers and created an unsustainable institutional culture. Poor working conditions and a lack of agency were some of the main reasons most of the high-performing teachers left their “low-performing” schools. District decisions created a “mess” and a “nightmare” and caused dozens of teachers to leave the schools in a steady turnover of teachers. Beatrice left after she saw 11 grade level colleagues walk out the door. Leaders like Beatrice could no longer take action to grow effective teams of teachers to spread expertise and develop leadership. Veteran and high-performing teachers departed the “low-performing” schools and took their agency with them. Most of the replacement teachers were beginning teachers, unlicensed teachers, or from international

placement agencies with little ability to enact teacher agency. They had so little knowledge and ability that they just followed along with district plans. The districts had their "robots."

Just like district directives limited teacher agency, state policies reduced teacher abilities to improve their schools through a punitive culture. The state "low-performing" schools policy faulted principals and teachers for poor student performance. Under the guise of "data-based decisions" the state created a narrow focus on the end of grade test results that excluded teacher agency from being part of the solution. According to some of the teachers, the state pressured districts to raise scores regardless of teacher input or opinion on how to help students improve. None of the teachers in the study experienced the state–or the district for that matter–asking their professional opinion about how to improve their school. Some had taught at Title One schools that were not labeled "low-performing" where the teachers retained their agency. It was a unique characteristic of "low-performing" schools that the state insisted on punishing the teachers and stripping them of their ability to act and lead.

When the state labeled schools as "low-performing" based on end of grade tests alone, it discouraged some teachers from wanting to work at such a school and some parents from wanting to send their children there. According to Sergio, the state's "low-performing" schools policy was like "segregation" as it labeled schools and communities by their ethnicity and income. Elizabeth and Sarah agreed and said that the state painted schools with the "low-performing" brush as a code for socioeconomic level and discouraged teachers with the potential for agency from taking positions there. The state's policy undermined teacher agency by blaming teachers for being part of the problem, denying their voice and leadership, and signaling that any teacher that wanted to be high-performing should work elsewhere.

Some of the teachers felt that the state's decision to eliminate teacher agency in “low-performing” schools was part of an intentional plan to limit resources. They questioned the state’s flat pay scale for veteran teachers as one way to encourage them to quit and take their experience and vocal opinions with them. Michelle felt that it was easy to blame the teachers in “low-performing” schools because the teaching force was largely female, so the state intrinsically devalued their opinions and agency. The “low-performing” label dehumanized the teachers, schools, and students in a comprehensive manner. Some of the teachers saw the state’s insistence to underfund public schools as indicative of a plan against public schools and their improvement. The state's “low-performing” schools policies against teacher agency seemed to be another way to attack public schools.

State and district policies diminished teacher agency over time. Since the “low-performing” schools policy began in 2013, district pressure has escalated and teacher agency decreased. According to the teachers in this study, teacher turnover has increased as well. School districts needed to take a more measured approach with “low-performing” schools. The approach so far has not worked.

The underlying assumptions of the accountability system have been wrong for “low-performing” schools. The state policy subscribed to the ideas that the teachers and principals were to blame for student lack of proficiency. Even after generations of research since the Coleman report that showed the strong connection between student test scores and socioeconomic levels, policymakers and reformers ignored the empirical data (Goldstein, 2015). The accountability reformers, or “disrupters” in Ravitch’s (2020) terminology, thought they knew better or insisted on trying this approach. The fundamental decision to blame teachers in “low-performing” elementary schools for end of grade test results without any context or regard

for research led to the "mess" in schools such as those in this study. Before *A Nation at Risk*, elementary schools in urban areas were improving (Evans, 2004; Ravitch, 2020). In North Carolina today, many remain "low-performing" and few have risen out of failing status (Helms, 2023a; Helms, 2023b). Teachers in this study demonstrated that they deserved to be heard based on their insights, awareness, and knowledge of what worked with their children. The state and districts should have collaborated with teachers and promoted their agency rather than dehumanizing and discrediting them.

I experienced the national movement to turn a blind eye to reading research and commit a generation of young readers to illiteracy by adopting balanced literacy (Hanford, 2017). The state of North Carolina and other similar minded states should deeply analyze the research, talk to practitioners, and stop prolonging the wrongheaded "low-performing" schools policy with school performance grades. Success with the "science of reading" in places like Mississippi and now in North Carolina show what can be done. Just like North Carolina changed its approach with reading, it could adjust its plan for low-performing schools.

How it Could be Done: Recognize Teacher Agency

The third research question probed: based on their experience and the theory of teacher agency, how did high-performing teachers in "low-performing" schools describe their strategies for school improvement, transformation, and equity? The teachers presented numerous ways to improve "low-performing" schools and provided extensive analysis about problems in education. If the state recognized their agency and potential for school improvement, reform could be done.

First and foremost, all five of the teachers agreed that the current accountability plan was not working. The state and districts were making a "mess" and a "nightmare" out of "low-performing" schools. They were not helping the schools get better, but in fact, they were making

them worse. Current policies for “low-performing” schools were lowering teacher morale and motivation. Teacher attrition was increasing and test scores were decreasing. All five teachers saw an urgent need for change with little hope in the current system.

The five teachers did believe that teachers could make a difference in their respective classrooms if allowed the agency. They were all isolated instances of success as high-performing teachers recognized by their district or the state. Teachers could make an impact on school improvement through the proper attitude and approach. Teachers who held high expectations for their students and believed in the potential of their students could be high-performing. They would have to work together with other teachers and avoid being on an “island,” as Elizabeth described. Collaborative relationships with colleagues sustained teachers and provided the ideas and feedback to help them be high-performing. Positive relationships with students, families, and communities also helped with teacher performance. All teachers also underscored the importance of mastering the curriculum and standards so they could teach the material to their students efficiently and effectively.

The five teachers demonstrated that they were relative outliers as high-performing teachers in “low-performing” schools. In order to transform “low-performing” schools, they recommended urgent transformation of the state approach. The state needed a “wakeup call” and to “change the narrative” about “low-performing” schools. End of grade test results were not the fault of teachers but largely predetermined by socioeconomic circumstances. The state performance grade that marked schools as failures was just labeling the income levels of the parents and the community. The state needed a better assessment that measured more than proficiency but multiple indicators of student growth. Recognizing this fact would mark a shift

from blaming teachers and punishing them for end of grade proficiency to a new mindset of supporting teachers and trusting them to help students and families.

Districts should stop “telling them exactly what to do” and trying to form teachers into “robots.” They should cease ignoring teacher opinions and discriminating against the largely female elementary teaching force. Districts had to reverse their “sadistic” course that seemed to take pleasure in student and teacher failure. Instead, the state and districts should recognize teacher agency, teacher voice in decision-making, and teacher leadership in school reform.

