

EDUCATORS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE EFFECTIVENESS  
OF STRATEGIES TO CLOSE THE READING  
ACHIEVEMENT GAP OF BLACK BOYS

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## ABSTRACT

The Crumpton School District (CSD) is a high performing school district in suburban Philadelphia that has expended a great deal of energy and work to close gaps in the achievement of its Black students. Despite these efforts, 2016 standardized test data reflect a reading achievement gap of 28 percentage points for Black boys attending four of the CSD schools with the largest percent of Black boys enrolled. This qualitative study was designed to provide the CSD with implications for practice to continue and improve its work related to increasing the reading achievement of Black boys. More specifically, this study examined educators' perceptions of the effectiveness of strategies and conditions in place to close the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys. This study also examined the roles of CSD administrators in their efforts and plans for closing the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys. Individual interviews of 11 third grade teachers, seven reading specialists, four special education teachers, four curriculum specialists, three principals, one assistant principal, one supervisor of special education, and one supervisor of communication arts, as well as the review of principal's school improvement plans and goals, were the sources of the qualitative data. Detailed analyses of the qualitative data collected provided recommendations for teachers and educators of CSD to improve the manner by which they provide Black boys with equitable opportunities to achieve in the area of reading. These recommendations, hopefully, could benefit similarly situated districts in the state and nation.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate my doctoral journey to my favorite ladies and best friends, my wife Erica Jordan and my mother, Doris Jean Crumpton. Approximately 7 years ago, I was sitting at my mother's bedside as she battled breast cancer and I was in the process of writing a paper for a graduate class. While tending to my mother, who was barely coherent, she somehow gathered and collected her thoughts and said, "No matter what happens to me, I want you to finish." While I did not respond immediately, I knew that she sensed that I was overwhelmed with work, graduate school, and caring for her needs. To date, my mother is the only person who has ever understood me completely. She had the ability to diagnose and remediate my issues and internal struggles both directly and indirectly. On this evening, I sensed that she believed that I was growing tired and contemplating withdrawing from my doctoral program. After my failed attempt to change the subject of the conversation, I finally promised my mother that I would finish. She passed away a few weeks later.

Since my mother's passing, I have been developing a collage in the closet of my home office titled, "Keeping My Promise Mom." The collage is made of pertinent documents and correspondences from Temple University noting and detailing my progress through my doctoral program. The collage, coupled with the promise that I made to my mother, has kept me motivated and engaged during this long journey. Although my mother is not present to celebrate this milestone with me, I know that she is proud of me and that she knew that I would absolutely keep my promise.

I also dedicate my doctoral journey and study to my beautiful wife, Erica Jordan. While my mother is the only one who has completely understood me, Erica is the only one who can tolerate me and that is not an easy feat. I extend my overwhelming feelings of gratitude and appreciation to you for your strength, support, patience, and love. Thank you for respecting the

intensity of the journey, especially during the dissertation phase. Despite all the obstacles, you were steadfast while supporting me through these challenging times and I will be forever grateful.

In conclusion, I dedicate this study to my dear friends, family members, and colleagues who were at my side throughout my entire doctoral program. Your words of encouragement and your proofreading efforts played an integral role in my ability to progress through my doctoral program and to evolve professionally and personally.

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

### The Achievement Gap

Are many Black students failing in school or are schools failing many Black students (Haddix, 2010)? An achievement gap separating Black from White students has long been documented - a social divide extremely vexing to policy makers and the target of one blast of school reform after another (Gabriel, 2010). While some studies suggest that the gap is closing, many counter that the gap is actually widening. Based on student achievement data tracked from 2005-2013, The Education Trust reported that Black students are 2.5 times as likely as their White counterparts to perform below the basic level in both reading and math and only 1 in 10 Black students scored at or above proficient in math, compared with 1 in 3 White students. In 1994, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, fourth-grade reading scores for Black boys lagged behind those of all other groups at the same grade level. The Black-White Grade 4 reading gap in 2007 was significant in all 44 states for which data were available (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Nationally, only 12 % of Black fourth-grade boys are proficient in reading, compared to 38 % of White boys (Gabriel, 2010). Due to lack of comparable data, it is unclear when the achievement gap started, but Pollard (2002) concluded that it is clear that the situation is not improving. Thus, the imperative that to close the achievement gap for Black boys, researchers, educators, and policymakers must first establish the root causes of the inferior academic performance of Black boys.

Historically, the achievement gap debate has been incorporated into education policy development. More specifically, since the acceptance of standards-based education

reform and the authorization of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, America's public schools have struggled to close the achievement gaps of minority and disadvantaged groups, especially in the area of literacy. While NCLB has created a greater level of accountability by requiring schools to specifically report and monitor the performance of traditionally underserved groups of children, isolated instructional interventions and strategies geared toward closing the achievement gap for Black boys are proving to be insufficient (Patom, 2007). In addition to increased levels of accountability, the standards-based reform movement promised to narrow class and racial gaps in school performance by creating common and high expectations for all students. However, a lack of awareness of the need to adapt and to make personnel and school changes in response to diversity (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 2003) has resulted in inconsistent and inequitable learning opportunities for many students of color. First and foremost, research is needed to discover the root causes and direct determinants of the literacy gap of Black boys. Next, large scale, sustainable, research-based, and effective interventions must be developed to close the achievement gap in order to create learning environments beneficial to all students regardless of socio-economic status, race, or ethnicity. With these sustainable interventions, the results will hopefully lead to change and will reform teaching and learning organizations to provide Black boys with equitable opportunities to acquire and develop the necessary skills needed to evolve into effective readers.

### Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory legal scholar Laura Padilla (2001) defined internalized oppression among Black people as the turning point upon themselves, their families, and their people- the distressed patterns of behavior that result from racism and oppression by

the majority society (Padilla, 2001). When examining the reading achievement gap of Black boys, it is important to explore the historical experiences of Black students in a White dominated school system. Critical Race Theory forces educators to consider the impact of internalized racism and cultural oppression on students' self-perceptions and preferences. In 1947, Kenneth and Mamie Clark conducted a study to examine the racial preferences of Black children. Both a Black and White doll were placed in front of Black children and they were asked to select the one they liked best. Black children consistently chose the White doll. Clarke and Clarke's (1947) study concluded that many Black children have a racial inferiority complex and that the self-hatred of Black youth was learned from conditions of schools during racial segregation (Clarke & Clarke, 1947). Similarly, Woodson (1933) believed that schools are the place where Blacks and Whites are taught to believe that Blacks are of less value than Whites. He further noted that schools have been used to maintain racial and social order and to maintain a racial hierarchy with Whites on top (Woodson, 1933).

In a Critical Race Theory article that examined the impact of internalized racism on the achievement gap, Julian Weissglass (2004) described internalized racism as a process in which people of color believe and act on the negative messages they receive about themselves or their group. Internalized racism causes people to give up, become hopeless, or believe that they are not as intelligent or worthwhile as Whites (Wiessglass, 2004). Unlike Wiessglass's article, this qualitative study did not examine the impact of Critical Race Theory on the reading achievement gap of Black boys, it is important to note that racism and the historical oppression of Black people may very well contribute to gaps in achievement.

### Historical Perspective

Racial prejudice, poverty, and discriminatory legislation are deeply rooted in issues related to the reading gap of Black boys. During the early to mid-1900s many Black parents migrated to the north in search of equitable learning opportunities for their children, only to find inferior schools devoid of sufficient funding and resources. In addition, the need for sharecropping made regular school attendance nearly impossible for many Blacks. This was primarily due to local policies influenced by Jim Crow Laws which mandated school segregation, allowing institutional and structural injustices into the education system. Black children were forced to learn in overcrowded schools with wide age ranges and abilities. These factors impeded the academic achievement of Blacks and paved the way for the now present achievement gaps between Black and White children. Even after the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education mandated school desegregation, the achievement gap between underprivileged students of color and students from White families continues to exist.

The origins of the achievement gap can be traced back to the early 1900s, prior to the institution of the mandated school desegregation laws of the mid-late 1950s. One root cause of the Black-White achievement gap was the inability of Northern and Midwestern cities to provide equitable learning opportunities to a growing number of poor and Black students who migrated from Southern states. As these Northern cities suffered an economic decline in the early 1900s, there resulted a shortage of financial resources needed to provide a quality education to an influx of Black students. A second root cause of the Black-White achievement gap was the racial barriers that stood in the way of proper schooling. More specifically, inferior job opportunities for Blacks gave them little reason to remain in

school. Due to discriminatory hiring practices, vocational training became tracks to failure rather than opportunities that did not require college degrees. At that time, Black workers were often last to obtain employment. Kathryn Neckerman (2007) reinforced this theory by noting that trade unions often exercised discriminatory practices by not providing Blacks with employment opportunities to exhibit and use the skills they learned. A third root cause of the Black-White achievement gap was that remedial programs established in the early 1900s for Blacks were insufficient and underfunded. Learning opportunities provided to Black students were uneven and unequal, often taking place in overcrowded classes and environments not conducive to effective teaching and learning (Neckerman, 2007). As of 2007, Neckerman offered little new guidance to remediate the deeply rooted causes of the Black-White achievement gap that is still as prevalent today as it was in the early 1900s.

A strong correlation exists between low income and subpar academic achievement. Children raised in impoverished environments are less likely to be successful in school than their counterparts residing in more affluent areas. In the 1960s policies and regulations prevented new construction and routine maintenance in central cities that were largely populated by Blacks. More specifically, implementing a practice called “redlining,” the Federal Housing Authority (FHA) excluded certain neighborhoods from mortgage capital based on racial composition. At the same time, the FHA adopted regulations that allowed Whites in impoverished urban areas to move to surrounding suburbs, while denying Blacks the same opportunity. Ultimately, some Blacks were able to relocate to the suburbs, but most remained giving rise to concentrated poverty in many inner cities. Melvin Oliver (1995) deconstructs poverty into the conditions and experiences that are directly related to

cognitive development and school achievement. In other words, growing up in an area of concentrated poverty impedes the stages of reading development of a child and results in achievement gaps. These impoverished conditions are much more prevalent for Black children as only a small percentage of White children live in high-poverty neighborhoods throughout childhood, while a higher percentage of Black children remain in the inner cities. As of 2015, 12% of White children lived in poverty, compared to 36% of Black children (KIDS Count Data Center, 2017).

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine educators' perceptions of the effectiveness of existing strategies and conditions in place to close the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys at Doris, Dwight, Patricia, and Quendell Elementary Schools in the Crumpton School District (CSD). To protect the identity of the schools involved in this study and to ensure anonymity, the aforementioned names of the schools and district are pseudonyms. Learning to read is one of the most essential skills in modern society. Reading ability is highly correlated to future academic success. For children, a critical transition takes place during elementary school: until the end of third grade, most students are learning to read. Beginning in fourth grade, however, students begin reading to learn (Lesnick et al., 2010). Students who are not reading on grade level by third grade will fail to meet increased demands as they progress through their elementary and secondary school years. In a Longitudinal Analysis of third grade students in Chicago in 1996-97 and their educational outcomes, Lesnick et al. (2010) found that the proportion of students who were reading below grade level was highest in Black students. More specifically, 44% of African



American students were reading below grade level, compared to 18% of White students.

According to NAEP (2009):

Up until the end of third grade, most children are learning to read. Beginning in the fourth grade, however, they are reading to learn, using their skills to gain more information in subjects such as math and science, to solve problems, to think critically about what they are learning, and to act upon and share that knowledge in the world around them. (p. 9)

Therefore, this study is focused on third grade Black boys because grade 3 is a pivotal year, a year that could determine if these boys will ever acquire and develop the necessary skills to become proficient readers (Lesnick et al, 2010).

For the purpose of this research study, the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys is defined as the observed disparity in performance of third grade Black boys as compared to that of their White peers in educational measures such as standardized tests and curriculum-based assessments in the area of communication arts. Based on 2016 English-Language Arts standardized test data, third grade Black boys at Doris, Dwight, Patricia, and Quendell Elementary Schools scored 28 percentage points lower than their White counterparts. There are many factors that contribute to the reading gap of Black elementary school boys. Factors such as lack of pre-kindergarten schooling, ineffective teaching, racism, and inadequate parent involvement are ostensibly a few root causes that contribute to the reading achievement gap of Black boys. A less obvious factor is the turbulent relationship between demographics and education policy development. Demographic context can produce severe constraints on education policy (Fowler, 2009). Traditional frameworks of education policy development and adoption provide uneven learning opportunities for Black boys. As the population continues to age and diversify, policy decisions and implementation should reflect the needs of the targeted population.

For example, today many suburban areas reflect traditional urban characteristics. Yet, diverse student populations have increased most rapidly in suburban communities. As suburban areas continue to transform and broaden in terms of diversity, education policy should reflect strategies and initiatives that support an influx of children who are of varied ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. This study examined what impact all the above factors have on interventions designed to close the reading gap of Black boys at Doris, Dwight, Patricia, and Quendell Elementary Schools.

In examining educators' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of strategies and conditions in place to close the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys, the aim of the study was to collect data and obtain insights and implications regarding future practice. An additional goal was to research the development of strategic plans to enhance and improve the process by which educators, parents, and education policy makers inform decisions regarding the use of strategies and interventions geared toward improving the reading achievement of Black boys.

### The Research Questions

Without doubt, there is an achievement gap that continues to plague Black boys in the area of reading. This qualitative study addressed two questions –

1. What are educators' perceptions of the effectiveness of existing strategies and conditions that are in place to close the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys at Doris, Dwight, Patricia, and Quendell Elementary Schools in the Crumpton School District?

2. What are the perceptions of leadership roles of administrators at Doris, Dwight, Patricia, and Quendell Elementary Schools in the Crumpton School District in closing the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys?

In general, the effectiveness of any strategies and/or interventions geared toward impacting student achievement should be subject to assessments and critical analysis (Fowler, 2009). Because they are charged with providing equitable opportunities for all children to learn how to read, elementary school educators have the greatest impact on the reading achievement of all students. Teachers form their expectations and perceptions of students as a function of students' gender, race, social class, and by interacting with them. Research, as stated by Bol and Berry (2005), found that teachers' expectations and perceptions significantly impacted sixth grade students' scores on a standardized mathematics test. More specifically, educators' perceptions of the effectiveness of programmatic measures employed to close gaps in the reading achievement of Black boys, coupled with their insights as to how a minority group of elementary-aged children learn to read, should inform an overarching framework for effective teaching and learning. This qualitative study highlights the need to include individuals who have the greatest impact on student achievement in making decisions that inform methods used to teach third grade Black boys how to read- teachers.

#### Role of the Researcher

As an elementary school principal in a school in the Crumpton School District, I conducted what Glense and Peshkin (1992) refer to as "backyard" research (as cited in Creswell, 2009) which exposed the research project to an array of validity and ethical issues. First and foremost, I already have many assumptions, perceptions, and attitudes

regarding why Black boys struggle with reading, making it difficult to strategically analyze and synthesize data that do not align with my beliefs. Therefore, I elicited the support of a critical friend, an administrator in the Crumpton School District. This person assisted with the collection, examination, and analysis of pertinent data. This framework added an alternative perspective, one that differed from mine and helped to increase validity. Moreover, I am currently completing my tenth year as an elementary school principal; therefore, I am well aware of factors that impact the reading gap such as environmental issues, lack of parental engagement, equity problems, and ineffective teaching practices. In addition, I am well known throughout the Crumpton School District and have professional relationships with some of the participants. As a result, some may have been reluctant to fully disclose information based on my dual role as a colleague and a researcher. It was important to employ multiple strategies such as auditor reviews and provisions to ensure anonymity and validity. Ethical issues that may adversely affect professional relationships and the culture and climate of Crumpton School District were also considered.

As a young Black boy in elementary school, I struggled with reading. I vividly recall receiving remedial instruction during my primary school years. My academic struggles ultimately led to “acting out” behaviors that led to the development of a reputation as a child who could not and would not behave appropriately in a school setting. I continued to struggle academically and socially during my elementary and middle school years. Upon reflection, I currently believe that many of the learning opportunities afforded to me during my elementary years were uneven, inconsistent, and ineffective, which led to my inability to grasp and develop key literacy concepts and skills. As a principal, I witness

first-hand many Black boys who suffer through that same cycle. At times, my passion regarding the reading gap of Black boys triggers an array of emotions within me as I personally relate to their struggles. This range of emotions sometimes challenges my ability to execute my professional responsibilities, some of which impede the progress of Black boys, while simultaneously compelling me to do what I know is best for all children. It was imperative that I not allow my past experiences to inform my interpretations during this study. As previously mentioned, I elicited the support of a critical friend who has experience in qualitative research design to serve as an auditor of each phase of this study.

### Definition of Terms

*Crumpton School District.* Suburban School District located in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania consisting of 7,816 students in grades K-12. Student demographics are: 4% Asian, 20% Black or African American, 7% Hispanic, 4% Multi-Racial, 65% White. Percent of enrollment by student groups are: 21% Economically Disadvantaged, 2% English Language Learner, 13% Special Education.

*Doris Elementary School.* Suburban elementary school in the Crumpton School District consisting of 389 students in grades K-6. Student demographics are: 4% Asian, 46% Black or African American, 8% Hispanic, 8% Multi-Racial, 34% White. Percent of enrollment by student groups are: 39% Economically Disadvantaged, 3% English Language Learner, 11% Special Education.

*Dwight Elementary School.* Suburban elementary school in the Crumpton School District consisting of 544 students in grades K-6. Student demographics are: 3% Asian, 28% Black or African American, 7% Hispanic, 6% Multi-Racial, 55% White. Percent of

enrollment by student groups are: 30% Economically Disadvantaged, 1% English Language Learner, 11% Special Education.