The current system required immediate change as it did not reinforce the principles of equity but “segregation” and discrimination. The state performance grade told everyone “you don’t want to go there” to those D and F schools. The label chased away teachers and families and encouraged segregating students of color and high needs students into “low-performing” schools and keeping them that way. As several teachers pointed out, the “low-performing” label was a product of socioeconomics, not student progress. To increase student learning, the state needed to create a system that attracted families and teachers to schools formerly known as “low-performing.” Incentives such as better pay and benefits were a start. Improved working conditions were also essential to draw high-performing teachers and teachers with agency to reform the schools. A positive climate filled with collaborative opportunities to work with supportive colleagues was also necessary. Teachers had to have agency and a voice in order to create a stable, committed, and productive teaching team.

To treat such schools with equity, a larger number of personnel were required. All five teachers called for reduced class size through hiring more teachers, with a 15 student limit as a recommendation from several. The teachers also sought more teacher assistants, more tutors, and more extracurricular offerings after school. More staff would be one way to address equity

concerns in schools with so many students with high needs. Other initiatives should include increasing family engagement and community involvement in the school to broaden the base of support and help students understand the value of education.

These recommendations were full of promise and indicative of the potential of how teacher agency could drive school reform and improved performance. The state had to adopt a new policy approach and support districts along the lines of these teacher recommendations. As Tom Reville had said about Massachusetts years ago, they had gotten as much out of pressure as they could (Chenoweth, 2009). Adopting many of the WestEd report proposals for high-poverty schools would be a strong first step, including lowering class size in such schools to 15 students to one teacher (Oakes et al., 2019). Until the state committed to respecting teacher agency, schools would not reach their full capacity. The high-performing teachers knew what students needed and how to respond quickly. The state should have recognized and encouraged such quality teacher agency to accelerate school improvement and achieve the student growth.

The Theory of Teacher Agency Applied for Success

The fourth research question addressed: How did the model of teacher agency frame high-performing teachers' experiences and opinions? Imants and Van der Wal's (2020) theoretical model argued that teacher agency produced school outcomes and reform. They also established that teachers' individual practice and perceived work context influenced the quality of their agency, as seen in Figure 1. The in-depth interviews allowed the five teachers time to elaborate on their experiences and provide extensive detail about the framework defined in Imants and Van der Wal's (2020) theory. They showed that creating the right context for teacher agency could lead to school reform and higher outcomes.

The teachers' individual practice certainly led to improved results for their students. By definition, these teachers were all selected because they produced high achievement in student growth or proficiency as defined by the state or district. Furthermore, their intentionality, preparation, initiative, and self-reflection all contributed to their ability to be agentic. The teachers' personal traits informed their individual practice which in turn produced the potential for agency.

The five teachers indicated that their perceived work context minimized teacher agency and school reform. The teachers had some experience with their work context supporting their agency. Most of the teachers told of how they collaborated with their professional learning communities and other teachers to improve instruction and achievement in their classrooms. Nonetheless, all of the teachers described how external constraints such as their district's micromanagement and threats prevented them from taking action to reform their school beyond their classroom. Michelle, Elizabeth, and Sarah recounted tales of the school improvement team being a "waste of time" because of the districts' imposed regulations or administrations' short-sightedness. Beatrice recalled her failed attempt to reform the school through the Restart Committee due to her principal's obstruction. Only Sergio broke through the district "meddling" with his family engagement activity. All of the teachers perceived their districts as creating a "mess" that prevented meaningful reform. The state had created an institutional culture of pressure and high-stakes testing that inhibited teacher agency. Combined with a lack of resources for professional development and proper staffing, the state and the districts squelched most teacher agency in the "low-performing" schools.

According to Imants and Van der Wal (2020), school reform was dependent on agency. When teachers utilized their agency, they could produce responsive solutions, innovation,

motivation, and teamwork. Individual agency combined with team agency could create improved outcomes across more classrooms and a greater opportunity for schoolwide reform. In practice, the teachers in this study presented that the perceived work context stopped their agency to influence greater outcomes and broad reforms. The state and districts created a perceived work context in these "low-performing" schools that denied teacher agency the possibility to enact reform or improve outcomes. The decisions of the state and districts enfeebled agency to the point where teachers were "robots" and eventually decided to leave their schools. Very little reform ever occurred and school outcomes remained the same or deteriorated.

The theory of teacher agency captured the insights and opinions of the high-performing teachers. Theoretically, teacher agency could produce reform and results in the correct work context. In practice, the stifling circumstances of a "low-performing" school with district "meddling" and state "sadistic" behavior doomed agency to extinction.

I have experienced time in an elementary school before the "low-performing" schools policy, where a knowledgeable and informed principal developed a school culture that encouraged teacher leadership and voice. I witnessed a positive climate that attracted numerous quality teachers who became high-performers and a unified team in spite of the challenges of the school's demographics. Even though the school would later become labeled a "low-performing" school, that policy was not in place yet. The school was able to develop teacher agency and an effective teaching cadre before the policy came into effect and spoiled the agentic work context. The "low-performing" schools policy created the context for the school to go in the wrong direction by eliminating teacher agency.

I have seen in another instance where a district allowed teachers to have a voice, make schoolwide decisions, and allocate school resources for outstanding achievement. Teamwork

increased, intentionality rose, and teacher agency led to unexpected creativity amongst teachers and parents. It certainly can be done and teacher agency in theory and in practice is the right course at a macro level.

Summary

Chapter Four has presented five case studies of high-performing teachers in "low-performing" schools. The five cases represented five different perspectives from different backgrounds about the challenges of teacher agency in "low-performing" schools in North Carolina. One teacher was a Latina, one was a Black male, another was an older teacher, and two others were White females. Data collection consisted of three in-depth, 90-minute interviews for each of the participants. Chapter Four detailed within case analysis that provided the basis for subsequent cross case analysis. The data analysis led to findings that attempted to answer the research questions. The main findings were, first, teachers experienced agency in their classrooms and with their professional learning communities, but in spite of their efforts, they were unsuccessful due to insufficient agency to enact schoolwide reforms. Second, the state and district dismissed research and teacher agency in practice, so schools remained in "low-performing" status. Third, the state and districts should recognize teacher agency and teacher recommendations in order to improve "low-performing" schools. Fourth, the theory of teacher agency helped explain these teachers' experiences and why they were unable to change their "low-performing" schools. In practice, I described how teacher agency has been successful even in communities with challenging income levels (Imants & Van de Wal, 2020). Chapter Five will examine the findings in light of the empirical literature and offer recommendations about "low-performing" schools for educators and leaders. The next chapter will also suggest recommendations for further study and present the limitations of the study.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences and opinions of high-performing teachers who exhibited agency and leadership for reform outside of their classrooms to improve "low-performing" elementary schools in North Carolina. Using in-depth interviews, case study analysis, and the theory of teacher agency, I sought to find how five teachers became high-performing, how they attempted to lead their schools, and how they recommended reforming "low-performing" schools. This final chapter will present the summary of the findings and the findings in context of the empirical literature, including in the context of teacher agency theory. The following sections will then discuss the study's implications, recommendations for practitioners, recommendations for future research, limitations, and conclusions.

Summary of the Findings

The following section addresses each of the four research questions and summarizes the main findings of this study. The first research question asked: How did the experience of becoming a high-performing teacher in a "low-performing" elementary school inform the teacher's agency for change and leadership outside their classroom? Results showed that the teachers experienced some success in their classrooms and grade levels but lacked the agency to produce improvement and reform in their "low-performing" elementary schools. Through a demanding teaching style with high expectations, they achieved at top levels by mastering the curriculum and interacting closely with their professional colleagues to share ideas and plans to help their students learn. Nonetheless, they all felt their schools, districts, and state limited their teacher agency to make a difference at the school level. They all tried to improve their schools but were not successful due to contextual factors such as district micromanagement and principal

interference. Without the support of their principal, the teachers did not affect reform as they did not have sufficient agency to make schoolwide changes.

The second research question inquired: What factors did high-performing teachers identify that promoted or hindered exercising agency to influence change in "low-performing" schools? Data revealed that teachers were not able to utilize their agency because the state and districts had ignored research and teacher voices about school improvement. Empirical literature has shown for years the connection between student achievement and socioeconomic levels (Goldstein, 2015). Still, the state created a policy that distributed school performance grades based on proficiency which was in effect a grade on family income. Then, the state proceeded to blame teachers for school "low-performance" and deprive teachers of their agency to improve schools, as these teachers explained. The state "low-performing" schools policy placed more pressure on teachers in such schools than what a teacher at another Title One school might experience. The policy of labeling schools with a D or F also discouraged teachers from choosing to teach at a "low-performing" school or remain there. The high-performing teachers in this study did work alongside many colleagues who promoted agency through teamwork and personal relationships. Nevertheless, school districts followed the direction of the state and reduced teacher agency by micromanaging teachers, "meddling" in teacher decisions, and undermining teacher leadership teams. Some district personnel seemed to enjoy seeing teachers fail and preferred them to act like "robots" with no agency whatsoever. The state and districts never asked the teachers about what worked in their classrooms and rejected the research about the controversial accountability system.

The third research question examined, based on their experience and the theory of teacher agency, how did high-performing teachers in "low-performing" schools describe their strategies

for school improvement, transformation, and equity? I found that the teachers possessed the insight and strategic vision to propel school reform and improved outcomes, if only the state had recognized and supported teacher agency. The teachers had diagnosed that the current system was not working, was discriminatory, and inequitable. If allowed agency, the teachers believed they could be successful change agents even beyond their classrooms. The state would need to abandon its policy of labeling schools "low-performing" due to their end of grade test proficiency grades which was largely predetermined by the socioeconomic status of the school neighborhood. If the state and districts stopped "telling them exactly what to do" and treating teachers like "robots," the teachers could use their agency to improve schools. With proper staffing to rectify the inherent inequity in the high-needs schools–with more teachers, teacher assistants, tutors, and afterschool programs–the teachers could be part of school improvement. It was up to the state to change its approach and promote the potential of teacher agency.

The fourth research question asked: How did the model of teacher agency frame high-performing teachers' experiences and opinions? Data indicated that the model of agency structured high-performing teachers' responses by helping to explain the lack of teacher agency and thus reform in North Carolina schools. High-performing teachers explained that they possessed the willingness and vision to act to improve their schools. Nonetheless, the perceived work context created by the state's institutional culture and the districts' external constraints severely limited if not eliminated teacher agency for school reform in "low-performing" schools. The state and district directives curtailed agency and thus the outcomes for "low-performing" schools remained poor and the possibilities for school reform puny. According to the theory of teacher agency, agency could produce school reform and outcomes if supported by the proper work context and individual practice. These teachers experienced prohibitive circumstances as

imposed by the districts and state that limited their agency and thus reform. I have experienced instances where the application of teacher agency in elementary schools produced positive climates and outcomes for students and teachers. When applied properly, the theory of teacher agency was promising for "low-performing" schools.

Findings in the Context of Empirical Literature

Many have studied high-performing teachers and others have examined ways to improve "low-performing" schools. The findings of this study revealed that: the high-performing teachers tried to improve their schools but did not have enough agency; teachers were not able to be agentic because the state and districts discounted research and teacher practical experience; teachers demonstrated the vision and ability for school reform if only granted agency by the districts and the state; and the theory of teacher agency helped explain the lack of reform and improvement in North Carolina schools. Much of the previous empirical literature underestimated the extent "low-performing" schools policy directives denied teacher agency and school reform (Bowen, 2022; Chenoweth, 2009; Parrett & Budge, 2020).

Not Enough Agency (For it to be Done)

The first research question sought to know: How did the experience of becoming a high-performing teacher in a "low-performing" elementary school inform the teacher's agency for change and leadership outside their classroom? The teachers could make significant efforts to improve their schools through personal factors, curriculum mastery, and teamwork through their professional learning communities. Johnson et al. (2014) agreed that teachers could have some success in impacting their school with the proper environment and support from their principal. Some schools could even be very successful through certain instructional strategies, collective efficacy, and data analysis (Chenoweth, 2009; Parrett & Budge, 2020). The teachers in this study

followed many of the recommendations in the literature to improve learning in their classrooms and achieved at high levels where they were recognized by their districts or state (Chenoweth, 2009; Parrett & Budge, 2020; Payne, 2008). It could be done *in the classroom*, to paraphrase Chenoweth (2007). Nevertheless, teachers did not have enough agency to make a difference schoolwide. In this study, I defined teacher agency as the quality of engaged teacher action to address challenges in the classroom, school environments or beyond (Priestley et al., 2015). Teachers in this study were denied the agency to fix the problems in their schools and beyond. Their schools suffered the consequences and continued to make low grades on the state performance system.

Meanwhile, other "low-performing" schools also struggled to produce positive results in North Carolina. The number of "low-performing" schools grew from 488 to over 800 and only a fraction of restart schools moved out of failing status (Helms, 2023a; Helms, 2023b; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2023c). North Carolina's turnaround programs, like other similar national efforts, were problematic and ineffective (Heissel & Ladd, 2018; Henry & Harbatkin, 2019; Schueler et al., 2020). The teachers in this study explained why "low-performing" schools policy was failing: it was eliminating teacher agency, the ability for teachers to respond to student learning needs, to lead their schools to more effective reforms, and to provide feedback to districts and to the state about practices that worked.