*Patricia Elementary School.* Suburban elementary school in the Crumpton School District consisting of 1,080 students in grades K-6. Student demographics are: 3% Asian, 15% Black or African American, 4% Hispanic, 4% Multi-Racial, 74% White. Percent of enrollment by student groups are: 19% Economically Disadvantaged, 1% English Language Learner, 11% Special Education.

*Quendell Elementary School.* Suburban elementary school in the Crumpton School District consisting of 513 students in grades K-6. Student demographics are: 6% Asian, 16% Black or African American, 6% Hispanic, 8% Multi-Racial, 63% White. Percent of enrollment by student groups are: 25% Economically Disadvantaged, 3% English Language Learner, 15% Special Education.

*Title I.* As defined by the PA Department of Education, Title I is a 100% federally funded supplemental education program that provides financial assistance to local educational agencies to improve educational opportunities for educationally deprived children. All four schools that participated in this study received Title I funding during the 2015-2016 school year.

*Achievement Gap.* For the purpose of this study, the *academic achievement gap* is defined as the difference in achievement on math and reading assessments when comparing African Americans males to their Caucasian counterparts. According to NAEP, this difference in achievement can be identified as early as students' entrance in school and continues to widen by 0.10 standard deviations each year (Fantuzzo, LeBoeuf, Rouse, & Chen, 2012).

*Educators.* As defined by the U.S. Department of Education, all education professionals and paraprofessionals working in participating schools, including principals or other heads of a school, teachers, other professional instructional staff (e.g., staff involved in curriculum development, staff development, or operating library, media and computer centers), pupil support services staff (e.g., guidance counselors, nurses, speech pathologists, etc.), other administrators (e.g., assistant principals, discipline specialists), and paraprofessionals (e.g. assistant teachers, instructional aides). Specific to this qualitative study, a more specific definition of educators included in this study is as follows:

- *Teachers-* Educators who are responsible for providing students with direct teaching and learning opportunities on a daily basis. This includes Special Education Teachers, teachers of students with identified learning disabilities.
- *Reading Specialists-* Educators who are responsible for providing reading interventions for students who do not read at grade level. Instructional practices and strategies are remedial in nature and delivered to small groups of students.
- *Principals-* Educators who are designated as the instructional leaders of their respective schools. Specific to this qualitative study, participating principals are responsible for developing strategic plans to increase student achievement and to close gaps in achievement for disaggregated groups, e.g., Black and economically disadvantaged students, as well as students who have identified learning disabilities.

- *Elementary Curriculum Specialists*- Educators who are designated as the department chair for all content areas at the elementary level. Specific to this study, Elementary Curriculum Specialists hold principal certifications and assist principals with the responsibilities outlined in the *Principal* section.
- *Assistant Principals*- Educators who assist the building principal with the responsibilities outlined in the *Principal* section.
- *Supervisors*- Educators who are designated as the department chairs of their respective departments. Specific to this study, participants include building level Special Education Supervisors and a district level English-Language Arts Supervisor.
- *Getting Results Plan*- A yearly school improvement plan created and implemented by each principal in the Crumpton School District. Plans include: achievement goals; an analysis of summative assessment data by grade level, disaggregate groups, and assessment anchors; identification of strategies to improve student achievement; a process by which to monitor the plan; and a professional development plan based on areas of need.
- *Principals' Goals*- A minimum of four outcome-based goals, at least one goal reflective of each of the following domains as determined by the Pennsylvania Department of Education: strategic cultural leadership; systems leadership; leadership for learning; and, professional and community leadership. Included with each goal is a list of evidence that is to be used to assess, at the end of the school year, whether or not the goal



has been accomplished. In addition, each principal is required to use this evidence to create a reflective narrative regarding how each goal was or was not met. All Crumpton School District principals submit these goals to the Superintendent of Schools at the beginning of each school year.

## CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This literature review will highlight what research reveals about issues related to the achievement gap between Black students and their White counterparts. It will also describe, in great detail, a number of strategies and interventions that have proven to be effective in increasing the achievement of Black students and narrowing the achievement gap. Next, the critical transition from grade 3 to grade 4, as it relates to the reading achievement gap of Black students, will be examined. Finally, a description of the importance of educators' perceptions, as they relate to informing teaching and learning opportunities, will establish the purpose and need to conduct this qualitative study.

### The Achievement Gap: What Research Reveals

The academic achievement gap between Black students and their White counterparts has been at the forefront of education policy discussion for decades. Particularly, the achievement of Black boys appears to be at the center of this issue (McKown, 2013; Noguera, 2012; Zehr, 2011). It has been reported that Black students, Black boys specifically, are not meeting established educational standards and are not performing as well as other groups on standardized assessments (Byrd & Chavous, 2011; Matthews, 2014; Noguera, 2012). Researchers such as Patmon (2007) have long studied the potential factors that may influence the lack of academic progress Black boys are making in many schools. Patmon (2007) contends that far too many middle class White teachers are teaching economically disadvantaged Black children. She further argues that despite their qualifications and academic backgrounds, these teachers are unable to relate to and connect with the students they serve and as a result are ill-prepared to teach children from diverse backgrounds. Many are deemed highly qualified through the completion of a

low level multicultural course with little or no application to authentic school environments. In the book, *White Teachers/Diverse Classrooms*, Grinage (2010) described his experiences as the only Black teacher in a predominantly White suburban school where he believes color blindness affected many White teachers (as cited in Landsman & Lewis, 2010). He further noted:

White suburban teachers tend to see students as individuals and do not acknowledge racial and cultural differences, which may be crucial to their students' identities. It is fine to see students as individuals, but being blind to students' racial and cultural identities can be extremely harmful [...] Black students become the victims and no blame attaches to the teachers who fail to realize the impact that race and racism have on teaching and learning. (p. 126)

Many studies cite that schools are simply failing to engage Black boys, thus depriving them of meaningful learning opportunities. Kirkland (2011) proposes that lack of relevance, rather than skill deficit, may explain why some young Black males either do not like to read or choose not to read. This lack of relevance can lead to Black boys becoming disengaged and lacking a connection to school, having significant implications for the lack of academic success experienced by Black boys: their behavior in school; their perceptions of school; and the perpetuation of academic shortcomings among Black students (Noguera, 2012). When students feel a genuine connection to their school and have a sense of belonging, they feel the school values who they are as an individual and the culture they represent. What follows is a greater potential for success academically (Byrd & Chavous, 2011; Hurd, Sanchez, Zimmerman, & Caldwell, 2012; Lemberger & Clemens, 2012).

A report published at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (as cited in Banks, 1999) states that some potential root causes of the achievement gap – racism, poverty,

stereotypical characterizations, language differences, and cultural barriers – are not adequately addressed in today’s public schools. School reform initiatives aimed at closing gaps in achievement must begin with the empowerment and revitalization of teachers who will in turn create educational environments that will benefit all students regardless of socio-economic influences, race, or ethnicity.

In response to the studies above, some researchers such as Borsuk (2007) cite little or no exposure to literacy development prior to kindergarten as the root cause of the reading gap of Black boys, thus holding parents partially responsible for the literacy gap. Because the gap in achievement begins to form prior to kindergarten, parents are responsible for providing meaningful and relevant pre-kindergarten experiences such as pre-school or Head Start programs. Walton (2010) reasons that Black parents who wonder why there is such a discrepancy regarding the achievement results of White and Black boys have only themselves to blame.

Studies of the root causes of the literacy gap refer to environmental influences such as poverty, racism, economic status, and single parent families as reasons why Black boys do not perform as well as their White counterparts in many public schools (Fowler, 2009). One study in particular looked at the reading and mathematics standardized test scores of students in the 10th grade during the 2001-02 school year. Data in the form of surveys were collected from students, parents, teachers, librarians, and school administrators to gather information about school experiences and activities. The study revealed that the primary predictor of test scores was the socioeconomic status of the family (Rowley & Wright, 2011). However, recent case studies show that White boys who go to school hungry still perform better on achievement tests than Black boys who come from privileged

homes (Walton, 2010). Fowler contends with Walton that economic status has little impact on achievement as National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test results show that White boys from families receiving public assistance perform just as well, or better than, Black boys from families who do not. Therefore, some researchers question whether poverty is a factor that contributes to the literacy gap of Black boys.

Other examinations of the literacy gap of Black boys consider cultural ideologies and representations of Black males. Haddix (2010) considers cultural ideologies and representations of what it means to be both Black and male and how these two characteristics intersect with literacy research, policy, and practice. These ideologies were evident in a quote offered by a young Black boy who reasoned that academic involvement is considered to make one less of a man, especially if studies are a priority over sports or the “streets.” Similarly, a handful of studies have examined the literacy gap in terms of racial identity and its impact on attitudes and perceptions of young Black boys. Toldson and Owens analyzed the results of a CBS News Poll that asked students a range of questions that gauged their perception of being smart and their opinions about smart students (Toldson & Owens, 2010). Toldson and Owens highlighted some condescending attitudes toward smart kids in general and thought that many Black boys associated “talking proper English” with “talking or acting white.” Singleton (2007) expanded on the concept of Black boys associating “talking proper English” with “talking White” by defining eight characteristics of racial patterns of communication. Singleton defined these patterns- White Talk and Color Commentary- where “White talk” is described as verbal, impersonal, intellectual, and task-oriented, whereas “Color Commentary” is defined as non-verbal, personal, emotional, and process oriented (Singleton, 2007). Singleton concluded by

stating that all White people or people of color do not adhere to these patterns based on their racial affiliation, but these patterns are characteristic of how people of racial groupings typically, rather than stereotypically, respond when faced with racial subject matter (Singleton, 2007). In the book, *Multiplication is for White People*, Delpit (2012) described interactions between Black male students and a White student teacher and a White tutor:

A student teacher at Southern University told me that she didn't know what to say when an African American eighth-grade boy came up to her and said, "They made us slaves because we were dumb right, Ms. Summers?" Working with a middle schooler, a tutor was admonished, "Why you trying to teach me to multiply, Ms. L.? Black people don't multiply; Black people just add and subtract. White people multiply." (p. 14)

More research is needed to determine if the achievement gap among Black boys is a culture or a consequence.

#### Closing the Achievement Gap: What Works

The achievement gap between Black students and their White counterparts has been the subject of education reform efforts for the past century. The root causes of this achievement gap are well documented. In addition, strategies and interventions that have proven to be beneficial in narrowing the achievement gap are threaded throughout current literature and research studies. The following section examines what research suggests regarding means to increase the academic achievement of Black students. It is important to note that these approaches and strategies have shown to help Black boys achieve better and are not accepted by everyone as being helpful.

#### ***Culturally Responsive Schools***

Curriculum and instruction that recognize students' cultural backgrounds, home environments, and the impact of student experiences on the teaching and learning process

offer the greatest promise to promote high student achievement among Black students (Aarons, 2009). White (2009) referenced a 2001 study that assessed three major culturally responsive strategies used by highly qualified African American teachers with majority African American students: holistic, culturally communicative, and skill building. According to the study, teachers who generate the best results with Black students are culturally relevant, sincere, and respectful of African American students. These teachers invariably have high expectations for all learners and are what Lindsey, Robins, and Terrell (2003) refer to as culturally proficient. Culturally proficient teachers know how to learn about individual differences and organizational culture, and interact effectively in a variety of cultural environments (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 2003).

### ***Kinesthetic Learning Activities***

Educators should recognize and use boys' physical energy and kinesthetic learning as an attribute. Several opportunities during the day might be provided for physical activity, perhaps following high energy activities with sitting activities, and for creating literacy activities suited for kinesthetic learners (Aarons, 2009). Black boys might learn more in school if their lessons reflected verve - that is, if the tasks the students were given were more varied and stimulating (Boykin, 2001).

### ***Interactive Teaching***

Teaching should provide students with opportunities to work collaboratively and engage in cooperative learning. Teacher initiated activities should encourage interactive/free talk (Aarons, 2009). Learning tasks could be developed that require the manipulation of materials and resources so to actively and cognitively engage Black students in learning. In addition, the use of technology and differentiated assignments

based on specific learning needs and styles help to create equitable outcomes for Black students (Patterson et al., 2008).

### ***Ideology and Engagement***

In an ethnographic study that spanned 2003-2006, *Books Like Clothes: Engaging Young Black Men With Reading*, David Kirkland addresses the accepted argument that many Black boys are disengaged with reading and reading instruction. He believes that assertion to be inaccurate and misplaced. Instead, Kirkland offers a counter argument by suggesting that traditional texts integrated within contemporary school curricula are failing to engage Black boys and other minority groups. An example of this is noted in the book, *Beyond the Bake Sale*, wherein a parent states, “We want more materials and books about Hispanic culture- this does not exist in our school” (as cited in Henderson, Mapp, & Davies, 2007). Kirkland strengthens his argument by proposing that lack of relevance, rather than skill deficit, may explain why some young Black males either do not like to read or choose not to read. This premise was highlighted by Derrick, a young Black male student in one of Kirkland’s research studies, who adamantly stated, “I’m sayin’, who is Beowulf? I’m not gone need to know Beowulf to get a job. Nobody I know ... knows Beowulf.” Derrick’s refusal to read Beowulf reveals literacy engagement as an ideological artifact, one that exposes a hidden literate process related to an individual’s understanding of her or himself in relation to the socio-political subtext of the literate act (Kirkland, 2011). In an attempt to strengthen the engagement of young Black men with reading, Kirkland conducted a study that examined the relationship between ideology and engagement. The focal point of the study was the aforementioned Black young man named Derrick. Derrick struggled in his eleventh grade English class and did not read much in school. Kirkland observed



Derrick closely during two units of study, *Beowulf* and *The Iliad*. The *Beowulf* unit was presented using a traditional teaching and learning approach, dominated by oral reading, note-taking, and teacher led discussions. During the unit of study, Kirkland described Derrick as disengaged and unwilling to read. The culminating assessment was a traditional unit exam, which Derrick failed. *The Iliad* unit on the other hand was taught using a more creative and innovative approach. The unit began with students reading *Batman* and *X-Men* comics and then applying their overarching themes to the real world. For example, they discussed themes of revenge in *Batman*, drawing, for instance, comparisons between President Bush's invasion of Iraq and Batman's quest to redeem his parents' memory (Kirkland, 2011). As they progressed through *The Iliad* unit, students read in small groups and recreated the genre by publishing comic strips that were ultimately distributed to the entire class for reading and discussion. Unlike the disengaged version of Derrick during the *Beowulf* unit, Kirkland noted that during *The Iliad* unit the now engaged Derrick commented, "I love reading comics. They're fun, and they relate to me." Citing the difference in instructional approach, reading *The Iliad* was different and fun for Derrick so much so that he alone led his group in translating most sections of the text (Kirkland, 2011).

*The Iliad* and *Beowulf* have much in common and are two classics embedded in many high school traditional English courses. However, the innovative teaching and learning strategies integrated within *The Iliad* unit shifted the text from dominant ideologies of formalistic literacy to ideologies of contemporary populism (Kirkland, 2011). Kirkland concluded that reading for some Black males may require bridging ideological distances thus fostering opportunities for readers to find themselves, Reading and comprehending using texts become a form of self-expression (Kirkland, 2011).

Is it that African American boys are failing in our schools or that our schools are failing African American boys (Haddix, 2010)? In her article titled, *Black Boys Can Write: Challenging Dominant Framings of African American Adolescent Males in Literacy Research*, Haddix considers cultural ideologies and representations of what it means to be both African American and male and how these two characteristics intersect with literacy research, policy, and practice (Haddix, 2010). These ideologies were evident in the quote offered by that young Black man who reasoned that academic involvement is considered to make one less of a man, especially if studies are a priority over sports or the “streets.” Haddix also posits that there is a disconnect between recognizing the need to address African American male needs, and strategic practices and interventions needed to close gaps in achievement for African American males. She further proposes that the ongoing attention to a “national crisis” regarding the subpar academic performance of African American males provides school leaders and policymakers with a guaranteed hustle - something from which to profit. Similar to the theme that White men cannot compete with African American men on the basketball court, is there a universal acceptance that African American men are inferior to their White counterparts in literacy acquisition and development? Delpit (2012) believes that society has stigmatized Black boys and, therefore, they internalize negative stereotypes regarding learning and are alienated from school (Delpit, 2012). How then do we enhance and enrich academic experiences for African American males without furthering the stereotypes and misrepresentations of African American masculinity (Haddix, 2010)? Low expectations, lack of parental involvement, peer pressure, and lack of male teachers and role models are some of the factors that Haddix cites as impacting the achievement gap for African American males.

### *Student Voice/Perspective*

A research study titled, *Transforming Lives with Differentiated Literacy Instruction*, Coffey (2014) examined the overarching question: What happens when the teacher becomes a tutor and applies the knowledge gained from tutoring in the classroom? The result, Coffey claimed, is that students enthusiastically embark on enjoyable experiences with books they treasure. Unfortunately, struggling readers face challenges that hinder this enjoyment. As part of this qualitative study, seven teachers helped struggling Black boys enjoy their literacy experiences through one-on-one tutoring sessions. Two hours of intensive literacy instruction occurred two hours per week for one semester. During these collaborative sessions, the teachers used innovative literacy strategies to differentiate instruction and to help students to effectively navigate narrative and expository texts (Coffey, 2014). The instructional approach of the seven teachers in this study aligned with five recommendations from Derek, a sixth-grade African American struggling reader (Jenkins, 2009). Shawn Jenkins (2009) advocates that although a number of teaching recommendations and interventions have been developed by educators and policymakers to address the reading performance of African American males, many suggestions fail to consider the feedback of the students being served. In an article titled, *How to Maintain School Reading Success: Five Recommendations From a Struggling Male Reader*, Jenkins summarized a multi-year study of a struggling nine year old African American male student, Derek, in an attempt to gauge his perspective as to how teachers can strategically support struggling readers.