Why it is Not Being Done: Ignoring Research and Practice

The second research question asked: What factors did high-performing teachers identify that promoted or hindered exercising agency to influence change in "low-performing" schools? The findings demonstrated that the state and districts curtailed teacher agency by dismissing the research and teacher practice about "low-performing" schools. The "low-performing" schools

policy was not improving school outcomes because the state and districts implementing the policy dismissed research about student achievement being largely tied to socioeconomic factors (Fofaria, 2022; Goldstein, 2015; Nordstrom & Tillitski, 2021; Oakes et al., 2019; Wagner, 2019). Since the Coleman report of 1966, studies have documented the powerful influence of family income on student test results (Goldstein, 2015). Nordstrom and Tillitski (2021) demonstrated that North Carolina student proficiency scores were strongly correlated with student demographics, too. The WestEd report expressed concerns over the school performance grading system based on test scores and suggested using other metrics (WestEd, Learning Policy Institute, & Friday Institute for Educational Innovation at North Carolina State University, 2019). End of grade tests determined the school performance grade which designated schools as "low-performing" unless their annual growth was over 85%. Thus, the school grades and the "low-performing" status were mostly a product of student wealth and demographics.

In spite of this well-documented phenomenon, the state and districts insisted on blaming teachers for low test scores, removing their agency, and increasing pressure on the schools. They did not ask the teachers about their practice and what should be done to improve their schools. They did not promote the agency of high-performing teachers who tried to make a difference beyond their classroom, in fact, they restricted it severely and made the schools worse. Throughout their time in their "low-performing" schools, the teachers in this study did not did not hole up in their rooms and reject leadership opportunities like those in Poplin et al. (2011). Instead they led professional learning communities, school improvement teams, Positive Behavior Intervention Supports committees, and restart committees. They spoke with me for hours about what they would have done if given the agency. They would have redirected school finances, expanded family engagement, found ways to support "low-performing" schools with

more resources and staff, built effective professional learning communities, and attracted top teachers to productive learning environments. The teachers had the answers, expertise, and leadership, if only the districts and state had asked about their recommendations and respected their potential for agency.

How it Could be Done: Recognize Teacher Agency

The third research question examined, based on their experience and the theory of teacher agency, how did high-performing teachers in "low-performing" schools describe their strategies for school improvement, transformation, and equity? The third research question produced findings from teachers' agency about ways to address the issues behind the "low-performing" schools policy. The key result was that the state, districts, and administration should find teachers who were succeeding in their classrooms and listen to their suggestions. Ask them questions, seek to understand their perspectives and their opinions. Listen to these experts. These high-performing teachers generated many ideas of how to better address the challenges of "low-performing" schools. In one instance, they argued that classes in these schools should have a 15:1 ratio of student to teacher, just as the *Leandro* consultant recommended (Oakes et al., 2019). These teachers went beyond WestEd's proposals and explained how teacher assistants, tutors, and afterschool teachers or counselors were necessary to meet every student's needs.

Through their attempts at agency, the teachers provided incisive analysis about the forces that drove the "low-performing" schools policy to fail. One teacher recognized that discrimination against the largely female elementary teaching contingent partially explained why high-performers felt they were not listened to or respected. Goldstein (2015) had described the challenges of the feminization of teaching over multiple generations and how female teachers had struggled for decades to be heard. Podjasek (2009) also found conflicts between female

teachers and male principals in their attempts to provide leadership. Other teachers in the study explained the necessity of reform for the school performance grade due to its similarity to segregation. Nordstrom and Tillitski (2021) had similarly critiqued the process of assigning schools grades based on test scores as largely reflective of student demographics and liable to promote segregation in schools and communities. Some of the teachers shared that they felt the underlying culture of the "low-performing" schools policy was "sadistic" and bent on punishment, embarrassment, and cruelty. Payne (2008) had expounded upon the dysfunction in challenging schools in Chicago, but these were powerful accusations about the state of North Carolina and its approach to supposed school improvement. Unlike the teachers in Biesta et al. (2015) who possessed a reduced vision about reform due to the pervasiveness of their top-down systems in Scotland, these teachers were able to critically analyze the larger issues in their schools and produce apt suggestions. These teachers still possessed the agency to articulate their experience and propose recommendations to make "low-performing" schools better.

The Theory of Teacher Agency Applied for Success

The fourth research question queried: How did the model of teacher agency frame high-performing teachers' experiences and opinions? The fourth research question yielded findings that showed how the teachers' experiences supported the model of teacher agency. I have defined teacher agency in accordance with Priestley et al. (2015) as the quality of engaged teacher action to address challenges in the classroom, school environments or beyond. The teachers tried to utilize their agency to turnaround their schools only to be denied by their districts through micromanagement, marginalization, and dehumanization. They explained what they would have done if they had the opportunity and the state, their districts, and some principals, not interfered. They possessed the vision and the desire based on their individual

practice, but according to the theory of teacher agency, the perceived work context shut down the "quality of their engaged teacher action."

According to Imants and Van der Wal (2020), the "perceived work context" could limit agency and thus restrict school reform and improvement. Priestley et al. (2015) confirmed that a domineering or overbearing environment reduced teacher agency. The teachers described the "low-performing" school context as so frustrating to their efforts to be change agents that most teachers abandoned their schools to teach elsewhere. District and state elimination of teacher agency recalled the dysfunction that Payne (2008) described that created disincentives to improve schools and that turned district initiatives into counterproductive impediments to progress.

The denial of teacher agency produced terrible results that continued to worsen as the numbers of "low-performing" schools increased (Helms, 2023a; Helms, 2023b; Heissel & Ladd, 2018; Henry & Harbatkin, 2019). According to the teachers in this study, elements of the accountability system were making it harder to teach in a "low-performing" school and increasing the teacher shortage. They explained that the policy was particularly harmful to schools labeled "low-performing" as opposed to schools that happened to be Title One schools. They demonstrated how district and state policies made the challenging situation of trying to teach and lead with agency even more difficult and ultimately intolerable.

The teachers encouraged districts and the state to reverse direction, create a work context that encouraged agency and thus lead to school reform and better outcomes. Other school systems, some across the globe, followed this course, promoted teacher agency, and produced first-rate results (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Ng, 2015; Sahlberg, 2015). The theory of teacher agency asserted that such efforts at agency would lead to reform and results if supported

by the right context. The teachers in this study confirmed how much of an effect "perceived work context" could have on teacher agency and thus school reform (Imants & Van der Wal, 2020).

Based on the findings of this study, I propose a way forward for "low-performing" schools in North Carolina, as seen in Figure 2. Beginning with Imants and Van der Wal's (2020) model of teacher agency for school reform and professional development, I added several components that would address the challenges of "low-performing" schools in particular. Agency is centered in the model but teacher voice is an essential component for agency to produce change. Agency with voice is advantageous to school improvement because it produces outcomes and results as well as creativity and innovation. It is responsive to student needs and helps align initiatives to what the students require for learning. Thus, it is more efficient and streamlined than out of touch officials making wrongheaded decisions.