Derek struggled with literacy since kindergarten. He repeated the first grade and like most struggling young Black boys, Derek was tested for a learning disability at the

beginning of second grade. Derek described reading as boring and struggled with comprehension and vocabulary development. After testing ruled out a learning disability, Shawn Jenkins began tutoring Derek and served as an advocate for his family. Jenkins tracked and monitored Derek's progress and kept anecdotal notes of tutorial sessions. Jenkins later published five recommendations to help teachers examine their instruction from the perspective of Derek, a struggling reader.

Recommendation number one, **Teamwork Helps My Dream Work**, reveals the importance of all stakeholders - teachers, specialists, tutors, students, and parents-working together as a team. Jenkins noted that Derek was most successful when connections were made with teachers to discuss strengths and weaknesses; share home and tutorial routines; and collect school vocabulary words and assigned stories (Jenkins, 2006). This aligns with Tatum's (2012) assertion that engaging Black boys in authentic discussion in which they can analyze their realities in the context of the curriculum and talk about strategies for overcoming academic and societal barriers will ultimately help them apply literacy skills and strategies independently (as cited in Delpit, 2012). Jenkins stated that it was also imperative to **Build on Past Successes**. Derek often described his new teachers as people who refused to connect with the previous year's teacher to continue practices and strategies that were effective. In addition to teachers collaborating to continue practices, Derek also suggested the following to build on past successes:

- Allow students to loop or remain with effective teachers for two years or more;
- Develop afterschool tutoring programs to individualize support and have the teachers of these programs loop with students;

- Assign teachers to classes by late May to give parents and teachers an opportunity to build strong and effective teams prior to the beginning of the school year.

The third recommendation, **Connect Book Reading to My World**, focuses on selecting books and activities based on Derek's interests: computers and technology and his passion, art. **Allow Me to Help Select Books, Topics, and Activities** is Derek's fourth recommendation. Derek believed that this would motivate him and help him to begin to develop a sense of ownership regarding his literacy learning. Finally, Derek believed that **Exposure to a Variety of Texts on a Single Topic** might improve comprehension skills and his ability to retain important textual information. Similarly, when Delpit (2012) asked a group of Black boys to describe a good teacher, one student stated for each lecture a good teacher assigns reading outside of the text, i.e., from different sources (Delpit, 2012). Considering student voice in matters related to teaching and learning can help to close the reading achievement gap of Black boys. Whenever students are involved in planning what they will be doing, it is likely that good teaching is going on (Delpit, 2012).

Over time, the seven teachers in this study saw the effectiveness of the above strategies with their tutees and as a result continued the use of the strategies in their respective classrooms and experienced a reciprocal relationship between the two processes (Coffey, 2014). One teacher stated, "What I have learned from teaching applied to tutoring, and what I gained from tutoring definitely has helped me with my teaching ... Oh yes, they go hand in hand," (Cofey, 2014).

These seven teachers found creative ways to differentiate instruction, emphasize interests, and instill motivation as they opened a world of reading to their students. And they helped these students to more effectively navigate both narrative and expository texts

as students transferred their learning to new contexts and experienced a gradual sense of responsibility (Coffey, 2014).

### ***Parent Engagement/Accountability***

It is obvious in classrooms nationwide that too many Black boys seem destined to be left behind (Walton, 2010). As opposed to adopting the popular premise that schools are failing Black boys, Walton (2010) places a majority of the blame on parents. Jessie Jackson once stated, “There is no such thing as a parental aide to a teacher. The teacher is an aide to the parents. It is the parents who rear the children.” (as cited in Walton, 2010). Prager (2011) reinforces this premise by highlighting the notion that parents are the first teachers and help narrow the achievement gap by exposing children to a variety of experiences, which then enable them to better connect with the curriculum. In contrast, Henderson, Mapp, and Davies (2007) contend that schools need to build and develop relationships with parents instead of blaming them for not being involved and engaged. Children from diverse cultural backgrounds tend to do better when families and school staff join forces to bridge the gap between home and school cultures (Henderson, Mapp, and Davies, 2007).

In his article, *Educating Black Boys: Where Are the Parents?*, Scott Walton paints a dismal picture of how Black parents are not adequately emphasizing schoolwork. Recent studies show that White boys who go to school hungry still perform better on achievement tests than Black boys who come from privileged homes. Walton further contends that economic status has little impact on achievement as NAEP test results show that White boys from families receiving public assistance perform just as well, or better than, Black boys from families who do not. And since the gap in achievement begins to form prior to kindergarten, parents are responsible for providing meaningful and relevant pre-

kindergarten experiences. Walton reasons that Black parents who wonder why there is such a discrepancy regarding the achievement results of White and Black boys only have themselves to blame (Walton, 2010).

According to Daria Hall, assistant director of K-12 policy for the Education Trust, states such as Minnesota, Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and New York have significantly decreased the achievement gaps of Black students from 1998 to 2007 (as cited in Borsuk, 2007). However, issues such as rising poverty, loss of blue-collar jobs, high rates of single-parent and teen-mother births and severe crime have increased the achievement gap of Black students in states such as Wisconsin and Nebraska, which have the lowest reading scores for African American students in the U.S. The aforementioned issues adversely impacting the achievement of Black students surely exist in other states, so the question is to what do we attribute the low and declining reading scores that plague Wisconsin and Nebraska? Similar to Gabriel's (2010) argument regarding parent culpability regarding the inferior performance of Black students, Borsuk (2007) agrees by stating, "We can't keep making excuses for parents. We have to become more willing to hold everyone accountable and not just the teacher." Ensuring that children have access to quality preschool experiences rests primarily on parents and has the potential to narrow the achievement gap of Black children.

An achievement gap separating Black from White students has been long documented - a social divide extremely vexing to both local and national policymakers and the target of one blast of school reform after another (Gabriel, 2010). In her article titled, *Proficiency of Black Students Is Found to Be Far Lower Than Expected*, Trip Gabriel contends that new data attempting to find the underlying root causes for achievement gaps is more

startling than initially reported. Only 12% of Black fourth grade boys are proficient in reading, compared with 28% of White boys (Gabriel, 2010). Similar to Walton's (2010) stance, Gabriel also reports that poverty alone does not play a major role in the achievement gap of Black boys by stating that poor White boys perform just as well as Black boys who are not poor. In what she terms as "racial differences," Gabriel highlights pre-kindergarten experiences as the single most important factor influencing the achievement gap of Black boys. She believes that educators must begin to influence childhood parenting practices in order to truly address deep rooted literacy issues impeding the progress of Black boys.

There are far too many people of color, especially Black boys, in "subset" programs such as special education (Patmon, 2007). In her article, *Learning While Black*, Denise Patmon contends that many Black boys are "warehoused" in special education classes because no one knows how to handle them. Patmon further states that isolated interventions and strategies geared toward closing the achievement gap for Black boys are not sufficient. Instead, full-scale alternative programs are needed to initiate major reform. For example, Paige Academy, an independent elementary school in Boston, has a remarkable 99 % parent participation rate at teacher-parent meetings and workshops. The children of these parents are subject to suspensions if parents do not attend these meetings. In addition, Paige Academy's instructional day begins at 7 am and ends at 6 pm which provides more time to differentiate learning for targeted groups of students.

### ***Collaborative Approach***

A 1990 study of more than 105,000 students in Maryland's Prince George's County, where African Americans make up about 65 % of the enrollment, showed that black male pupils performed comparably to boys and girls of all races on first and second



grade standardized math and reading tests. But by fourth grade, African American boys experienced a sharp decline in their scores (Holly, 2011). In her article, *Getting Black Boys to Read*, J. Holly notes that while Black boys may have certain odds stacked against them such as racism, the stereotypical characterizing of behaving inappropriately, and perceptions of low intelligence, she suggests that parents and educators can work collaboratively to change the trajectory of Black boys within our schools. First and foremost, Holly argues that more Black male role models are needed. She contends that now, more than ever, the culture is ripe for change with a former Black president who promotes the value of reading and education. President Obama gave a speech about the role of fathers to a predominantly Black crowd and said, “We need to tell our sons, those songs on the radio may glorify violence, but in our house, we find glory in achievement, self-respect, and hard work.” Holly exclaims that President Obama is a Black male role model to whom and with whom educators, parents, and students will listen and identify.

In addition to emphasizing the need for Black male role models, Holly recommends the following suggestions for educators and parents to increase the reading achievement of Black boys: 1) Hire qualified Black male teachers 2) Provide male-centered learning environments 3) Fill classrooms and libraries with literature that caters to African American culture 4) Be sensitive to racism and stereotyping 5) Make sure basic needs are met, e.g. proper meals and sufficient rest 6) Hold Black boys accountable for their behavior 7) Develop consistent forms of parent-teacher communications 8) Be encouraging by reinforcing the fact that Black boys are just as capable as any other group. In analyzing Holly’s recommendations through the separate lenses of the district, school, and classroom, I believe that districts should be accountable for doing their best to hire and retain qualified

Black male teachers, while school administrators and teachers should create and sustain learning environments that support and promote Black culture and find ways to strategically address issues of racism and stereotyping. Classroom teachers should work with parents to ensure that basic student needs are met; to foster and build effective communication and relationships with parents/families; and to be what Delpit refers to as “warm demanders” and hold Black students accountable for meeting high expectations.

### ***Staffing/Training***

Many researchers have identified successful teachers of Black students as “warm demanders” (Delpit, 2012). Warm demanders hold Black students to high expectations and do not accept reasons related to poverty and access as excuses for why Black students cannot achieve. In her book, *Multiplication Is For White People*, Delpit highlighted a warm demander:

Mrs. Carter refused to accept poverty as an excuse for lack of academic achievement. When a student didn’t own a computer, she still had to finish a computer-based assignment. Mrs. Carter allowed the student to come early and/or stay after school, and she wrote a pass for her to use the computer during the homeroom period. (p. 78)

Delpit described another example of how a warm demander dealt with a student who would fall asleep every day in reading class:

Although she knew that the child’s home life was in shambles, she told the child that, no matter what, she had to work to learn in school. In order to keep the child awake and alert, the teacher had her stand during reading instruction. There was no ridicule involved, only support and praise for her efforts. If the child wished to sleep at recess, she could. (p. 78)

One might infer that Patmon (2007) thinks that warm demanders are scarce as she believes that schools are failing Black boys because far too many middle class White teachers are teaching poor Black children and that regardless of their qualifications and

academic backgrounds, these teachers are unable to relate to and connect with the students they serve. One Boston public school teacher, Sabrina Gray, noted:

I have to humble myself and acknowledge that I don't know how to teach young Black males. I am a female, not a male. Just as I learn differently, I have to teach differently to young Black males. These young men are eager to learn, yet bored. The challenge is not to entertain them, but to engage them. The question is how we teach teachers to challenge young Black males. (pp. 13-14)

Patmon further strengthens Gray's declaration by suggesting that teacher education programs are not effectively preparing teachers to teach children from diverse backgrounds. Many colleges simply require some sort of low level multicultural course with little or no application to authentic school environments.

In her article, *Woodland Hills, Propel Schools Get Grants to Aid Black Males*, Annie Siebert (2011) describes the use of a comprehensive grant to implement a two-pronged approach to narrowing the achievement gap. Similar to most school districts receiving grant monies to address the achievement gap, the Woodland Hills School District plans to use the funding to extend and expand existing programs to include evening and Saturday learning opportunities for Black males. In addition, similar to Benjamin's notion of eliciting the support of successful Black men to address the achievement gap of Black boys, Woodland Hills has agreed to share their grant money with Indiana State University of Pennsylvania to recruit Black men into the teaching profession. Woodland Hill's long-term dream is for these young Black men to return to their districts as teachers (Siebert, 2011). This long-range plan may finally begin to address Patmon's (2007) contention that many colleges and universities are simply not preparing teachers to teach children from diverse backgrounds. Surely, recruiting Black teachers does not automatically translate into qualified teachers, but it is a much needed starting point. Tracking these Black teachers

over an extended period of time and measuring their impact on the teaching and learning of Black boys is the type of focused action research needed to address the achievement gap.

### ***Funding***

Daria Hall (as cited in Borsuk, 2007) found that Wisconsin school districts with high minority enrollments have \$1,000 less to spend per student than the whitest districts in the state and, therefore, funding gaps could shed some light on the staggering poor performance of Black Wisconsin students. Although not specific to the overarching theme of this study regarding the achievement of Black boys, Borsuk (2007) confronts the sensitive issue of a funding gap. Wisconsin is not the only state with inconsistent funding issues across its school districts. For example, PA urban districts with high minority student enrollment, such as Philadelphia and Chester, have been victims of underfunding for decades. Pennsylvania is near the bottom in the percentage of state funding for local schools; only nine states contribute a lower percentage of state education funding than Pennsylvania (Education Law Center, 2013). This requires PA districts to rely heavily on local property taxes, but high-poverty communities such as Philadelphia and Chester are less able to raise the revenue to support quality schools (Education Law Center, 2013). For example, high-poverty public schools in PA spend an annual average of \$3,000 less per student compared to wealthy schools. This results in a funding gap of \$75,000 per classroom of 25 students (Education Law Center, 2013). Therefore, the quality of education in the state of PA can somewhat depend on the zip code. In addition, on average, Black students in these underfunded districts tend to perform poorer than their Black and White counterparts in predominantly White school districts in the same state, but with higher per

student spending rates. For example, Strawberry Mansion and John Bartram are the two lowest SAT scoring high schools in the state of PA. Both schools have high percentage of African American and Hispanic populations and struggle with chronic underfunding, budget woes, and poor teacher attendance (PA Real Time News, 2017). While educators and policymakers continue to debate how to close the achievement gap, little is being done to close the funding gap which directly impacts the achievement gap. As opposed to funding schools using a per pupil formula, school districts must begin to consider funding schools based on needs as identified by socio-economic and student achievement variables.

School leaders cannot simply rely on local taxes and monies promised from state and local governments to fund schools and initiatives geared toward narrowing the achievement gap of Black students. In an article, *Achievement Gap Symposium on Positioning Young Black Boys for Educational Success*, Patti Hassler (2011) identifies a progressive movement by the Education Testing Service (ETS) who have earmarked a grant totaling \$77,000.00 to support a program designed specifically for Black boys in grades 3 through 8 living in Newark, N.J. (Hassler, 2011). This program, The Great Expectations Freedom School, will be a summer enrichment program designed to provide Black boys with research-based interventions that have proven to be successful. ETS will receive assistance from two diverse model school districts who have implemented strategic programs that have drastically reduced achievement gaps and have increased the graduation rate for Black boys, the Bremerton School District in Washington, D.C. and the Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland. ETS hopes that by identifying programs, policies, and strategies that work, it will be possible to rewrite the story for young Black boys (Hassler, 2011).

### ***Full-day Pre-kindergarten***

The achievement gap between Black students and White students begins to form prior to students' entrance into kindergarten and widens over time. Investments in pre-kindergarten and direct linking of pre-K programs to high standards in the K-12 curriculum have helped narrow the achievement gap before students begin kindergarten (Aarons, 2009). It is important to note that the schools of the district (CSD) that participated in this study do not have a pre-kindergarten program.

### ***Racial Identity***

A cultural orientation among many Black children in some segments of Black communities defines academic learning in school as “acting White,” and academic success as a prerogative of White children. This orientation embodies both social pressures against striving for academic success and fear of striving for academic success (Fordham & Ogby, 1986). The following is a quote from Abdul Jabbar (as cited in Fordham & Ogby, 1986), which illustrates the “acting White” cultural orientation:

I got there [...] and immediately found that I could read better than anyone in the school. I could pick up a book, read it out loud, pronounce the words with proper inflections, and actually know what they meant [...] when the kids found this out I became a target. It was my first experience in an all-black situation, and I found myself being punished for doing everything I'd ever been taught was right. I got all A's and was hated for it; I spoke correctly and was called a punk. I had to learn a new language simply to be able to deal with the threats. I had good manners and was a good little boy and paid for it with my hide. (p. 177)

Because White Americans traditionally refused to acknowledge that Black Americans are capable of intellectual achievement, Black Americans subsequently began to doubt their own intellectual ability (Fordham & Ogby, 1986). The authors further note:

Black Americans began to discourage their peers, perhaps unconsciously, from emulating White people in academic striving, i.e., from “acting

White.” Because of the ambivalence, affective dissonance, and social pressures, many Black students who are academically able do not put forth the necessary effort and perseverance in their schoolwork and, consequently, do poorly in school. Even Black students who do not fail generally perform well below their potential for the same reasons. (p. 177)

Do Black kids consider being smart as “acting White?” (Toldson & Owens, 2010).

Toldson and Owens further explain:

Those familiar with Black idioms are aware that some Black people will accuse others of acting White usually as a slight against someone who is acting against the best interest of the Black community, or selling out. Recently, the phenomenon and the psychological connotations of acting White have been used to explain Black students’ educational values; the achievement gap between Black and White students; and even to influence the type of pedagogy and advising interventions offered to African American students, in particular, African American males. (p. 91)

In the article, “*Acting Black*”: *What Black Kids Think About Being Smart and Other School-related Experiences*, Toldson and Owens raise the issue of racial identity and its influence on the achievement gap. Ford and More (2004) assert that Black students with low levels of racial identity are less likely to achieve in school (as cited in Toldson & Owens, 2010). Wakefield and Hudley (2007) agree wholeheartedly by contending that African American children with positive racial identity and a strong self-concept are more academically successful (as cited in Toldson & Owens, 2010). Many experts agree that factors such as lack of Black male teachers, parent involvement/engagement, and lack of funding adversely impact the progress of Black boys. However, less clear and nationally debated is whether the achievement gap among Black boys is a culture or a consequence. In an attempt to answer this question, Toldson and Owens analyzed the results of a CBS News Poll that asked students a range of questions that gauged their perception of being smart and their opinions about smart students (Toldson & Owens, 2010). They concluded:

From these analyses of relevant research and large national datasets, it can be concluded that the acting White theory for Black education is more fodder for cultural critics, than a construct that will advance any meaningful solutions for academic achievement gaps. Regardless of race or gender, grade school students admit to some condescending attitudes toward working hard in school specifically and smart kids in general. (p. 95)

### Grade 3: A Critical Year

Reading proficiently by the end of third grade (as cited by NAEP at the beginning of fourth grade) can be a make or break benchmark in a child's educational development.

According to NAEP (2009):

Up until the end of third grade, most children are learning to read. Beginning in the fourth grade, however, they are reading to learn, using their skills to gain more information in subjects such as math and science, to solve problems, to think critically about what they are learning, and to act upon and share that knowledge in the world around them. (p. 9)

A longitudinal study that compared social behavior to literacy achievement found that students who are poor readers by the end of third grade will remain poor readers throughout high school (Miles & Stipek, 2006). The National Research Council asserts that academic success, as defined by high school graduation, can be predicted with reasonable accuracy by knowing someone's reading skill at the end of third grade (NAEP, 2009). A student who is not a marginally proficient reader by the end of third grade is unlikely to graduate from high school (National Research Council, 1998).

In 2009, 84% of Black fourth grade students scored below proficient on the NAEP reading test, compared to that of 58% percent of White students. In addition, 52% of Black students scored below basic on the same test compared to that of 22% for White students (NAEP, 2009). These results are startling in general, and of even greater concern for Black students. To reverse this trend, birth to grade 3 curriculum and instruction efforts should be rooted in the following standards (National Reading Panel, 2000):



- Phonemic awareness: Ability to manipulate sounds in words
- Phonics: Knowledge of relationships between written letters and sounds
- Vocabulary: Understanding the meaning of words in reading and in written and spoken language
- Fluency: Ability to read rapidly
- Comprehension: Ability to gain meaning while reading

Researchers have found that 75 % of students identified with reading problems in the third grade still struggle with reading in the ninth grade (Francis, 1996; Shaywitz, Escobar, Shaywitz, Fletcher, & Makuch, 1992), and that students with poor word identification skills in the third grade were unlikely to significantly improve their reading skills by the end of eighth grade (Felton & Wood, 1992). More specific to the reading achievement gap of Black students, a study that examined the relationship between a third grade reading level and four educational outcomes- eighth-grade reading performance, ninth-grade course performance, high school graduation, and college attendance- concluded that the proportion of students who are below grade level is highest for male students, and especially for African American students (Lesnick et al., 2010). Third grade constitutes a critical transition, a pivotal point for Black students (Paul, 2012). This pivot point may represent the final opportunity for teachers to positively impact the reading achievement gap of Black students.

#### The Achievement Gap: Educators' Perceptions Matter

Educators' perceptions, expectations, and behaviors should be uncorrelated with race. However, evidence exists that educators' perceptions, expectations, and behaviors interact with students' beliefs, behaviors, and work habits in ways that help perpetuate the

Black-White achievement gap (Webb, 2015). More specifically, many studies that measure whether teachers' perceptions and expectations for racial student groups are unbiased typically reveal that teachers are indeed racially biased. For example, in 10 studies that focused on teachers' perceptions concerning race, Baron et al. (1985) concluded that teachers had higher expectations for White students in nine of the studies and for Blacks in one of the studies. Likewise, Lightfoot (1978) stated that many teachers use stereotypical dimensions of race and ethnicity to inform lower expectations of Black students and, as a result, these children become hardened caricatures of an initially discriminatory vision (Lightfoot, 1978). Similarly, Baron, Tom and Cooper (1985) wrote:

The race or class of a particular student may cue the teacher to apply the generalized expectations, therefore making it difficult for the teacher to develop specific expectations tailored to individual students. In this manner, the race or class distinction among students is perpetuated. The familiar operation of stereotypes takes place in that it becomes difficult for minority or disadvantaged students to distinguish themselves from the generalized expectation. (p. 251)

A study conducted by Puma, Jones, Rock, and Fernandez (1993), *Teachers' Perceptions of Student's Level of Effort*, surveyed a national sample of teachers to rate students in their classes on, "Cares about doing well," "Gets along with teachers," and "Works hard at school." Teachers rated White students higher than Black students on all three items. In fact, the study showed that teachers perceived the greatest Black-White difference with regard to the above ranking categories in the early elementary years, when children are acquiring and developing the primary building blocks and pertinent skills necessary to grow, evolve, and excel academically. Of all stakeholders charged with providing children with equitable opportunities to learn and excel, one could argue that teachers have the greatest impact on student achievement. The formulation of lower

expectations for Black students in comparison to their White counterparts could potentially lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy where these expectations negatively impact student performance and outcomes. For these reasons, it is essential that educators not allow an opportunity for inferior expectations and perceptions for Black students to negatively inform teaching and learning opportunities.

Studies show that strategies such as providing Black students with efficient wait time and providing them with corrective feedback will cognitively and actively engage them in learning (Prager, 2011). However, teachers' perceptions and belief systems about reading instruction can be the most direct and immediate influence over students' reading success (Iaconelli, 2015). Without doubt, these perceptions can have the potential to positively or negatively impact future student academic performance. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1992) conducted a study known as the Pygmalion effect. In this study, teachers' expectations of their students' IQ levels were manipulated, thus leading teachers to believe that their students had higher IQ levels than they actually had scored. These higher expectations led to students improving their scores on a subsequent IQ test (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1992). This study showed that educators' perceptions matter in issues related to teaching and learning and have the potential to impact and influence how students academically progress and evolve.

The goal of reading instruction is for students to become independent readers. Differences among teachers' belief systems can lead to differences in teachers' perceptions of how students can attain this goal (Iaconelli, 2015). These differences can prioritize student needs and inform the selection of content and strategies used to deliver effective reading instruction. Costa and Garmston (1994) note that educators' knowledge, belief

systems, and perceptions might be the most powerful forces in influencing decisions and modifying instructional practices. When determining how to implement strategies and interventions to close the reading achievement gap of Black boys, educators cannot ignore the role that their perceptions and expectations play in providing equitable opportunities for Black boys to learn. While top-down mandates may dictate how educators' must design instruction to close the reading achievement gap, it is educators' perceptions that directly influence daily decisions that take place in classrooms (Iaconelli, 2015).

According to Nespor (1987), beliefs are the amalgam of cognitive knowledge and personal and/or professional experience, along with the possible influence of colleagues and/or the school environment (as cited in Iaconelli, 2015). Teachers' perceptions usually encompass the selection of instructional methods, the ability to work effectively with the curriculum, and an understanding of the parameters of students' abilities; they also reflect the amount of effort that teachers put into developing each lesson (Nespor, 1987). Pajares (1992) asserted that different perceptions have different effects on the delivery of reading instruction and that the stronger the belief and/or the longer that teachers possess a certain belief, the more difficult it becomes for them to change those beliefs (Landrum, Cook, Tankersley, & Fitzgerald, 2007).

A study by Bol and Berry (2005) examined the perceptions of teachers on factors contributing to the achievement gap and ways to reduce this gap. The study found that teachers' expectations and perceptions significantly impacted students' scores on standardized tests (Bol & Berry, 2005). It was further noted that teachers expect three times more from White students than from Black students. In a similar study, *Teachers' Expectations and Sense of Responsibility for Student Learning: The Importance of Race*,

*Class, and Organizational Habitus*, Diamond et al. (2004) concluded that the effects of teacher perceptions could be substantial if the effects accumulate from kindergarten to high school. Likewise, Berry et al. (2001) reported that African American male middle school students experienced lowered expectations from their teachers. They contended that these lowered expectations affected their achievement and their opportunities to gain access to high-level courses. Diamond et al. (2004) contended that lower expectations and perceptions for Black students is prevalent in many schools and leaders can adjust these perceptions by engaging in practices designed to increase teachers' sense of responsibility for student learning.

In a study, *Exploring Teachers' and Black Male Students' Perceptions of Intelligence*, Williams (2009) noted that a teacher told a Black boy that he should consider going to a community college, whereas, the recommendation for all of the White students was a four-year college. Williams (2009) expands on this example by stating:

These scenarios are typical of the 'lived' experiences of many black male students; where the message is very clear – that they are not intelligent enough, as are their white counterparts, to choose either the profession of their liking or to attend the college of their choosing, simply because of the color of their skin and the negative perceptions, held by many, of Black males. (p. 176)

Williams (2009) further concluded that the realities of racial discrimination, the history of slavery, and legal segregation have caused educators to perceive Black males as less intelligent. These inferior perceptions can reduce students' academic self-image and cause students to exert less effort in school (Diamond et al., 2004). The authors also suggested that having lower expectations and perceptions for Black students leads to a decreased level of responsibility for Black students, and directly impacts on gaps in academic achievement.

Because stereotypes and discrimination are present in society, Aker (2016) contended that many educators have asserted that these conditions are also present in schools. In her study of Black Teachers' Perceptions of the Academic Achievement of Black Male Students, Aker concluded that expectations for Black males are generally lower than that of other groups of students. One participant in the study (a teacher) wrote:

Entrenched in some teachers' thinking (often subconsciously) are stereotypes and misconceptions about Black males that prevent teachers from providing the best learning opportunities for students. In short, if teachers believe Black males are destined for failure and apathy, their pedagogies will be saturated with low expectations; teachers will be unwilling to prepare for their courses and unwilling to provide Black male students in urban schools with the best. In essence, teachers often think about Black male students through deficit lenses. (p. 17)

Aker (2016) reasoned that Black boys can sense when educators have negative and/or low perceptions or expectations of them. As a result of that perception, Black boys are more likely to disengage from school and therefore not achieve to the same extent as their White counterparts.

### Summary

Although scores have increased for both Black students and White students, on average Black students do not perform as well as their White peers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). More specifically, Black boys struggle more with reading. Due to lack of comparable data, it is unclear when the achievement gap started, but Pollard (2002) concluded that it is clear that the situation is not improving. To close the achievement gap for Black boys, researchers, educators, and policymakers must first establish the root causes of the inferior academic performance of African American boys. An analysis of articles and research studies highlight what many experts believe to be the sources of the subpar academic performance of Black boys. These sources range from issues of

ideological distances, racism, stereotyping, and poverty to the lack of preparation of teachers and schools, effective teaching, parent involvement/engagement, Black male role models and teachers, and self-responsibility and accountability on behalf of Black boys themselves and their successful brethren. Although many studies have analyzed and suggested numerous factors relating to the achievement gap of Black boys, more research is needed to identify successful programs and interventions that would lead to an improvement in the academic performance of Black boys.

Integrated throughout this literature review are proposals of interventions, strategies, and programs geared toward providing African American boys with equitable opportunities to make adequate gains in the academic arena. Aggressive, yet unrealistic, efforts such as closing learning institutions and the use of student discipline as a consequence for the lack of parental involvement offer little hope in reversing the achievement trend of Black boys. However progressive measures such as including student voice in developing effective teaching practices and proactive initiatives like securing funding to recruit and train Black male teachers could possibly close achievement gaps over an extended period of time.

This review of literature pinpoints the importance of grade 3. The transition from grade 3 to grade 4 is an important transition, one that has implications for success throughout middle school and high school. Equally important, this literature review supports the need to closely examine the impact that educators' perceptions have on the achievement gap of Black students. Educators have the greatest influence on the daily decisions regarding the selection of best instructional strategies used to inform teaching and learning opportunities. These decisions are often a direct reflection of educators' perceptions and educational

beliefs (Iaconelli, 2015). More specifically, educators' perceptions and belief systems about reading instruction can be the most direct and immediate influence over students' reading success. These belief systems can be so strong that they can positively or negatively influence students' success (Iaconelli, 2015). By closely examining how school leaders plan to close the reading achievement gap of Black boys and educators' perceptions of the effectiveness of these plans, this qualitative study may enhance understanding of how educators' perceptions can inform equitable opportunities for Black boys to learn and thrive.



## CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

### Site Selection

Located in a suburban residential area approximately five miles north of Philadelphia, the Crumpton School District is a large and diverse school district consisting of 7,816 students in grades K-12. Student demographics are: 4% Asian, 20% Black or African American, 7% Hispanic, 4% Multi-Racial, 65% White. Percent of enrollment by student groups are: 21% Economically Disadvantaged, 2% English Language Learner, 13% Special Education. The Crumpton School District employs six hundred thirty-four teachers, one hundred twenty-one administrative staff, and four hundred twenty support services staff. In the Crumpton School District, one hundred percent of the teachers are highly qualified, as identified by the State of Pennsylvania.

Prior to 2004, the Crumpton School District was considered a high performing school district with all its schools and disaggregated student groups consistently achieving adequate yearly progress (AYP) as reflected by standardized test data. However, beginning in 2005, the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind held districts accountable for conducting a more strategic and detailed analysis of its disaggregate data. This new mandate uncovered major areas of concerns for the district's special education and Black students. These concerns then paved the way for a large-scale superintendent's initiative aimed at narrowing the achievement gap. The initiative evolved into a model that used equity as a vehicle to provide all students with opportunities to learn.

A superintendent's committee consisting of district teachers and administrators, parents, school board members, and students drafted strategic plans to address the achievement gaps for special education and Black students. Objectives threaded

throughout these plans ranged from increased participation of minority students in the gifted program and in honors/advanced placement (AP) courses to stressing the importance of data-driven and differentiated instruction. Another major component was to abandon detracking at the secondary level and to offer only two levels of instruction within each major subject, honors and college preparatory.

Within five years of implementing this initiative, standardized test scores indicated that special education and Black students were achieving at a higher level and the achievement gap for these two groups had decreased significantly. The district also experienced an increase in students participating in AP courses, as well as students preparing for college. The success of the Crumpton School District in closing the achievement gap has been well documented in several professional journals and books that focus on achieving excellence for all students through equity. The district has also received several prestigious national awards such as General Colin Powell's America's Promise Best Communities for Young People, Money Magazine's America's Best Places to Live and the College Board AP Annual Honor Roll. As a result of this attention, the Crumpton School District was invited to share its initiative and results at many state and national conferences.

Without doubt, the Crumpton School District has experienced success with regard to closing the achievement gap of its Black students. Despite this success, current standardized test data indicate that Black students continue to lag behind their White counterparts, especially in the area of reading achievement. Therefore, this qualitative study's purpose was to provide implications and insights as to how the Crumpton School

District administrators and teachers might continue their efforts in closing the achievement gap of its Black students, and more specifically, for its Black boys.

### ***Participants***

This qualitative research study was conducted between July 2017 and October 2017 at Doris, Dwight, Patricia, and Quendell Elementary Schools, located in a large suburban school district in Pennsylvania, 5 miles north of Philadelphia. The participants were 11 regular education third grade teachers, 3 special education teachers, 4 elementary curriculum specialists, 8 reading specialists, 3 principals, 1 supervisor of special education, 1 assistant principal, and 1 supervisor of communication arts. These participants were selected to participate in the study because they were responsible for teaching reading to third grade Black Boys or responsible for the planning of reading instruction for third grade Black boys during the 2015-2016 school year.

Before I collected the data from the participants, I submitted my study to Temple University's Institutional Review Board. Approval to conduct this study was granted on July 3, 2017 (IRB approval#24548). I sent an abstract and a letter explaining the purpose of the study as well as the method by which I would recruit the participants to the Superintendent of the Crumpton School District. In return, I received a letter of permission to conduct the study from the Superintendent.

### ***Access to Participants***

As an administrator in the Crumpton School District, I have access to all staff email addresses within the school district. Therefore, participants were invited to participate in this study by email.

### ***Protection of Participants' Privacy***

Confidentiality is an important component of building trust (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). After the participants agreed to join the study, I exchanged contact information with the participants to schedule interview dates and to answer any questions that they had about the study. On the day of the interview all participants read and signed a consent form. In addition, all participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities (Hatch, 2002). No identifying information (i.e., name, years of experience, race, gender, any additional degrees or accreditation, or position or assignment) was released (Hatch, 2002). Participation in the study was voluntary, so no one received a stipend, reward, or gift for being in the study. Participants who chose to withdraw early from the study did so without penalty or repercussions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Reasons or situations for early withdrawal remained confidential. I processed the data gathered from the audio taped interviews to my private computer, backed up the data on a flash drive specifically used for this study, and locked all documentation in a filing cabinet at my private residence (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The paramount intent of this qualitative study was to examine educators' perceptions of the effectiveness of existing strategies and conditions in place to close the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys at Doris, Dwight, Patricia, and Quendell Elementary Schools in the Crumpton School District. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the views, experiences, and beliefs of educators. Predetermined questions (see Appendix A and B) grounded interviews; however, a flexible and conversational approach allowed the interviewer to ask follow-up questions and/or to pursue an idea or response in greater detail. This flexible approach allowed for the potential discovery of

important information that may not have previously been determined as relevant to the interviewer.

Using a deductive approach, interviews were used to gather information from participants. In addition, pertinent documents, School Improvement Plans (Getting Results Plans), and Principals' Goals were examined relative to existing interventions and strategies in place that were designed to narrow the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys. A rubric (see Appendix C and D), developed to structure the examination of documents, allowed me to efficiently align themes and patterns within the documents with information obtained from the participant interviews, as well as to connect intended goals and objectives of principals and administrators to outcomes and expectations of teachers. Data collected from participants and the examination of pertinent documents were analyzed and synthesized into patterns, generalizations, themes, and categories regarding the reading achievement gap of Black boys. Then, relevant literature and past experiences of participants were integrated to propose theories as to how the reading achievement gap of Black boys may be narrowed and ultimately eliminated.