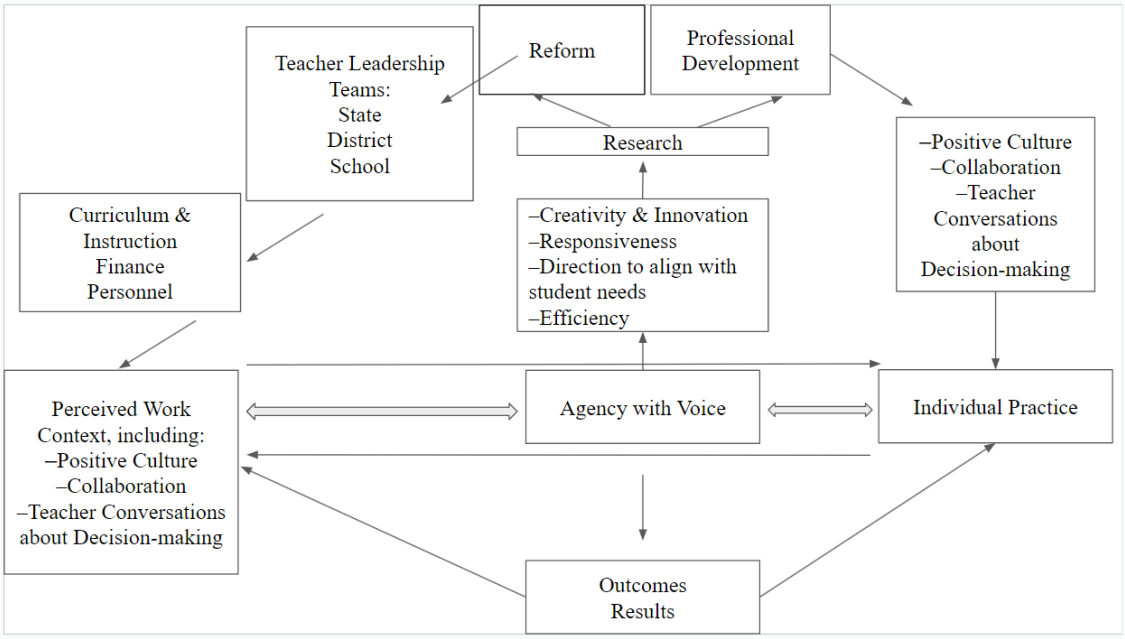

Figure 2

The Model of Teacher Agency for Reform of "Low-Performing" Schools

Next, agency leads to research of worthwhile initiatives before spurring school reform and professional development. Professional development in “low-performing” schools should enhance teacher voice and agency through ways to promote a positive culture, collaboration, and teacher conversations about decision-making. This professional learning will strengthen teacher agency and the perceived work context through improved individual practice.

Proper school reform should require organizational change and a new work context for “low-performing” schools. The state and districts should form teacher leadership teams consisting of high-performing teachers from “low-performing” schools. Just like schools have school improvement teams made up of teacher leaders, the state and districts should seek teacher input and leadership. These teams will lead on crucial decisions for “low-performing” schools about curriculum and instruction, finance, and personnel. This in turn will enhance the perceived work context with positive culture, collaboration, and teacher conversations about decision-making. Teacher agency will fuel school reform and improved results in “low-performing” schools through enhanced voice, informed decision-making, and multi-level teamwork.

It is now necessary for state, district, and community leaders to recognize teacher agency and dedicate themselves to a new approach for school improvement. Bryk (2010) had indicated that engaged communities supporting productive strategies like teacher agency would lead to solutions for “low-performing” schools: “In the end, melding strong, independent disciplined inquiry with a sustained commitment among civic leaders to improve schooling is the only long-term assurance that an education of value for all may finally emerge” (p. 30). For enduring results, continued study combined with civic commitment will provide for better schools for those most in need.

In September, 2023, the North Carolina State Board of Education issued a press release about the improvement of some restart schools and the state board chair wanted to expand on their success. According to the data, many of the restart schools had met or exceeded growth goals. The press statement neglected to clarify that meeting growth did not remove a school from the "low-performing" ranks. Only schools that exceeded growth advanced. The report acknowledged that the percentage of "low-performing" schools actually increased since 2020:

> Still, because of disruptions to teaching and learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, a larger percentage of the 148 schools in the five cohorts were considered recurring low performing after the 2021-22 school year than of the 102 schools in the first two cohorts after the 2018-19 school year. (Staff, 2023)

More of the restart schools were "low-performing" than in 2019. Of course, the pandemic affected school performance.

Still, many "low-performing" schools, about a third, chose not to adopt the restart strategy. The board chair and others sought to know why. Restart schools were supposed to grant charter-like flexibilities for funding and hiring. According to the press release, "In terms of the kinds of flexibilities that restart schools chose to employ, 95% of the schools took advantage of leeway allowed in budgeting, primarily for additional staffing or flexibility in the use of staff" (Staff, 2023). In my experience, restart did not provide more funds or more staff. It was helpful in a limited way should a school want to move a physical education teacher to the classroom without certification. The reality was that flexibility was extremely limited.

This was another clear example of the limitations on teacher agency and thus school improvement. In the restart model, schools received flexibility in name only or a tiny amount of practical flexibility. The state was as miserly in offering flexibility in restart as it was in agency

for teachers. There was plenty of blame and displacement, stress and pressure, but few funds and the agency to make decisions about them. The reason few "low-performing" schools did not choose to become restart schools was: it was not worth it. It was more paperwork and no more money. They gained little flexibility and no more teacher agency.

The restart results spoke to the failure of the program as few schools emerged from "low-performing" status. Meeting expected growth did not mean success. It meant remaining labeled as "low-performing." Some of the restart schools might have been successful. Nevertheless, the important takeaway was that most schools were still failing and the state was not offering worthwhile agency to teachers. The question was not how to expand restart, but how to design a more productive way to improve schools altogether. The answer was that the theory of teacher agency pointed in a more fruitful direction.

Implications

Considering the findings of this study, one of the implications was that improving "low-performing" schools was a political struggle. Many state politicians argued against *Leandro* and for accountability, tests, and school choice. Politicians and citizens in favor of school improvement needed to consider the voices of high-performing teachers and share the lessons they provided. These high-performing teachers contradicted the stereotypes that accountability stalwarts and "disrupters" promoted (Ravitch, 2020). These teachers were not "lazy" and "unmotivated" or a negative influence on learning. In fact, they were the opposite. They were productive agents of change, if only the state government had allowed them to be. They recognized the wrong direction of the politicians who supported the school performance grade status quo. Political experts needed to consider the findings of this study and determine a way forward to redirect the political process in favor of teacher agency and true school reform.

Politics

This year, the state Department of Public Instruction has been in the process of reviewing the school performance grades (McClellan, 2023). Recently, many have questioned the accuracy of the grading system (Fofaria, 2022). The policymakers should consider the voices of high-performing teachers as they make their recommendations to the General Assembly. They have an opportunity to not just change the grading system but reform the "low-performing" schools policy. The current policy stifled school reform and improvement because it denied teacher agency and ignored high-performing teacher practices. The "low-performing" schools policy was based on the performance grade and punished schools with a D or an F with a discriminatory approach that worsened school performance and chased away good teachers. Policymakers should consider these deleterious outcomes and expand their reform of the school performance grade to the entire "low-performing" schools policy. A full review was necessary of the negative effects of the accountability system and the positive potential of teacher agency.