### Research Paradigm

Critical theory is a practical approach to describing reality, sometimes giving voice to someone or a group who has been suppressed or oppressed. As previously stated, many students of color continue to be marginalized and alienated in most public school arenas and therefore not afforded consistent and equitable opportunities to improve academically. Therefore, this critical qualitative research study aimed to challenge existing and traditional teaching and learning systems, as well as gender issues (Lichtman, 2013), by examining educators' perceptions of the effectiveness of existing interventions and strategies geared

to close gaps in the reading achievement of elementary-aged Black boys. Critical theory also includes participation by mutually supporting groups (Lichtman, 2013). In examining educators' perceptions regarding the reading achievement gap of Black boys, the intent of the study was to set the stage for future research and for the development of strategic plans to enhance and improve the process by which educators and administrators inform decisions regarding the use of strategies and interventions geared toward improving the reading achievement of Black boys.

#### Data Collection Plan

This qualitative study revealed educators' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of existing strategies and conditions in place designed to close the reading achievement gap of Black boys in the Crumpton School District. After pertinent data were collected and organized, insights and implications were provided for possible future practice in identifying strategic ways to close the reading achievement gap of Black boys. These methods would include comprehensive implementation guidelines as well as the inclusion of various stakeholders such as teachers, parents, students, and school administrators.

Effective research requires data collection from a minimum of three different sources. Data collection from multiple sources provides a more complete understanding of a given problem (Glanz, 1998). This process of utilizing several data collection methods is referred to as triangulation. Glanz (1998) contends it enhances the credibility of qualitative data analysis. However, he further asserts that the usage of few data collection sources may lead to incomplete analysis and/or misevaluations. Relative to this study, data were triangulated by interviewing educators from four different schools, as well as by interviewing classroom teachers, reading specialists, curriculum specialists, building level

administrators, and central administrators. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. Next, information obtained from these various stakeholders as well as from the examination of pertinent documents, e.g. school improvement plans, was analyzed and categorized into themes and patterns. In addition to using this triangular approach, the following strategies were employed to ensure internal validity:

1. Participant checking - The participants interviewed served as a check throughout the data analysis process. All participants were interviewed once. Each interview was approximately 45 minutes in duration. As an active participant and elementary principal of one of the schools participating in the study, I kept a journal that described my reflections throughout the study. In addition, my ongoing dialogue and interactions with the various participants increased the likelihood that information gathered was accurate;
2. Review of pertinent documents - An analysis of School Improvement Plans (Getting Results Plans) and Principals' Goals as well as current and past interventions implemented to close gaps in reading achievement was completed;
3. Layered Interviews – Individual interviews of teachers, specialists, and administrators occurred in the school setting during non-school hours and lasted for approximately 45 minutes. To increase validity, first year teachers and/or long-term substitutes were not interviewed as a part of this study. Sessions were private and took place in quiet locations to avoid distractions. In order to obtain a deep understanding of educators' perceptions, a conversational approach was employed and open ended questions provided participants the flexibility to

expand on their responses (Patton, 2002). Interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder and notes were taken of participants' responses throughout the process. In addition, I asked administrators to bring copies of the Getting Results Plans and Principals' Goals so that they could discuss specific measures geared toward narrowing the reading achievement gap of Black boys. I transcribed the interview responses verbatim within two to three days post-interview (Hatch, 2002). After each transcription was completed, I used member checking to ensure the narrative was correct (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006);

4. Critical Friend – A Crumpton School District administrator assisted in collecting, examining, and analyzing data from multiple sources. This was imperative as it justified the need for an alternate perspective due to my role as a principal in the school district as well as a researcher;
5. Participatory modes of research - To the greatest extent possible, all of the participants were involved in each phase of this study. Some limitations included staff turnover and retirements; and
6. Clarification of researcher bias - Researcher bias was examined in “The Researcher’s Role” section of this proposal.

The principle strategy in this study, to ensure external validity, was the provision of implications for future practice and research that interested educators in other similarly situated schools could pursue to address their reading achievement gap issues (as cited in Creswell, 2009).



Interviews revealed personal, in-depth, and authentic information regarding the participants and their experiences with the reading achievement gap. An even representation of teachers, specialists, and administrators were interviewed in person. These interviews provided information that could not be directly observed and allowed individuals to provide historical information regarding their experiences with the reading achievement gap, as well as perspectives regarding the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of current interventions and policies in place to address the reading achievement gap of Black boys. One limitation of the interview process was that information was filtered through the perceptions of the participants (Creswell, 2009). In addition, the articulation skills and knowledge of some of those interviewed regarding the central problem were uneven and inconsistent.

Pertinent documents such as School Improvement Plans and Principals' Goals were examined to gather information and to set the stage for a deductive research approach. Information obtained from these documents were strategically coded to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. This aspect was unobtrusive because as a public school instructional leader, I had access to these documents throughout the research study (Creswell, 2009). It should be noted that some documents were incomplete or inaccurate, thereby questioning the validity of themes and patterns.

#### Data Analysis and Interpretation

As cited by Creswell's (2009) Figure 9.1, I employed the following steps to implement a linear approach to analyze and interpret data:

- 1) Organized and prepared the data for analysis.
- 2) Read through all the data.

- 3) Began with detailed analysis with a coding process.
- 4) Generated a description of the setting as well as categories or themes for analysis.
- 5) Advanced means by which themes were represented in the narrative.
- 6) Interpreted the data by describing lessons learned. (p. 185)

More specifically, data collection and analysis was a simultaneous and ongoing process (as cited Creswell, 2009). For example, I engaged in a reflective process when conducting interviews by asking follow-up questions based on earlier interviews. Memos were written after each interview to align common themes and perspectives (Creswell, 2009). In addition, as suggested by Creswell, responses by interviewees to open-ended questions were analyzed and synthesized into categories to address the original research question(s). Information obtained from interviews and the examination of documents were classified and coded into multiple themes and categories in an attempt to define educators' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of existing strategies and interventions geared toward closing the reading achievement gap of Black boys. Recordings of interviews were transcribed into an electronic database so that information could be easily accessed and able to be coded by themes and patterns. Finally, as suggested by Marriam (2009), major themes that surfaced as a result of ongoing data analysis were chronicled and interpreted for meaning. Interpretation of data either confirmed past research studies cited in the literature review or posed new questions in need of additional examination (Creswell, 2009).

### Reporting the Findings

A narrative framework was used to report findings as a result of data collection and analysis during this qualitative study. Precise and descriptive text conveyed the perspectives of educators' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of existing strategies and interventions geared toward closing the reading achievement gap of Black boys. In addition, themes and patterns noted as a result of the examination of documents such as Principals' Goals were threaded throughout to provide a complete picture of an educational system that continues to provide uneven learning opportunities for Black boys. Based on the experiences of the participants, implications for future practice and research were provided to assist similarly situated school districts in their work to close the reading achievement gap.

### Assumptions, Ethical Issues, and Contextual Sensitivity

More often than not, a qualitative researcher conducts applied research with an end goal of interpreting a phenomenon in terms of improving the quality of practice within a particular discipline (Merriam, 2009). This discipline is commonly familiar to the researcher and the actual study frequently occurs in the natural settings of the participants; therefore, the researcher regularly possesses an array of assumptions regarding the reality of a particular problem. Glense and Peshkin (1992) refer to a researcher's familiarity with a topic of study as "backyard" research, thus exposing the project to an assortment of validity issues. In addition, research involves collecting data from people and about people (as cited in Creswell, 2009). Therefore, sensitivity to ethical issues may arise. My purpose was to conduct research that would set the stage for the future practice and research aimed at narrowing the reading achievement gap of Black boys.

Participants were not only informed of the overall intent of the study, but were given the methods used to prepare the report. Participants were also informed as to how the data collected from the interviews and plans would be used. It was clear that all stakeholders – students, parents, teachers and administrators could ultimately benefit from participating in this study.

In order to protect identities, aliases or pseudonyms were used to protect the anonymity of all participants. In addition, the original proposal to conduct this study was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure that the legal and human rights of the participants were protected. Participant rights were also protected by signing consent forms by all who were involved in this qualitative study. Data collected from multiple sources were continuously and collaboratively reviewed by the participants, internal and external auditors, and by me to ensure accuracy and validity.

### Summary

Although scores have increased for both Black students and White students, on average Black students do not perform as well as their White peers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Specifically, Black boys struggle more with reading. To close the achievement gap for Black boys, researchers, educators, and policymakers must first closely examine the root causes of the inferior academic performance of Black boys. A brief analysis of current research highlighted what many experts believe to be the sources of subpar academic performance of Black boys. These sources range from issues of ideological distance, racism, stereotyping, and poverty to the lack of adequate preparation of teachers and schools, as well as ineffective teaching, and indifferent parent involvement/engagement. Although many studies have analyzed and noted all these

numerous factors involved in the achievement gap, more research is needed to identify successful programs and interventions that would lead to an improvement in the academic performance of Black boys.

This qualitative study endeavored to closely and strategically examine educators' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of existing strategies geared toward closing the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys in an attempt to identify solutions that would reverse the trend of the subpar reading achievement of Black boys in comparison to their White counterparts. Multiple research theories, various forms of data collection, as well as internal and external auditors ensured validity and provided detailed accounts of the experiences of participants. Data were continuously collected and reviewed by multiple research experts to ensure accuracy. Findings were reported in a narrative framework and organized into themes, theories, and patterns. The overarching intent of the study was to present findings that would improve teaching and learning opportunities for a minority group that has been marginalized and alienated in many public schools. It was my intention that various stakeholders, i.e. teachers, students, parents, school administrators, etc. benefit from the research findings and conclusions.

## CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine educators' perceptions of strategies in place to close the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys. More specifically, the study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are educators' perceptions of the effectiveness of existing strategies and conditions that are in place to close the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys at Doris, Dwight, Patricia, and Quendell Elementary Schools in the Crumpton School District?
2. What are the perceptions of leadership roles of administrators at Doris, Dwight, Patricia, and Quendell Elementary Schools in the Crumpton School District in closing the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys?

In order to collect data to address the research questions, I conducted private audiotaped interviews of 11 third grade teachers, seven reading specialists, four special education teachers, four curriculum specialists, three principals, one assistant principal, one supervisor of special education and one supervisor of communication arts. All participants either taught reading to third grade Black boys or were responsible for participating in the planning of reading instruction for third grade students during the 2015-2016 school year. For the purpose of reporting the findings and to protect the identities of all participants (which includes demographics such as gender, race, as well specific roles such as special education teachers and reading specialists), third grade teachers, special education teachers and reading specialists are referred to as "teachers." All other participants are referred to as "administrators." All interviews took place before or after school hours in quiet locations to reduce interruptions. I asked eight interview questions of the teachers (see Appendix A)

and six interview questions of the administrators (see Appendix B) regarding their perceptions of the effectiveness of strategies and interventions in place designated to closing the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys. Follow-up questions were asked accordingly.

Interview findings are organized and reported in two separate categories - effective/ineffective strategies and conditions and planning and preparation. In addition, teacher and administrator findings are listed separately as their respective roles formed perceptions from two completely different perspectives (teacher versus administrator). The research question is restated under each category to add structure and clarity for the reader. Next, common strategies and themes that emerged are identified and briefly described as sub categories under the research question. When appropriate, direct quotes of participants are incorporated to reinforce and highlight shared themes and patterns. References from literature are threaded throughout to support findings. As the researcher, I provide intermittent discussions and analyses of findings to foster a deeper level of understanding for the reader. Finally, I provide comparisons of teachers' and administrators' perceptions.

#### Effective Strategies: Teachers' Perceptions

Research Question #1 - What are educators' perceptions of the effectiveness of existing strategies and conditions that are in place to close the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys at Doris, Dwight, Patricia, and Quendell Elementary Schools in the Crumpton School District?

The following are common strategies that teachers perceived to be most effective in closing the reading achievement gap of the third grade Black boys whom they teach.

### ***Positive Relationships***

The importance of positive relationships emerged as a theme. All participants agreed that teachers must be able to form positive relationships with Black boys in order to build trust between teacher and student. They reasoned that the formation of these relationships is a prerequisite to any attempts to teach Black boys. Most teachers identified lack of positive relationships between Black boys and teachers as a factor associated with the reading achievement gap of Black boys. Teacher P stated, “If my Black boys sense that you do not genuinely care about them, they shut down and will refuse to put forth any effort.” Teacher O said, “In general, there are too many white women teaching Black boys. These teachers are not always able to relate to Black boys and therefore are unable to the build positive relationships that are essential for the academic success of Black boys. Fostering positive relationships with Black boys has the potential to impact teaching and learning.”

### ***Background Knowledge***

Teachers perceived the building of background knowledge as an important strategy in assisting Black boys in accessing the curriculum. Are Black boys reading or being read to at home prior to any formal schooling? Are they being exposed to books, literature, and vocabulary? Are Black boys engaged in literature-based activities at home or away from school, or are they watching too much television or playing too many video games? The aforementioned questions were raised by teachers during the interviews. All teachers interviewed believed that the lack of background knowledge greatly contribute to the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys. Teacher S stated, “You take it for granted that they (Black boys) have certain background knowledge, but they often do not.



So I have to take the additional time to make sure they know what they need to know and how they can relate to it.” Teacher B agreed, saying that there is a need to build up vocabulary so that his/her Black boys have a sense of how to approach and work the reading materials. Teacher U stated, “When it comes to some of my Black boys, I often have to spend extra time to integrate additional resources to build background knowledge because they simply do not have the background knowledge and vocabulary necessary to effectively participate in teaching and learning activities.” In general, teachers stated that Black boys are better able to participate in reading lessons once they have established background knowledge regarding the content and themes threaded throughout the lesson.

### ***Parent/Family Engagement***

Effectively engaging the parents and families of Black boys was a strategy that teachers perceived to be effective in narrowing the reading achievement gap. Each teacher mentioned that lack of parent/family engagement as a major factor that adversely impacts the reading achievement of Black boys. The overarching theme that emerged was that parents of Black boys are mostly disengaged, and therefore, these parents are unable to access appropriate resources to assist their children in developing the foundational skills necessary for their boys to develop into proficient readers. Teacher R asserted, “Black boys who have parents that are engaged tend to be better readers than Black boys whose parents are not engaged.” Teacher B added, “Good teachers are important, but engaged parents are equally important. Teachers and administrators must exhaust all resources to bring the parents of Black boys on board.”

### ***High Expectations/Encouragement***

A common theme threaded throughout most of the interviews was that when Black boys are held to high expectations and provided with a heightened level of encouragement to meet those expectations, they typically put forth maximum effort. Teacher V indicated, “Ideally, I try to encourage all my students to do their best, but I admit that I find myself giving my Black boys that extra push. Even my Black girls are more intrinsically motivated and tend to possess a love of reading, but my Black boys often only read when required to do so; therefore, I frequently encourage them to read, especially at home, more so than I do for my White students and Black girls,” Teacher N mentioned that all teachers should be focused on closing all learning gaps, but admitted that he/she takes the reading achievement gaps of Black boys a little more personally and that his/her role is to encourage Black boys to set high expectations for themselves. She concluded by stating, “My role is to help my Black boys develop the belief that they can become good readers, while providing them with the encouragement and support to do so.” The general consensus was that holding Black boys to high expectations is an effective strategy in narrowing the reading achievement gap of Black boys.

### ***Engagement/Interest***

The significance of actively and cognitively engaging Black boys through the selection of interesting learning materials that they can relate to was a common and effective approach that teachers use to close gaps in reading achievement. Most teachers stated that Black boys are generally disengaged when it comes to reading because most of the required reading selections are of little interest to them. Therefore, teachers must find ways to engage Black boys by identifying supplemental stories and books that they relate

to and that interest them. Teacher A said, “I require students to complete interest inventories to match them with books I know they will like. When I do this, I find that my Black boys are much more engaged in reading and learning activities.” Teacher G stated, “Ensuring that students are cognitively engaged is important, but equally important for my Black boys is ensuring that they are actively engaged as well. I find that my Black boys are more engaged and are better able to show what they know when given the opportunity to move around, manipulate learning materials, and converse with their peers.”

### ***Collaborative Learning***

Teachers deemed collaborative learning as an effective way to close the reading achievement gap of Black boys. A majority of teachers stated that Black boys are very social; therefore, these teachers create opportunities for Black boys to work collaboratively during teaching and learning. Teacher U stated, “My Black boys are social and want to constantly talk so I try to capitalize on this social aspect by allowing them to work in groups often.” It is important to note that Teacher U identified the need to teach Black boys the appropriate social skills necessary to work effectively and efficiently in groups. In general, teachers noted that Black boys experience more success when engaged in collaborative learning tasks and experience less success when they participate in more traditional learning environments. These traditional settings are characterized by sitting for long periods of time and dominated by whole group instruction where the teacher does most of the talking and students do most of the listening.

### ***Equitable Representation: Literature***

Teachers perceived providing reading materials representative of Black boys and black culture as one of the most effective strategies that can be easily implemented to close

the reading achievement gap of Black boys. “Most of the required books and reading selections are based on white characters and white experiences. It’s my job as a teacher to find supplemental literary resources so that Black boys see themselves in the work that we do in the classroom,” replied Teacher E. With the exception of four teachers, all participants noted that there is generally a lack of diversity in the required literature. The consensus among these teachers was that they have to work beyond the curriculum to form a relationship between instructional materials and the Black boys whom they teach.

### ***Leadership Roles***

Placing Black boys in leadership roles during reading-related learning activities is a strategy that teachers perceived to be effective in closing gaps in reading achievement. A common theme threaded throughout the responses was that work appears to be more relevant to Black boys when they have a specific role. Some of these roles include becoming a scribe, time keeper, score keeper, or recorder during games or collaborative group tasks.

### ***Deemphasizing Importance of Standardized Tests***

In general, teachers believed that placing less emphasis on standardized test is an effective way to maximize instructional time so that Black boys are afforded more opportunities to read. All teachers stated that far too much instructional time is spent preparing students to perform well on standardized tests. Teacher B stated, “Instead of teaching test-taking strategies, I would like to focus more on expression and provide my Black boys with strategies and techniques that will enable them to speak and write clearly.” Teacher B admitted that she often skips the required test prep sessions when he/she deems appropriate and provides more opportunities for “real” teaching. Overall, teachers stated a

desire to abandon test preparation, thus providing additional instructional time to provide Black boys with learning opportunities that will close gaps in reading achievement.

#### Discussion of Effective Strategies: Teachers' Perceptions

CSD teachers identified an array of non-instructional strategies in place that they deemed to be effective in closing the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys whom they teach. Those strategies included building positive relationships, setting high expectations, fostering student engagement/interest, and increasing and promoting parent engagement, etc. In a study that examined the perceptions of teachers on factors contributing to the achievement gap, Bold and Berry (2005) found that teachers' expectations significantly impacted students' scores on standardized tests. Based on my interactions with CSD teachers during the interviews, I believe that they hold Black boys to high expectations and realize that their expectations have an impact on how Black boys progress. In fact some admitted to providing Black boys with a heightened level of support to meet high expectations. I believe that Black students generally respond positively to this extra support as some perceive good teachers to be those who inspire and push to the point of no return (Delpit, 2012). For example, CSD Teacher V admitted to giving his/her Black boys a little extra push to meet high expectations, while Teacher N stated that the reading achievement gap of Black boys is personal for him/her and that his/her role is to encourage Black boys to set high expectations for themselves. Conversely, Aker (2016) reasoned that Black boys can sense when educators have negative and/or low perceptions or expectations for them. As a result of that perception, Black boys are more likely to disengage from school and therefore not achieve to the same extent as their White counterparts. By all

measures, CSD teachers who participated in this study set high expectations for the Black boys whom they teach.

Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Pianta, and Howes (2002) found that supportive student–teacher relationships were more predictive of reading skills for African American students than for Caucasian students. In addition, Black children are less likely than Caucasian children to enjoy supportive relationships with teachers (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Fortunately, the CSD teachers who participated in this study perceived that the formation of positive relationships with Black boys was a factor that positively impacts the reading achievement of Black boys. More specifically, Teacher P understood that she/he must build both positive and genuine relationships with her Black male students to prevent students from shutting down and becoming idle and disengaged. CSD teachers also appeared to be cognizant of the racial imbalance between teachers and students and how this imbalance could impact the formation of positive relationships between White teachers and Black students. CSD Teacher O mentioned that far too many white teachers are teaching Black boys and therefore may be unable to relate to and build the positive relationships that are essential for the success of Black boys. Statistics support Teacher O’s assertion. For example, in 2003–2004, 84% of elementary teachers in the United States were Caucasian (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). Conversely, 42% of elementary children in 2003 were part of an ethnic minority (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). Several studies report that a teacher-child ethnicity match is associated with more positive teacher ratings of closeness (Saft & Pianta, 2001). CSD teachers appear to be well aware of the fact that they must put forth additional effort to build positive relationships with

Black boys because of the racial imbalance between primarily White teachers in their respective schools and Black students whom they teach.

Similar to the perceptions of CSD teachers, I believe parent engagement is one of the most important non-teaching strategies that has the greatest potential to positively impact the reading achievement gap of Black boys. “There is no such thing as a parental aide to a teacher. The teacher is an aide to the parents. It is the parents who rear the children” (as cited in Walton, 2010). Prager (2011) reinforces this premise by highlighting the notion that parents are the first teachers and help to narrow the achievement gap by exposing children to a variety of experiences, which enable them to better connect with the curriculum. Similar to Walton’s (2010) and Prager’s (2011) assertions, CSD teachers often blamed uninvolved parents as a factor that contributes to the reading achievement gap of Black boys. For example, Teacher H mentioned that a barrier to closing the reading achievement gap of Black boys is the lack of buy-in and support on behalf of parents, while Teacher J appeared visibly frustrated when she exclaimed that the parents of her Black male students do not attend any school events. Conversely, engaging the parents of Black boys was a strategy that CSD teachers perceived to be effective in narrowing the reading achievement gap. I personally believe that CSD teachers should not blame parents for why gaps in achievement exist. Instead, teachers should to work collaboratively with the parents of their Black male students to provide the support needed to achieve and excel. If CSD teachers construct caring and meaningful relationships with parents, treating parents as partners in their children’s education, parents are far more likely to become involved – and stay involved (Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007). Additionally, this involvement and engagement must be linked to student learning to assist in closing gaps in achievement. To

positively impact student achievement, CSD teachers must engage parents in their children's learning by clearly communicating to parents what students are learning and doing in school (Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007).

Along with the CSD teachers who participated in this study, I think that cognitively and actively engaging Black boys in learning is an effective approach to closing the reading achievement gap of Black boys. I find that Black boys are most disengaged when they are unable to relate and connect to what they are reading. Similarly, Kirkland (2011) proposes that lack of relevance, rather than skill deficit, may explain why some young Black males either do not like to read or choose not to read. Teachers who find ways to bridge this connection and relationship gap will most likely be successful in narrowing the reading achievement gap of Black boys whom they teach. For example, in Kirkland's (2011) study of Black boys and the relationship between ideology and engagement, one Black boy who struggled with reading was more engaged in progressing through a unit of study when he was able to work collaboratively with peers and exhibit his understanding of the content by creating comic strips and mostly disengaged during a separate unit of study when he was required to sit through lectures and take a final paper and pencil exam at the end of the unit. Teacher G stated that learning activities that involve movement, interaction, discussion, and manipulation are best suited for learning styles of Black boys. Boykin (2001) agrees with this premise by concluding that Black boys might learn more in school if their lessons reflected verve—that is, if the tasks the students were given were more varied and stimulating (Boykin, 2001). Lisa Delpit (2012) described the difference between two schools serving very low-income Black children, one school's state test scores were at



the top of the district's well-to-do schools, and the other school's scores were at the very bottom of the district.

The schools essentially served the same population. The difference could only be the quality of teaching and instruction. In each of the classrooms in the higher-scoring school, I saw teachers engaged with their students, actually teaching. In the lower-performing school, I saw most teachers sitting while students completed seat work. (p. 73)

As a result of interviewing CSD teachers, it was evident that they perceived a varied and stimulating learning environment, one that resembles the engagement that Delpit describes above, as a factor that positively impacts the reading achievement of Black boys.

#### Effective Instructional Strategies: Teachers' Perceptions

The following are common instructional strategies that teachers perceived to be most effective in closing the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys whom they teach. Each strategy is first presented as a brief summary of how CSD teachers collectively defined each approach during the interviews. Direct quotes are then integrated to provide a deeper understanding of how some CSD teachers implement these specific approaches.

- **Differentiated Instruction** - changes and adaptations to instructional approaches to meet the individual needs of Black boys. These changes and shifts should be informed based on data and teacher observations. Several teachers perceived differentiated instruction to be an effective strategy in closing the reading achievement gap of Black boys:

Despite a child's grade level and grade level goals and objectives, it is important to instruct him/her at his/her instructional level. This is most effective because it allows students to make connections to background knowledge and apply those connections to learn new things. If students are unable to do this [...] they kind of hit a wall and stop learning

and progressing. Differentiated instruction entails adapting learning activities based on individual needs, so while learning goals may be the same for one group of students, the assignments intended to assist students in reaching those goals may look different for a student or for a group of students. (Teacher H)

When thinking about the Black boys that I teach who struggle with reading, I find myself often differentiating their assignments or sometimes differentiating my instructional techniques. Some of these techniques include providing more wait time, integrating more active engagement, and facilitating relevant discussions to build background knowledge. (Teacher C)

Providing opportunities for differentiated instruction [...] I think is very effective in closing the reading achievement gap of Black boys. It gives me the opportunity for more focused instruction. I can focus on individual students or groups of students [...] and give them more attention and teacher face time while other students work independently or cooperatively in small groups with little direct teacher facilitation. However, differentiated instruction is only effective in closing gaps in learning if it is done correctly and consistently. It just can't be students physically sitting in groups and working on the same assignments and activities. Learning activities must truly be different and aligned to student needs. This takes a great deal of data analysis and preparation. (Teacher P)

- **Decoding and Fluency Practice** - integration of additional instruction in the areas of decoding and reading fluency for Black boys who struggle with reading fluency and comprehension. This includes activities and strategies that parents can use at home to support what is occurring at school. Teacher I asserted, "Extra and focused practice with decoding and fluency strategies help to accelerate the reading progress of Black boys whom I teach. I find that they simply need more time and more practice and I ensure that this

takes place by doing it in school because there are no guarantees that it will happen at home.” One other that agreed with Teacher I’s perceptions said:

Fluency practice is essential, but it is tough to find the time. By third grade students are expected to be fairly fluent. I created a fluency buddies program where my struggling readers, many of whom are Black boys, read to sixth grade students and vice versa. This takes place before school two times per week [...] about 20 minutes per session. I have found it to be really effective. It provides students with the extra practice outside of the instructional day, but still in the school environment where I can supervise it while simultaneously preparing for my day [...] this way I know it is getting done. My students become more fluent and confident readers and the sixth graders build leadership skills and earn service hours. It is a win, win. (Teacher M)

- **Appropriate Book Selection** - selection of books based on students’ reading levels and interests. Book selection includes identifying books with main characters with whom Black boys can relate, resulting in increased engagement and relevance. Teacher Q’s perception of the effectiveness of appropriate book selection as a strategy that supports the reading progress of Black boys was shared by most:

In order to better engage my Black boys in reading, I have to guide their book selection. They need to see themselves in the book in order to connect to it. I look for books with Black boys visible on the covers [...] books that are about Black experiences and culture. This allows them to relate themes and plots to their own experiences. When they do this [...] they become more engaged and are able to pick up a book, like it, and understand it. (Teacher Q)

- **Build Background Knowledge** - Black boys often are devoid of the background knowledge needed to effectively participate in content-related teaching and learning activities. Therefore, when appropriate, teachers should provide Black boys with strategies to build and expand background

knowledge regarding a particular topic or theme prior to reading a book or reading selection. Many CSD teachers believed that taking the extra time to build background knowledge of Black boys helps to fill the knowledge void that often exists due to a lack of exposure to literature and experiences.

Teachers A and E noted the following:

Filling in gaps with regard to background knowledge is probably the most meaningful thing I do to close the reading achievement gap of my Black boys. They need to know what it is and how they can relate to it before they touch the material [...] so that they can have a sense of how to approach it and work with it. (Teacher A)

I find and integrate additional non-fiction text to build background knowledge of my Black boys and it appears to be successful because I see their vocabulary broaden and increase as the year progresses. I also use technology to build background knowledge. I recall recently when one of my Black boys asked, “What is a prairie?” I pulled up a picture of a prairie on google images and was able use the image to facilitate a discussion of what a prairie is. I found that this boy had some knowledge of prairies so I was able to build on that [...] so now he was able to connect what I was teaching to what he already knew. (Teacher E)

- **Direct and On-going Feedback** - frequent and individualized dialogue between teacher and student regarding progress or lack thereof. Black boys benefit greatly from knowing where they currently stand and what is needed to progress to the next step. Studies show that strategies such as providing Black students with sufficient wait time and providing them with corrective feedback cognitively and actively engage them in learning (Prager, 2011). Teacher A agreed, chuckled and stated, “My Black boys simply need to know [...] am I right or wrong and they need to hear it often to remain

motivated and engaged. Others described more creative and non-traditional ways to provide Black boys with on-going feedback:

My Black boys need frequent check-ins, especially with regard to their independent reading so I use learning logs where I have reciprocal written communication with students [...] kind of like a written discussion where we talk about characters, make predictions, and ask/answer questions. I find this to be extremely effective in providing them the on-going feedback needed to remain engaged in reading. (Teacher V)

- **Intense Vocabulary Instruction** – explicit instruction in specific words and word-learning strategies. Many Black boys have not had the benefit of pre-school and therefore arrive to elementary school as Kindergarten students devoid of an age-appropriate vocabulary. This vocabulary deficiency widens over time. CSD teachers believed that exposure to pertinent vocabulary that Black boys need to access the curriculum and effectively participate in teaching and learning activities is essential:

Vocabulary development is essential. I find that many of my Black boys have a limited vocabulary which contributes to their gaps in reading achievement. Even if you can decode a word you may not know what that word means if you have not been exposed to it in literature. So I spend a lot of time teaching vocabulary through literature and in conversation [...] and challenge students to use more sophisticated vocabulary in their writing and conversations. I believe this allows students to figure out the meaning of unfamiliar words in context which increases reading comprehension. This is challenging for my Black boys who struggle with reading [...] especially the conversation piece, but overtime it does help to improve their reading achievement. (Teacher G)

- **Teach Active Reading Strategies** - strategies that assist with reading comprehension - predict, visualize, react, question, background knowledge,

and summarize. These strategies help Black boys to build background knowledge and to make relevant connections to reading materials. A theme that emerged is that Black boys who are struggling readers do not cognitively engage themselves with reading materials:

Many of my Black boys who struggle with reading “pretend” to be reading when they really are not. Some are daydreaming or just sitting there staring at pages of print. So I require them to “mark-up” the text by using active reading strategies. I require them to physically write down predictions, reactions, connections, etc. This lets me know that they are attempting to cognitively engage themselves in the reading material. Good readers do this naturally [...] and that is the ultimate goal for my Black boys who struggle with reading. (Teacher J)

- **Access to a Diverse Classroom Library** - classroom library representative of books with Black boys as main characters. CSD teachers believed that a diverse classroom library allows Black boys to see themselves in literature which builds appropriate connections and fosters cognitive engagement.

Teacher B expanded:

I have tons of books in my room. Even if it is not great literature such as Captain Underpants or magazines, I just try to overwhelm my Black boys with reading materials that are diverse and that interest them. Recently, two of my Black boys were fighting (not literally) over a book and this was actually a really good thing. (Teacher B)

- **Leveled Learning Centers** - learning activities based on individualized needs. These centers often provide opportunities for collaborative work and the manipulation of materials which suit the typical learning styles of most Black boys. Teacher D stated, “When Black boys who struggle with reading are grouped with students with the same abilities, they experience success

and become more confident and engaged.” Teacher A asserted, “Learning Centers are great in supporting Black boys because they are able to show what they know without “all eyes” on them [...] it really builds confidence and promotes self-accountability. Teacher K reinforced this theme and said, “Learning centers often provide opportunities for students to physically manipulate instructional materials such as sight word flash cards and sentence strips. Black boys benefit greatly from being able to “show” you what they know, as opposed to “telling” what they know.

- **Kinesthetic Learning Activities** - learning activities that allow for student movement and physical activity. This appears to provide Black boys with alternative methods to exhibit what they know and do not know. In general, CSD teachers acknowledged the need to provide Black boys with opportunities to be structurally interactive:

Black boys are more active. In general, they don’t like sitting for long periods of time so I integrate as much movement and active engagement as I can to support them. With some simply allowing them to stand behind their desks or walk about the room during less structured times of the day goes a long way in keeping them focused and engaged. (Teacher D)

Black boys might learn more in school if their lessons reflected verve—that is, if the tasks the students were given were more varied and stimulating (Boykin, 2001).

- **Integration of Technology and Games** - integration of appropriate games that support content, e.g. Scrabble and use of technology, chrome book technology, and computer coding to support teaching and learning.

Learning tasks that require the manipulation of materials and resources actively and cognitively engage Black students in learning. In addition, the use of technology and assignments differentiated based on specific learning needs and styles help to create equitable outcomes for Black students (Patterson et al., 2008). CSD teachers perceived the integration of technology and games as effective in providing Black boys with non-threatening means to access the curriculum.

I take the passion my Black boys have for playing computer games and use it to motivate them and to build their confidence. It is effective because it makes learning fun for them and provides them with a non-traditional way to practice skills. The more they like it, the more they will do it [...] it is that simple. (Teacher S)

All of my Black boys love to play video games. It is what they spend most of their leisure time doing. So any opportunity to integrate a game through technology motivates and engages Black boys. Study Island is a software program that I use frequently that engages Black boys. Students must work their way through reading assignments and related comprehension questions and then are provided opportunities to play games that reinforce pertinent skills. I believe a computer program such as this is very effective in closing the reading achievement gap of Black boys. (Teacher N)

- **Extended Day Learning Opportunities** - instruction beyond the required instructional day. Extended day learning opportunities provide a means to close reading achievement gaps of those Black boys who lack a pre-school education and support at home. Most CSD teachers believed that Black boys who struggle with reading and literature greatly benefit from extra practice time:



I could go on for hours about how the lack of parent involvement and engagement contributes to the reading achievement gap of Black boys. I can't concern myself with what does or does not happen at home. That is a factor that I cannot control. The fact of the matter is [...] many of my Black boys who are not good readers simply don't have the support needed at home. So I have to provide opportunities outside of the regular school day to fill in the gaps. Whether it's staying after school to get a head start with homework or coming in early to preview a new skill for the week [...] extended learning opportunities help to accelerate the progress of many Black boys in the areas of reading and literacy. (Teacher O)

- **Title I Support** - certified readings specialists provide reading interventions to academically at-risk students. Support can be delivered to small groups of students with common needs or one-on-one individualized instruction as the schedule allows. This support greatly benefits the progress of Black boys in the areas of reading and literacy. Teachers I and A provided a little more detail:

Title I support allows us to target students who have the greatest deficiencies in reading. It allows us to provide rigorous support for students would not otherwise receive it. It allows teachers and reading specialists to design instruction so students can appropriately access the curriculum at their instructional level. The instructional level is so important [...] we must meet students where they are. Title I funding enables us to provide additional services for students who are academically at-risk. (Teacher I)

I'm not a huge fan of the state's funding formula for school districts, but I do appreciate the fact that we are deemed a Title I school based on our low socio-economics and as a result we receive more funding to support students who are at-risk. I believe that we use the additional funding to hire additional reading specialists who are responsible for working with students who really struggle to keep up. Unfortunately, based on my experience, these students tend to be many of my Black boys. The Title I reading specialists

at my school are definitely effective in closing the reading achievement gap of Black boys. (Teacher A)

- **Response to Intervention and Instruction (RtII)** - process by which the alignment of intervention and enrichment reading instruction is determined based on a continuous analysis of student data. Teacher O asserted, “Ideally, data are used to identify needs and to plan for teaching and learning accordingly. Ongoing data analysis allows teachers to see exactly how Black boys are performing in comparison to their counterparts, thus informing the selection of appropriate learning strategies and interventions.”