Preparations and Perspective

Principals and teachers needed to be aware of the political fight over "low-performing" schools and its impact on their students. Education has always been a political battleground (Goldstein, 2015). In North Carolina, one side has committed to the status quo. Apparently in their fight for the political upper hand, this side did not support *Leandro* reforms at the expense of the students, teachers, and families in "low-performing" schools. For years, the Marine Corps has encouraged its Marines to know their history in order to be prepared for the next enemy, the next fight. Santayana reminded educators that those who did not learn history were doomed to repeat it. The recent history of "low-performing" schools was a cautionary tale for teachers and administrators to study thoroughly to find ways to help their students.

Children

The primary implication of this study was that the “low-performing” schools policy was hurting thousands of children in North Carolina (Helms, 2023b; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2023c). Parents needed to know that the state policy was harmful to their children's learning. The state actions were part of the reason why their children did not have experienced and effective teachers. They were part of the reason their child’s teacher was from a foreign country. They were why the classes were overcrowded and the teachers did not return their phone calls because they had 30 other calls to make, one for each fifth grader in the class. They were why for years their children were not taught to read (Hanford, 2017). Just like the state altered their reading policy, they could change the “low-performing” schools policy and effect change for children.

Recommendations

The high-performing teachers in this study presented numerous suggestions for actions to improve “low-performing” schools. Reviewing their findings and the literature unearthed multiple recommendations for teachers, administration, districts, and the state. While the size and nature of this research was not designed to make generalizations, some of the findings might be useful for practitioners or lead to further research. The following sections outlined these recommendations by category.

Teachers

The five teachers expressed several recommendations about how they became high-performing teachers in their “low-performing” schools. The five case studies emphasized the importance of holding high-expectations, crafting positive student relationships, pushing the students to achieve, and working with colleagues in their professional learning communities to

become experts in teaching. These steps were confirmed in much of the literature about high-performing teachers in "low-performing" schools (Bryk, 2010; Chenoweth, 2009; Herman et al., 2008; Johnson et al., 2014; Parrett & Budge, 2020). Moreover, the state, districts, and schools should encourage more agency for teachers through giving teachers professional development around the standards and time to collaborate on planning. The high-performers insisted on the necessity of learning every aspect of their curriculum and multiple ways to teach the material. They all emphasized how they put forth the extra effort to make sure they mastered how to implement the curricular expectations through additional study and discussion with teammates. Knowledge of their craft and subject matter increased the quality of the teachers' agency in the classroom and beyond.

"Low-performing" schools should consider the value of teachers who had previous experience as a teacher assistant. Four of the five high-performers were teacher assistants before becoming teachers and they credited their time as assistants as being important to their success. As Michelle said, "experience matters" and time as an assistant mattered to her and other high performers. The time helped Michelle and Elizabeth master classroom management in a "low-performing" school and exposed them to a variety of teaching styles. In contrast, few of the teachers credited their college experience as preparing them to be successful in their "low-performing" schools. College prepared them somewhat with lesson planning, but not for what they really needed: classroom management and curriculum mastery. The role of teacher assistant experience in the furthering of high-performance in "low-performing" schools might call for more study. This observation might reveal a need to adjust the pre-service preparation process as well as an examination of how to develop promising teacher assistants to become teachers in

"low-performing" schools. There might be another candidate pool full of potential for teaching in "low-performing" schools. More adept teachers might raise the level of agency as well.

Teachers should prioritize learning from their colleagues in their professional learning communities in order to achieve high-performance and increase their agency. The high-performing teachers in this study grew in their professional learning communities by sharing and listening. Sergio's experience contrasted with the others as he shared his frustration with unmotivated and unhelpful fellow teachers in his "low-performing" school. His grade level hindered his professional expertise and thus agency by their lack of teamwork and inability to share. Teachers need to be open and supportive of one another in order to develop into high-performing teachers and enact high-quality agency. They should learn from one another to build capacity in their grade level and school. With teacher attrition in "low-performing" schools reducing the knowledge of teachers and teams, the rebuilding of the teacher work force and expertise appears to be an urgent priority. "Low-performing" schools should build teacher agency by attracting effective, high-performers that were willing to listen, learn, and grow together.

Administration

Analyzing the findings of this study in light of the empirical literature, several important recommendations emerged for principals or assistant principals. Principals needed to be aware that the district might plan for the content teacher or instructional facilitators to report to them, not administration. The principals might not be in charge of the content teachers. They might be working for the district, not the principal. Payne (2008) had forewarned of this possibility.

Furthermore, under "low-performing" schools policy, principals should not expect a long tenure in a "low-performing" school. The state law on the turnaround model called for principal

removal after three years (Reform of Continually Low-Performing Schools, 2010/2014). The teachers explained how they saw principals turnover every two to three years and they saw this as another impetus for teacher turnover and school decline. Short-term principals were less able to promote and protect teacher agency against the demands of school districts.

Principals needed to be aware of the cost of moving teachers involuntarily. As the district focused narrowly on test scores, principals were sometimes forced to move high-performing teachers to positions against their will. Several teachers left the "low-performing" school when moved against their wishes.

Principals should take actions to strengthen teacher agency in "low-performing" schools. The theory of teacher agency recommended that higher quality agency would lead to higher outcomes and effective school reform (Imants & Van der Wal, 2020). The findings of this study supported the clear evidence from literature that cohesive and collaborative professional learning communities advanced teacher agency (Bryk, 2010; Chenoweth, 2009; Johnson, et al., 2014; Parrett & Budge, 2020). Principals should also empower school improvement teams to work together and make decisions for the school (Johnson, et al., 2014; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Principals should avoid some of the leadership failures discussed in the findings where the school administrator counteracted the school improvement team and the restart committee. Principals should avoid denying teacher agency. Teachers should set the agenda for school improvement and principals should allow teacher agency to increase.

The future of "low-performing" schools will be built upon the teacher agency that current principals are able to develop and grow to sustain a core of teacher leaders. These teachers will possess the capacity to act as change agents when given the opportunity. Until districts and the state change their policies for "low-performing" schools, teachers will be restricted in their

agency and principals will be inhibited from fully promoting it. Some principals had faced repercussions for their support for teachers. In the meantime, principals should develop agency by listening to their teachers, particularly the high-performers, and seek their wisdom, guidance, and insight.

Districts

School districts were caught between the crises of the "low-performing" schools and the mandates of the state. Even within the accountability system and its hyper-focused attention on end of grade scores, districts needed to recognize that the path to reform and out of "low-performing" status would be through teacher agency. According to theory and the experience of these teachers, teacher agency would lead to school reform and improvement (Imants & Van der Wal, 2020).

As seen in these case studies, districts needed to be more wary of applying pressure on "low-performing" schools and telling teachers exactly what to do. The pressure demoralized teachers, led to poor district decision-making, and only made the schools worse off. District policies only drove their high-performers away and maintained the status quo. The top-down, micromanagement, checklist strategy was a complete failure. Having content teachers and instructional facilitators act as watchdogs and compliance officers only worsened school performance. Rationalizing that districts were helping the teachers by writing their lesson plans and giving them stars for adherence to requirements led to complete school staff turnover. Districts possessed the ability to improve the "low-performing" schools through an entirely different approach. School districts needed to put their energy into developing and supporting teacher agency.

Districts should have listened to the high-performing teachers to learn what would have worked. If the county personnel had recognized the ability of the teachers and allowed them to be part of decisions, the district would have raised morale, retained more teachers, increased teacher capacity, and invigorated teacher agency to create the necessary reforms and innovations. Recognition of the power of school decision-making should have led to an investment in professional learning communities and school improvement teams. Districts should have turned to research about ways to restructure and encourage teacher collaboration (Schleifer, et al., 2017; Spillane, et al., 2018). As the teachers in this study also recommended, districts could have worked with "low-performing" schools to make more connections with families and the community, so the teachers felt more supported. More associations with families and fellow teachers would have spurred teacher agency and reform.

The essential first step for districts was to seek out teacher opinions and perspectives on ways to make the schools better. Districts should form teacher leadership teams of high-performing teachers from "low-performing" schools. These teachers should lead reforms and district decisions about curriculum and instruction, finance, and personnel for "low-performing" schools. This approach will change the work context of such schools, promote more teacher agency, and unleash the potential in "low-performing" schools.

State

Based on the findings of this study, the state should have made several policy changes to improve school performance for those labeled "low-performing." As the teachers explained, the teachers, schools, and districts depended on the state to set the direction for the "low-performing" schools. State policies set in motion the series of decisions that eliminated teacher

agency in these schools and made their performance even worse. New policies should reverse this downward spiral or "downhill" process.

The state of North Carolina should immediately rescind its "low-performing" schools policy and stop giving schools performance grades based on end of grade proficiency scores. As seen in these case studies and in the results in the empirical literature, the system was flawed and not improving schools. The state could still have a report card based on other metrics, as the *Leandro* consultant, WestEd, suggested (Oakes et al., 2019). Student growth was less correlated to socioeconomic level, so that could be a much more productive measure that would not tar schools and communities with a "scarlet letter" determined by family income. Other data points could highlight how schools were improving and inspire communities to further support their local schools (Nordstrom & Tillitski, 2021). Likewise, changing the school grades so they promoted the positive aspects of the school would also be a selling point for the area and increase the marketability of the neighborhood.

Reducing the emphasis on the end of grade test proficiency would also lower the stress on schools with more complex demographics. As the teachers testified, the myopic devotion to end of grade results was a major driver of districts' pressure on teachers and created a counterproductive cycle that ensured that the schools did not improve. Surveying teachers in "low-performing" schools across the state to explain what happens at their school level might provide insight into how to adjust the end of grade testing analysis and incentive process. Giving bonuses for individual performance was another concept that reduced teacher agency. The case studies made clear that incentives should be established to help teachers collaborate and lead, not compete. Competition led to less agency through isolation, reluctance to share ideas, and negative interpersonal relations between those who received bonuses and those who did not. The

state might have to reconsider the entire accountability model to promote student learning rather than reinforce failure.

The proper approach, as these teachers argued, was through teacher agency and empowerment. Listening to teachers about their needs and ways to help students was the essential launch point. Disrupting forces in education might argue that schools would be better if run like a business (Ravitch, 2020). In that case, it was strange that college educated professionals in education did not receive the agency that other businesses granted their college graduates. As Casey (2006) explained, businesses ran better with worker agency and learning organizations would, too. The five teachers spoke clearly in this study, asking for more help and more support to address their student needs. They recognized that there was not much hope in support from the state as long as it subscribed to its wrongheaded ways of punishing teachers and labeling schools "low-performing." If the state wanted to improve "low-performing" schools, it could take corrective actions such as those in the *Leandro* recommendations (Oakes et al., 2019). The state could listen to teachers and send more help by reducing class size, adding more teacher assistants, more tutors, and more afterschool programs. Furthermore, the state should create teacher leadership teams of high-performing teachers from "low-performing" schools that could lead state-wide reforms to promote teacher agency in such schools. The state needed to revise its accountability mindset and truly turnaround schools by listening to high-performing teachers and recognizing the power of teacher agency.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study has generated several questions for future study. The high-performing teachers in the "low-performing" schools brought up multiple topics and concerns that researchers might find fruitful. Each of these case studies called for action with a certain sense of immediacy and

concern for students, teachers, and families who were faced with policies that were discriminatory and inequitable.

This study was small and localized but might lead to further research about the nature of teaching in “low-performing” schools. Researchers could investigate the working conditions in other “low-performing” schools throughout the state of North Carolina through quantitative studies. Other quantitative methods could delve into the effect of the “low-performing” schools policy on teacher agency and school reform. Surveys or data analysis of teacher working conditions could determine a better understanding of the experience of teachers and high-performing teachers in “low-performing” schools across North Carolina.

Other qualitative studies could search out more high-performing teachers to see how their experience compared to these case studies. Teachers could answer questions such as recommending the more effective paths to become a high-performing teacher, such as time as a teacher assistant. Teachers in other schools and districts might provide additional insights through more in-depth interviews and conversations. These five teachers were ready to share their opinions and other teachers may produce extensive explanations about the status of teacher agency in “low-performing” schools.

The teachers in this study brought up multiple subjects that bear further exploration. They discussed the dynamics of teacher turnover and how state and district pressure worsened staffing in “low-performing” schools. There was a need to explore this dynamic in other parts of the state to see the extent of this problem. Another question that arose called for looking into the process of decision-making at the state and the district levels about “low-performing” schools. Researchers could also identify how to best include teachers in the conversations at district and state levels about improving “low-performing” schools. Furthermore, researchers needed to

determine the ways to change the “low-performing” schools policy at the state level. Based on the findings, the current policy was discriminatory, inequitable, and caused academic harm. There was a sorrowful urgency in the statements of the five teachers in this study. Perhaps the most accessible, convenient, and immediate direction for future study would be simply to ask more teachers their opinions about their experience in “low-performing” schools and paths to reform.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations of note. First, the study only involved five teachers without a broad representation of characteristics. Four of the five teachers were female, one was a Latina, and one was an older teacher, over 50. One teacher was a Black male. This study was a small, unique sample of particular perspectives but applicable in what they exposed, not for their extensive diversity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

This study was also limited to teachers who I had observed during their instruction and also those I knew were high-performing based on their test scores. They all were awarded for their growth or proficiency and most received bonuses from the state for their performance. I had worked with some of the teachers, but I did not work with them during the scope of this study. The teachers did not all teach in the same school districts. The study was also limited to teachers who taught in “low-performing” schools, so other expert insights of high-performing teachers who taught at less complex schools were not included.