#### Discussion of Effective Instructional Strategies: Teachers’ Perceptions

CSD teachers perceived many common instructional strategies to be effective in closing the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys whom they teach. More specifically, they deemed instructional strategies such as differentiated instruction, kinesthetic learning activities, and extended learning opportunities to be effective in improving the reading achievement of Black boys. Integrated within these strategies are opportunities for the use of technology, games, and manipulative materials- all of which teachers perceived to be effective in closing the reading achievement gap of Black boys. All those above are important as they are strategies that teachers can use to directly influence what takes place in the classroom. There are many factors beyond the control of teachers that contribute to the reading achievement gap of Black boys, but their perception regarding the selection of appropriate and effective teaching strategies is not one. While top-down mandates may dictate how educators’ must design instruction to close the reading achievement gap, it is educators’ perceptions that directly influence daily decisions

that take place in classrooms (Iaconelli, 2015). While CSD teachers appeared to be bound by top-down policies and procedures, they appeared confident in their perceptions of what is working in their classrooms to support the progress of Black boys. In fact, they often spoke about how they often go beyond the minimal requirements and expectations to provide Black boys with equitable and additional opportunities to learn. This was evident by Teacher O's assertion that he/she provides multiple opportunities for Black boys to learn outside of the regular school day and Teacher E's integration of additional non-fiction texts to build the background knowledge of some Black boys. CSD teachers' perceptions appear to encompass the selection of appropriate and effective instructional methods, the ability to work effectively with the curriculum, and an understanding of the parameters of students' abilities (Nespor, 1987).

CSD teachers believed that differentiated instruction is realized through the implementation of RtII and Title I reading support which provide a framework for the continuous analysis of student data, and collaboration among educators to discuss these analyses, and then to inform the selection of appropriate strategies and interventions to meet the needs of Black boys. Teacher O mentioned that ongoing analysis required by the RtII framework allows him/her to see exactly how Black boys are performing in comparison to other student groups and this informs her instruction accordingly. Teacher C stated that this continuous analysis of data allows him/her to adapt learning activities based on individual needs, while teacher P asserted that by using data to differentiate instruction, he/she is able provide more focused learning opportunities for Black boys. Teacher I agreed and concluded that CSD's Title 1 support allows teachers and reading specialists to design instruction so students can appropriately access the curriculum at their

instructional levels. Similar to Coffey's (2014) assertion regarding the positive impact of varying instruction based on student needs, it appears as if CSD teachers perceive differentiating instruction to be an effective way to open the world of reading for their Black male students.

In *Multiplication Is For White People Raising Expectations for Other People's Children*, Lisa Delpit (2012) questions why a Black boy would continue to practice shooting basketball hoops day after day, week after week, and month after month. She reasons that the Black boy continues to practice, even if improvement is not obvious and apparent, because he perceives basketball to be fun and engaging and can use his mind and his body (Delpit, 2012). This idea of providing Black boys with opportunities to use their bodies as well as their minds aligns with Boykin's assertion that Black boys might learn more in school if their lessons reflected verve—that is, if the tasks the students were given were more varied and stimulating (Boykin, 2001). I believe that some CSD teachers' perceptions of how kinesthetic learning can be effective in closing the reading achievement gap of Black boys to be somewhat misguided. For example, Teacher O admitted that he/she provides opportunities for students to stand behind their desks or move about the room. I view Teacher O's strategies as opportunities for Black boys to remain focused and settled, which may indirectly impact their ability to participate in teaching and learning activities. However, I do not think these are the rich and stimulating interactions that Delphi and Boykin refer to in their depictions of kinesthetic learning being connected to meaningful practice and learning outcomes.

When Lisa Delpit (2012) talked to a group of students who were primarily Black about problems they saw in their school most of the students' comments focused on what

teachers did or did not do in classrooms. When asked to describe a good teacher one said, “Someone you can find outside of class for help.” It appears as if the CSD teachers that participated in this study would be considered good teachers from this student’s perspective. In general, CSD teachers believed extended learning opportunities outside of the regularly scheduled instructional day to be an effective method of closing the reading achievement gap of Black boys. Teacher O often stays after school to work with some of her Black boys to get an early start with homework or preview content for the next day or upcoming week. Teacher O’s efforts are aligned with Kirkland’s (2011) contention that after school individualized tutoring programs offer Black boys the support needed to close gaps in achievement. Jackson (2002) believes that measures such as enrolling Black boys in literacy-based Saturday programs at local churches and libraries should also be considerations for providing Black boys with extended learning opportunities. Based on my interactions with CSD teachers during the interview process, I believed them to be sincere in their belief that they often provide the Black boys whom they teach with additional opportunities to learn and evolve. They wholeheartedly perceived these opportunities as effective in closing the reading achievement gap of Black boys.

#### Ineffective Strategies/Conditions: Teachers’ Perceptions

The following are common strategies and aspects of education that teachers perceived to be most ineffective in closing the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys whom they teach.

##### ***Social Skills Instruction***

The teaching of social skills appeared to be an important method of providing Black boys with pertinent skills and strategies needed to interact and communicate appropriately

with others. However, social skills instruction takes place to varying degrees depending on the school, but is far from consistent and comprehensive enough to positively impact how some Black boys socialize with peers and staff. Teacher T stated, “We have a school psychologist, but she appears to be overwhelmed with testing students in special education and hardly ever involved in the social and emotional development of students.” Teacher D stated, “Our school psychologist will occasionally teach social skills to small groups of students, but only after there has been some type of incident like a playground tussle or bullying.” Opportunities to teach social skills appeared to be reactive as opposed to proactive.

### ***District Pacing Guide***

Teachers perceived instructional pacing guides as deterrents to providing effective reading instruction to Black boys whom they teach, many of whom simply need more time to complete an assignment or repeated exposure to a skill or concept in order to grasp it. These top-down mandates (pacing guides) outlining precisely what teachers are to teach as well as when they should teach it hinders the implementation of effective research-based instructional practices. These guides place constraints on the schedule and therefore prevent teachers from providing Black boys who struggle with equitable reading opportunities to progress through the curriculum. Teacher R expanded by noting the following:

The pacing guide is aligned to my grade book so I have to finish teaching unit 1 in reading before the end of the first marking period in order for students to receive report card grades. I don’t have the answer, but this has to change and become more flexible as we know that students do not progress at the same rate. I think one of the reasons why a reading achievement gap exists is because we push students through units of study in every subject at every grade level, regardless of whether or not they are securing the skills and material. (Teacher R)

### ***Low/Social Expectations***

Teachers reasoned that holding Black boys to low expectations, and accepting what they perceive to be socially acceptable excuses not to put forth the effort needed to achieve, greatly contributes to the reading achievement gap. Many of the teachers interviewed did not think that being a good reader is socially acceptable among primary-aged Black boys. They generally felt that most Black boys whom they teach do not think that reading is important. Teacher D mentioned the “coolness” factor that appears to influence his/her Black boys. He/she said, “Being a good reader is simply not considered “cool” among my Black boys and being “cool” seems to be a high priority.” Approximately half the teachers also mentioned low expectations for Black boys as a barrier to closing the reading achievement gap of Black boys. Teacher M replied, “I am not so sure that we always expect our Black boys to be just as good as other students. We often use factors that contribute to the reading gap of Black boys as excuses for why they should not be held to the same standard as other students and our teaching methods are informed accordingly.”

### ***Lack of Relevance: Curriculum***

The perception among most teachers interviewed was that the prescribed district curriculum is the problem and does not help to narrow the achievement gap. Teacher D stated that teachers must match literacy to students and the curriculum does not allow them to do so. Teacher C said, “Most books available to my Black boys that have Black characters are about athletes or entertainers. They need to see characters in books that they can relate to, characters who look like them.” All teachers mentioned some aspect of the curriculum as being a barrier to closing the reading gap of Black boys. In general, teachers felt that the curriculum was too regimented and focused too much on assessments and

standardized test preparation. The main theme threaded throughout the interviews was the fact that Black boys mostly do not relate to the characters and reading themes integrated within the reading curriculum and therefore lacking in relevance. This lack of relevance leads to disengagement, disinterest, and lack of motivation to put forth the effort to become good readers.

### ***Lack of Early Exposure***

Teachers perceived lack of early exposure to reading and literacy-based activities as the greatest factor that contributes to the low reading achievement of Black boys whom they teach. Teacher C stated, “Learning to read begins at home prior to the beginning of any formal schooling. Based on my experience, a majority of Black boys are not reading or being read to prior to beginning Kindergarten. I even witness Black boys lagging behind Black girls.”

### ***Mentoring Programs***

Lack of the implementation of effective mentoring programs was identified by most teachers as a factor that indirectly contributes to the reading achievement gap of Black boys. Although not required, all schools represented in this study implement some aspect of a mentoring program for Black boys. These programs tend to be disjointed and inconsistent and therefore ineffective. The programs are loosely structured and fail to positively impact the social and emotional development of Black boys. Teacher A stated, “Beyond being required to wear a tie on a certain day of the week and having lunch together, I really don’t see any evidence of the mentoring program.” Teacher N believed that mentoring programs for Black boys should also include learning objectives and activities such as afterschool book clubs run by Black male teachers and parents.



### ***Lack of Parent Involvement/Engagement***

Teachers noted that far too many parents of Black boys who struggle academically are not engaged and do not participate in school activities, meetings, and workshops. Teacher T stated, “Clearly there is more family involvement among the parents of White students and data reflects that White students tend to perform better.” All but three teachers identified lack of parent involvement/engagement as a barrier to closing the reading achievement gap of Black boys. The consensus was that students who perform better in school typically have parents who are highly engaged and the parents of Black boys whom they teach are generally disengaged. “A big barrier is lack of parent involvement and buy-in on behalf of the parents of Black boys whom I teach,” replied, Teacher H. Teacher J reinforced this and said, “I have seven Black boys in my class and their parents do not come to anything - not a report card conference, a math night, a Back-to-School Picnic-nothing!” Teacher A agreed but, commented that he/she must do a better job of engaging parents of Black boys and encouraging them to attend important meetings and workshops.

### ***Lack of Culturally Responsive Classrooms***

Teachers agreed that recognizing the cultural backgrounds of students in relation to how these various backgrounds impact teaching and learning opportunities has the potential to narrow the reading achievement gap of Black boys whom they teach. Although there is an expectation that teachers use culturally responsive strategies, it is not mandated. Teacher U admitted that he/she was unsure of what a culturally responsive room should look like. He/she concluded by saying, “And I’m sure there are those who claim that they know what a culturally responsive room looks and feels like, but they really have no idea.”

### Discussion of Ineffective Strategies/Conditions: Teachers' Perceptions

There are an array of strategies and policies in place that CSD teachers perceived to be ineffective in addressing the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys. Some of these strategies include lack of relevance regarding a top-down curriculum, implementation of a district pacing guide, lack of comprehensive mentoring programs, and subpar culturally responsive teaching. It is important to note that many of the strategies perceived as ineffective are those that are beyond the direct control of teachers. During the interview process, I felt as if most strategies teachers deemed as ineffective in closing the achievement gap of Black boys were associated with district or administrative mandates or lack of parent support and engagement. It appeared that CSD teachers agreed with Iaconelli (2015), who concluded that some top-down mandates dictate how educators design instruction to close the reading achievement gap. For example, Teacher D stated that the prescribed district curriculum did not allow him/her to match literacy to his/her Black male students. In addition, Teacher C argued that available books and literature lack diversity and therefore are not relevant to Black boys. Most teachers noted that required reading selections are mainly representative of White characters and White experiences. Therefore, Black boys are unable to see themselves in that literature and therefore become disengaged at times, which negatively impacts reading achievement. Many CSD teachers attempted to supplement the required readings with books that are more representative of Black students and black culture. However, comprehension skills that are assessed are linked to the required readings. Therefore, teachers feel the need to use all required readings to prepare students for end-of-unit assessments accordingly. This reduces time and

opportunity to provide supplemental books that are more reflective of the experiences of Black boys as options.

I agree with the CSD teachers who participated in this study that top-down mandates are ineffective in addressing the reading achievement gap of Black boys. Historically, a grassroots approach to reform is more effective in creating real change since it brings the desired changes and resulting decision making closest to the student (Schrag, 1998). Top-down mandates are only effective if there is heaving populist agreement with the issue (Schrag). Marzano and Kendall (1996) agree with Schrag and believe that top-down accountability measures have been historically poor ways to effect change. Clearly, CSD staff closest to the teaching and learning environment do not perceive some of the district's top-down mandates and policies as having a positive impact on closing the reading achievement of Black boys.

In the CSD a pacing guide governs stringent and rigid guidelines regarding beginning and ending dates of units of study. CSD teachers perceived these pacing guides as deterrents to providing effective reading instruction to the Black boys whom they teach. This aligns to Delpit's (2012) perspective in that predetermined scripts cannot make for good teaching. In general CSD teachers reasoned that students learn and grasp pertinent reading skills at varying rates and that Black boys who are struggling readers simply need more time to read and to engage in reading and literacy-related instructional activities. Teacher R felt that the district's pacing guide contributes to the reading achievement gap of Black boys because it pushes them through units of study, regardless of whether or not they have secured the skills and material. I believe that CSD pacing guides assume that all

students are able to progress through the curriculum at the same rate, which is a disservice to academically at-risk students, many of whom are Black boys.

Mentoring is defined as the positive relationship with and contribution by a non-parental adult to the life of a young person (Baker & McGuire, 2005; DuBois & Rhodes, 2006). CSD teachers perceived loosely created and implemented mentoring programs for Black boys as mostly ineffective in closing the reading achievement gap. Teacher A acknowledged that a mentoring program exists in his/her school, but admitted that he/she notices very little evidence of its implementation besides occasional spirit days. Teacher I described school-based mentoring programs as disjointed and inconsistent. Exposure to and interactions with minority men who have achieved professional and personal success may help to open alternative educational opportunities and motivation for African American boys (Gordon et al., 2009). As a principal in the CSD, I agree with the perceptions of the teachers regarding the ineffectiveness of mentoring programs. Mentoring programs are not mandated in the CSD and do not appear to be a priority of those charged with making policy and curriculum decisions. Conversely, there is nothing preventing CSD teachers from leading the way in the creation of more meaningful and comprehensive mentoring programs. If CSD teachers perceive effective mentoring programs as an effective strategy to narrow the reading achievement gap of Black boys, then as individuals closest to the teaching and learning environment they (CSD teachers) should assume a greater role in making mentoring programs a priority.

CSD teachers realized the importance of recognizing the cultural backgrounds of students in relation to how these various backgrounds impact teaching and learning opportunities for Black boys. While there is a general expectation that CSD teachers create

culturally responsive classroom environments, those who participated in this study were generally unaware of what a culturally responsive classroom should look like. Teacher U speculated that many of his/her colleagues may claim to know what a culturally responsive room looks like, but if pressed to provide details would have no clue as how to respond. I believe this results in teachers not knowing all there is to know about their students, many of whom are very different from them and thus contributing to the reading achievement gap of Black boys (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 2003). CSD teachers should improve their cultural responsiveness through application of strategies imbedded in literature and research studies. They can begin with a 2001 study referenced by White (2009) that assessed three major culturally responsive strategies used by highly qualified African American teachers with majority African American students: holistic, culturally communicative, and skill building. According to this study, teachers who generate the best results with Black students are culturally relevant and generally sincere with and respectful of African American students. These teachers also have high expectations for all learners.

#### Effective Strategies: Administrators' Perceptions

The following are common strategies that administrators perceived to be most effective in closing the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys.

##### ***Early Exposure/Readiness***

Administrators believed that early exposure to a print enriched environment has the potential to eliminate the reading achievement gap of Black boys. Administrator 8 stated, "It all starts at home. Clearly, Black boys who enter kindergarten with little exposure to literacy and reading struggle initially and those gaps widen over time." Administrator 8 continued by stating that most of his/her third grade Black boys who are struggling readers

probably did not benefit from early exposure to books and literacy type activities prior to entering Kindergarten. He/she added, “It is very evident the first day of school which kindergarten students have never held a book.” Administrator 3 added, “Early exposure to school and routines are essential in closing the reading achievement gap of Black boys.

### ***Resource Allocation***

The appropriate allocation of resources appeared to be a strategy that most administrators deemed effective in addressing the reading achievement gap of Black boys. Administrator 4 stated, “I have the responsibility to advocate for those who cannot do it for themselves; equity may mean that inequalities sometimes exist to benefit those who are the least advantaged. When thinking in terms of an achievement gap for Black boys, I need to reallocate resources, e.g. teachers, reading specialists, time, and support to even the playing field to support those who need it most.”