The teachers were aware that I was a building-level administrator, so their interpretation of my position might have limited the study somewhat. Some of their responses might have been couched in certain terms to avoid any misinterpretation or misunderstanding by an administrator.

I did edit personal references and have tried to withhold identifiable information to protect the participants' privacy.

The study was limited in some ways by previous experiences I had with the teachers. They knew that I was an administrator. I had to apply special interpretation to some of their comments that referenced me or other administrators. I did not anticipate this aspect of the interviews. Some of their comments could have been interpreted as flattering to me. Others seemed qualified so as not to degenerate administrators in general, and possibly offend me. I bridled my interpretations of their comments about administrators with caution, knowing the power relationship that may have existed between the participants and me and how it might have shaped their responses (Vagle, 2018). As an administrator, my presence and profession might have limited the fullness and accuracy of some of their observations about principals.

In this study, I was able to obtain a full discussion of agency from each participant. I did intentionally limit providing the teachers with definitions of teacher agency or leadership so they would use their own words to define the terms. I asked open-ended questions about their understanding of agency, so teachers would talk about what worked or did not in their own language, with their own meanings. Then, I analyzed and interpreted their explanations of agency to conceptualize their understanding of teacher agency.

Conclusion

These teachers told a sad tale of the struggle and decline of "low-performing" elementary schools. They clearly expressed that the "low-performing" schools policy was not working and was making these schools worse. They issued a "wake-up call" for the state of North Carolina to change its policy before more damage was done. Chenoweth (2009) had written about *How It's Being Done* in a handful of schools, how high-poverty schools had achieved high-performance.

The teachers in this study showed *why* it was *not* being done in "low-performing" schools in North Carolina. They explained how they experienced the deterioration of their schools well in advance of the recognition by decision-makers at the district level or state level. They cautioned that if the district ignored their voices, they would only delay their own realization of the inevitable: that their policies had failed.

These teachers called for immediate action. In short, they sought an end to the "low-performing" schools policy on the grounds it was discriminatory, inequitable, and hurt students' learning. They proposed changing the state metrics to determine school quality and shift to measurements like student growth that were more fair to schools with complex demographics. Last, they proved the possibilities of empowering teachers through teacher agency to reform schools and help them succeed.

The best course was to start talking to teachers in "low-performing" schools immediately to begin working on ways to improve schools. Recognizing and strengthening teacher agency as soon as possible would provide a way to immediately reverse course. Many of the teachers with agency had left "low-performing" schools or were considering leaving soon. The hope for "low-performing" schools was present in the potential teacher agency that remained in each school. The pressing need was to find and activate the teacher agency before it vanished.

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APPENDIX A: FIRST INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Semi-structured interview

Length: 90 minutes, Zoom recorded

Schedule: conduct between May-July 2023

Purpose: gather background information about the participant to provide context; understand experiences about becoming a high-performing teacher; understand early experiences in teaching and leading for change; understand beliefs and philosophy of education and change

Steps:

1. Review the expectations for study participation.
2. Review the definitions of terms used in this study: high-performing teacher, "low-performing" schools
3. Begin interview.

Participant (pseudonym):

Date/time of Interview:

Location of interview:

<u>Origins</u>

How did your journey start to become a high-performing teacher?

Tell me about events that shaped your becoming a high-performing teacher.

*Why did you choose a career in education?

Describe your teacher preparation experience and coursework.

How has your teacher preparation and coursework helped you become a

better/effective/ or high-performing teacher?

When did you start teaching?

“Low-performing” School Context

*Define “low-performing” school in your words? What does that mean to you?

How did you arrive at teaching in a “low-performing” school?

Why did you start teaching in a "low-performing" school?

How long did you teach there?

Describe the school setting at the “low-performing” school.

What was the "low-performing" school like?

Describe other teachers at the school.

Describe the staff relationships, interactions with administration and families.

How did it feel to teach in the school?

Agency and Leadership

How did you start to take action outside of your classroom to improve the school?

How do you define action or agency outside of your classroom?

How did you start to take action outside of your classroom to improve the school?

What outcomes did you achieve in your teaching in a “low-performing” school?

Beliefs

What do you believe is the purpose of education?

Did you believe you could make a difference at the school?

*Recommendations by a teacher reviewer.

APPENDIX B: SECOND INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Semi-structured interview

Length: 90 minutes, Zoom recorded

Schedule: Conduct between May-July 2023

Purpose: address the present experience of the participant and call forth stories and specifics of the present experience, in being a high-performing teacher trying to improve the school outside of the classroom

Steps:

1. Review the expectations for study participation.
2. Review the definitions of terms used in this study: high-performing teacher, "low-performing" schools
3. Begin interview.

Participant (pseudonym):

Date/time of Interview:

Location of interview:

Agency

How have you tried to make a difference for your students in your classroom?

How have you tried to make a difference for students outside of your classroom?

Follow up question, if necessary: What steps did you take to improve the school outside of your classroom?

Outcomes

What efforts worked in making a difference?

What did not work?

Why or why not?

How did COVID affect your efforts at school improvement?

Context

Tell me about your experiences with your professional learning communities in trying to improve grade level performance.

Tell me about your experiences with the school improvement team in order to improve school performance.

What experiences did you have with administration in trying to raise student performance?

What factors helped you in making a difference in improving your school?

*As a high-performing teacher, what have you experienced that promotes school improvement?

What obstacles worked against you to improve the school outside of your classroom?

Anything else that you would like to comment upon or that I have forgotten to ask?

APPENDIX C: THIRD INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Semi-structured interview

Length: 90 minutes, Zoom recorded

Schedule: Conduct between May-July 2023

Purpose: explore high-performing teachers' perspectives on school reform and directions for "low-performing" schools

Steps:

1. Review the expectations for study participation.
2. Review the definitions of terms used in this study: high-performing teacher, "low-performing" schools
3. Begin interview.

Participant (pseudonym):

Date/time of Interview:

Location of interview:

Outcomes

Describe the most significant actions you took for school improvement.

What were the results of your actions for school improvement?

Recommendations

What lessons did you learn from the efforts?

How does your experience as a high-performing teacher inform your perspective on school improvement?

What are your recommendations to improve "low-performing" schools?

What recommendations do you have at the district level for ways to improve “low-performing” schools?

What do you recommend at the state level for ways to improve “low-performing” schools?

What do you recommend at the systemic level for ways to improve “low-performing” schools?

Reform

How should we design a more fair school system?

What recommendations do you have about the school report card?

What should it look like? Should there be one at all?

What is the hope for “low-performing” schools?

What is your vision of school improvement?

Anything else that you would like to comment upon or that I have forgotten to ask?

*Recommendation from a teacher review.