### ***Instructional Leadership***

Effective instructional leadership emerged as a theme in terms of a way to narrow the reading achievement gap of Black boys. Administrator 6 stated, “As an instructional leader I must first and foremost ensure that teachers have the appropriate materials and resources needed to teach effectively. I have to ensure that time in their schedule blocks are conducive to learning and that equitable opportunities exist for support and extension activities.” He/she concluded by stating all this must be in place if I expect teachers to accelerate the progress of Black boys who are struggling to evolve into good readers. Administrator 1 said, “It is important for me to lead the way and facilitate conversations that are uncomfortable at times to ensure that our curriculum is being taught with fidelity. I have to help to sift through the data of our Black boys and assist teachers in identifying

specific strategies and interventions that have the potential to narrow the reading achievement gap.”

### ***Supervision and Evaluation***

In general, administrators believed that effective supervision and evaluation of teachers help to produce effective teachers. Administrators agreed that effective teaching represents the greatest opportunity to close the reading achievement gap of Black boys. Administrator 4 contended, “It is my job to ensure that teachers are providing excellent and equitable opportunities for students to learn. If they are, it is my responsibility to help them to continue to grow and evolve and, if they are not, it is my job to get them the help and resources needed to improve.”

### ***Cross-Curricular Teaching***

Teaching reading across the curriculum is a strategy that administrators perceived to be effective in closing the reading achievement gap of Black boys. Administrator 9 believed that teachers should be required to embed more non-fiction with fiction to give Black boys more support in accessing what they are reading. Administrator 5 said, “We have to take reading instruction away from just reading, especially for our struggling Black boys. We have to teach them how to read throughout the entire day in social studies, math, and science. This may help to mitigate the gap.”

### ***Early Intervention***

Administrators perceived early intervention as vital in terms of supporting Black boys who struggle with reading and literacy. Administrator 7 stated, “The reading gap is smaller in kindergarten and gets progressively larger by third grade; therefore, we need to place as many resources as possible in early childhood and early intervention.”

Administrator 2 reinforced this framework and exclaimed, “If we can fill in the gaps in the earlier years, we can help strengthen the foundational skills that will improve the reading achievement of our Black boys.”

### ***Parent Education***

The need to educate parents emerged as a strategy that could help to narrow the reading achievement gap of Black boys. Administrator 3 stated, “We often place a lot of blame on parents for not being engaged or not preparing their children for kindergarten. What if they don’t know how?” He/she continued and said, “It is time for schools to take the lead and identify the needs of parents and then support them in gaining the knowledge and resources needed to provide their children with greater opportunities to be successful. We certainly do some of this, but not nearly enough.”

### **Discussion of Effective Strategies: Administrators’ Perceptions**

Administrators of the CSD believed that they play an integral role in closing the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys. They perceived early exposure to print rich environments, coupled with early intervention as key ingredients to supporting Black boys who struggle with reading and literacy. Equally important was administrators’ roles in allocating resources to appropriately meet the reading needs of Black boys and paving the way as instructional leaders by ensuring that teachers have the necessary resources and training to teach effectively. Providing opportunities for parent education also emerged as an effective strategy that could help to narrow the reading achievement gap of Black boys. Most administrators admitted that there is a lot of work to be accomplished in this area, but mentioned that the few opportunities to educate parents have produced promising results.



The achievement gap between Black students and White students begins to form prior to students' entrance into kindergarten and widens over time. CSD administrators believed that lack of early exposure greatly impacts the reading achievement gap of Black boys. The CSD does not have a pre-kindergarten program and research suggests that investments in pre-kindergarten and direct linking of pre-K programs to high standards in the K-12 curriculum have helped narrow the achievement gap before students begin kindergarten (Aarons, 2009). Administrator 8 stated that it is evident on the first day of school which kindergarten students have had effective pre-primary schooling prior to their entrance to kindergarten, which contributes to the reading achievement gap of Black boys. Administrator 3 agreed by reasoning that early exposure to school is paramount in closing the reading achievement gap of Black boys. While I understand and agree with the perceptions of CSD administrators in that many Black boys enter kindergarten behind their White counterparts, I also agree that there is no achievement gap at birth- at least not one that favors White children (Delpit, 2012). Educators cannot allow what happens or does not happen to Black boys prior to kindergarten to form negative perceptions of their learning potential. If they do, they assume that Black boys are less brilliant and the tendency will be to teach for remediation (Delpit, 2012). I believe that CSD administrators do not allow an expectation gap to result in an achievement gap (Delpit, 2012). Instead, CSD administrators realize that they must invest in early and rigorous interventions to support struggling Black boys in their early primary years. Administrator 7 realized that gaps present at kindergarten have a tendency to widen over time; therefore, he/she places as many resources as possible into early intervention. In addition, Administrator 8 understood that allocating resources to fill gaps in the learning by Black boys during their

early years will build the foundational skills needed to evolve into proficient readers. Upon entrance to kindergarten, it is up to educators to teach Black boys the school knowledge that they have not learned at home (Delpit, 2012).

One reason for the lack of African American success in schools is that many poor Black students are simply not being taught (Delpit, 2012). Delpit asserts, “After many visits to many American schools, I can say with confidence that in the schools where children are performing at high levels, a large number of teachers are actually teaching.” Delpit further explains the characteristics of good teachers:

They are explaining concepts and using metaphors that connect the knowledge children bring to school with the new information the children are learning; for example, the teacher in Louisiana who compared how neurons work in the human body with how cell phone systems work. They ask students to explain concepts to their peers. They ask questions that require deep thought, and they demand responses. (p.75)

During interviews of CSD administrators, it was evident that they were well aware of the fact that some of their teachers are better than others. They perceived allocating resources as a part of their role in addressing the reading achievement gap of Black boys. The varying abilities among the teaching staff is considered when assigning students to teachers. Administrator 4 acknowledged that he/she feels a need to “even the playing field” by allocating resources such as teachers and reading specialists accordingly. It was apparent that CSD administrators perceived their role in addressing the achievement gap of Black boys to consist of doing their best to ensure that Black boys who struggled in the area of reading and literacy have the best teachers possible standing in front of them.

In Finland, uplifting leadership is evident in how teachers take responsibility for student achievement and how their principals see their task as being one of facilitating this process rather than driving it (as cited in Blankstein & Noguera, 2015). By contrast, in the

United States, instructional leadership has actually turned out to be the capacity to fill out observational checklists of classroom competence to evaluate teachers (Fullan, 2014). In my experience, I believe that CSD administrators do not fit Fullan's description of instructional leadership in the U.S. By contrast, based on my interviews, I find them to be facilitators of teaching and learning. They expressed a strong sense of compassion in leading the way to ensuring that teachers possessed what they needed to provide students with quality instruction. Administrator 6 stated that his/her number one priority was making sure that teachers had the appropriate materials and resources needed to teach effectively. Likewise, Administrator 1 mentioned that he/she takes the lead in analyzing the data of Black boys and assisting teachers with the selection of appropriate interventions accordingly. CSD administrators perceived effective leadership as a way to narrow the reading achievement gap of Black boys. Research suggests that effective leadership can result in satisfied teachers, which can have a positive impact on minority achievement gaps (Griffith, 2004). In my opinion, CSD administrators appear to be providing quality instructional leadership for the teachers of students in their respective schools.

CSD administrators perceived parent education as a strategy that could narrow the reading achievement gap of Black boys. While they acknowledged that there is much work to be done in the area of parent education, CSD administrators know that strong leadership by principals can create successful family-school partnerships to help students reach high levels of academic achievement (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 2003). Administrator 3 reasoned that educators often blame parents for not preparing their children for school, but then hesitated and questioned whether or not parents knew how to adequately support their children in matters related to student achievement. All families want to help their children,

but they may not know how. CSD administrators must enhance parents' confidence by offering workshops that focus on what children are learning and strategies and techniques that will teach parents how to work with their children at home and how to have productive meetings with teachers (Lindsey, Robins & Terrell, 2003). Administrator 3 agreed and stated that it is time for schools to take the lead and provide parents with the resources needed to help their children achieve great success.

#### Ineffective Strategies/Conditions: Administrators' Perceptions

The following are common strategies and aspects of education that administrators perceived to be most ineffective in closing the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys.

##### ***Utilitarian Perspective***

The utilitarian view that educators must do the greatest good for the greatest number, i.e. teach to the majority is a common strategy employed by many teachers. However, administrators reasoned that this viewpoint perpetuates the reading achievement gap of Black boys. Administrator 9 exclaimed, "It becomes difficult to defend the unequal distribution of resources to parents and community members who question why their child is not reaping the benefits of support and interventions."

##### ***Time Constraints***

In general, administrators believed that time constraints adversely impact their ability to assist teachers in implementing strategies and interventions geared toward closing the reading achievement gap of Black boys. Administrator 1 indicated, "Overall, there is simply not enough time to provide enough remediation support given the constraints of the curriculum, and the content that needs to be taught." He/she explained that students are

expected to meet certain end-of-year goals and objectives without consideration to the fact that no two students progress at the same pace. Administrator 2 stated, “Be it a random request for students to complete a 45 minute survey or a special assembly to support a district-wide fundraiser, there is always something chomping away at the time teachers need to provide quality teaching and learning opportunities for their students.”

### ***Transience***

Some Black boys who are struggling readers are transient, which prevents them from receiving the quality instruction needed to close gaps in reading achievement. Transient Black boys was a theme that emerged from the interviews with principals. Administrator 5 stated, “Many of my Black boys are transient and in and out of different foster homes. I have had situations when Black boys have enrolled and withdrew multiple times during a three year span. This inconsistency obviously contributes to any learning gaps that exist.”

### ***Cultural Gap Between Teachers and Students***

Administrators perceived a cultural gap between white teachers and Black boys as a factor that contributes to the reading achievement gap of Black boys. Administrator 4 exclaimed, “Far too many white teachers are teaching Black boys and the cultural gap between the two affects the alignment of teaching and learning styles.”

### **Discussion of Ineffective Strategies/Conditions: Administrators’ Perceptions**

Similar to the perceptions of teachers, CSD administrators believed that Black boys who are not proficient readers, simply need more time to read. A theme that emerged during the administrator interviews was that the constraints of the schedule, curriculum, and content that needs to be taught hinder teachers’ opportunities to provide Black boys with

the extended time needed to effectively implement key strategies and interventions. During the interviews, I sensed a subtle level of frustration on behalf of the administrators. It appeared as if they understood that a more flexible approach to teaching and learning would better meet the needs of Black boys, but they are charged with implementing rigid top-down policies that fail to consider the diverse needs of students.

Another factor that CSD administrators felt contributes to the reading achievement gap of Black boys in their respective schools is that many of them are transient. High rates of mobility can negatively affect students' achievement (Hayes, 1999). In addition, some transient students become as much as a year behind their peers in academic achievement (Kerbow, 1996). CSD administrators believed that the progress that many Black boys make is negated when they move around from one school to another and as a result gaps in reading achievement widen. In fact, a few administrators stated that some Black boys often are not enrolled in school for days or weeks at a time because they are in and out of foster homes and sometimes these foster home placements necessitate a change in school. As a principal, I see the effect that transience has on achievement of Black boys, school climate, and allocation of resources. Recently, a Black boy registered at my school mid-way through the year. He struggled to assimilate into our learning environment and displayed behaviors that negatively influenced students who had historically been "good" kids. In fact some of his behaviors resulted in the police having to be called to the school to assist, which was the first time and only time to date, that police presence was needed to assist with student behavior. Eventually, as a result of the collective efforts of the school psychologist, school teachers and administrators, district social worker, and community-based family

counseling the boy made some progress by the end of the school year. Unfortunately, the boy did not return to the district the following year.

CSD administrators asserted that a cultural gap between White teachers and Black boys indirectly influences the reading achievement gap of Black boys. Simply put, they acknowledged that far too many White women are teaching Black boys. Unfortunately, the administrators believe that this cultural gap affects the alignment of teaching and learning styles, which negatively impacts learning opportunities of Black boys. An example of this was depicted in Delpit's book, *Multiplication Is for White People Raising Expectations for Other People's Children*, a group of black students was asked to assess two video-taped lessons on the Civil War, one taught by a Black teacher and one by a White teacher. The students described the Black teacher as a "real teacher" because he took time to ask personal questions and they believed that he cared about his students (Delpit, 2012). In addition, when interviewed by external assessors, the Black teacher was asked why he stopped to ask so many questions and he said, "I can't teach you unless I know you, so I have to have a personal connection" (Delpit, 2012). Conversely, the black students described the White teacher as lazy and noted that he didn't care about his students (Delpit, 2012). I suspect that the students felt this way because the White teacher was not as engaging and required students to work in groups with little teacher interaction. As a principal of a school with a large percentage of White female teachers and a large percentage of Black students, I see how this cultural gap can sometimes contribute to the reading achievement gap of Black boys. However, I believe that through professional development and exceptional effort, teachers of any race or gender can provide Black boys

with quality opportunities to learn. And I believe that it is the responsibility of principals to support teachers in providing these opportunities.

#### Strategies/Conditions: Comparison of Teachers' and Administrators' Perceptions

I was unable to identify any research examining the differences in the perceptions of teachers and administrators regarding the effectiveness of strategies to close gaps in reading achievement and how these differences impact the reading achievement gap of Black boys. Consequently, in this qualitative study, comparing teachers' and administrators' perceptions of the effectiveness of strategies and interventions in place to close the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys was difficult because of the differences in their respective roles and responsibilities. However, there were some similarities. Both teachers and administrators perceived the importance of effectively engaging parents and families as a means to better support the progress of Black boys. Nevertheless, it was obvious that teachers had a tendency to blame uninvolved parents for negatively impacting student achievement of Black boys, whereas administrators held themselves responsible for not doing an adequate job at engaging parents and families. In fact, teachers noted parent engagement as an effective strategy and lack of parent engagement as an ineffective strategy. Administrators simply stated that parent engagement was an effective strategy. In addition, both teachers and administrators noted the importance of using data to inform instructional practices geared toward closing the reading achievement gap. However, teachers perceived this as a specific strategy while administrators viewed it more as a primary role as a result of their respective leadership positions. The major difference in comparing the perceptions of teachers and administrators regarding the effectiveness of strategies whose purpose is the closing of the



reading achievement gap was that teachers noted both general strategies, e.g. building positive relationships and specific instructional strategies e.g. differentiated instruction, as opposed to administrators who described only general strategies e.g. teacher selection. Again, this is most likely a function of the uniqueness of respective roles and responsibilities.

CSD teachers and administrators believed that comprehensive and inflexible district curriculum's pacing guides hindered teachers' creativity and did not allow for the extended instructional time that many Black boys need to grasp pertinent skills and concepts. It is important to note that both teachers and administrators agreed that the curriculum they are charged with implementing is mostly irrelevant to Black boys, a curriculum that fosters disengagement and contributes to the reading achievement gap of Black boys. They also agreed that lack of early exposure and early intervention greatly contribute to the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys. However, teachers blamed this lack of early exposure on parents, whereas administrators expressed the need to allocate resources to primary education to remediate the reading achievement gap.

#### Planning and Preparation: Teachers' Perceptions

Research Question #2- What are the perceptions of leadership roles of administrators at Doris, Dwight, Patricia, and Quendell Elementary Schools in the Crumpton School District in closing the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys?

One interview question focused on teachers' perceptions of how administrators plan to close the reading achievement gap, as well as their knowledge of each school's Getting Results Plan. The following are common themes that represent teachers'

perceptions of administrators' roles in planning to close the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys in their respective schools.

### ***What Plan?***

Seven teachers possessed adequate knowledge of their school's plan to address the achievement gap between Black and White students, but not one for Black boys specifically. All agreed that the plan works and is reasonable. Some provided greater detail:

Yes, the plan is a very good attempt of identifying what we need to do. We set high standards for all students [...] every single student can learn no matter what. We do a lot of data analysis to see where Black students are in comparison to other students. We look at different groups of students to determine where they need to go. (Teacher M)

Yes, it is more than a reasonable plan. We've had a lot of success because of it. We set high expectations and that leads to closing the gap. We do a lot of data analysis and that shows you exactly where the gaps are. What we're doing appears to be working. (Teacher O)

In general, these seven teachers noted strengths outlined in the plan such as:

- High expectations
- Appropriate student achievement goals
- Ongoing data analysis to determine strengths and weaknesses, to monitor student progress, and to inform instruction. Ongoing analysis allows teachers to see how Black students are performing in comparison to other student groups.

These seven teachers also felt that the plan could be made better if the following were implemented:

- Add a parent component
- Provide more opportunities for mentoring programs and the teaching of social skills

- Provide teachers with more flexibility regarding the selection of instructional materials, scheduling, pacing, and scope and sequence of learning activities
- Tease out the data for Black boys specifically so that they can be specifically targeted
- Place less emphasis on testing and provide more for teaching
- Provision to recruit Black male teachers and a plan to keep the good Black male teachers currently teaching in the district.

Ten teachers knew that a plan existed, but admitted that they have not seen it. Teacher D asserted, “I know there is some kind of plan, but I have not seen it and I am not familiar with the step by step process.” Teacher E agreed and asserted, “The plan? I believe there is one, but not sure exactly where we are with it [...] we are in transition.” The consensus among these teachers is that their building’s plan to address the achievement gap involves tracking the performance of Black students through data analysis and then having conversations with colleagues and administrators regarding how to use this data to increase the achievement of Black students. These teachers could not articulate whether the plan was reasonable, or if the plan could be made better.

Five teachers possessed no knowledge of a school plan to address the achievement gap between Black and White students. Teacher J stated, “I am not aware of any plan. If one exists I sure would like to see it!” Teacher H added, “Besides looking at the data, I am not aware of any kind of plan.”

### ***Data Analysis***

Regardless of the extent of their knowledge of an existing school plan to address the achievement gap between Black and White students, all teachers mentioned that principals require them to analyze disaggregated assessment data on an ongoing basis. They are then required to report how Black students are performing and then outline how they plan to address concerns either in writing or orally during grade level team meetings. In general, teachers perceived the cyclic process of analyzing data and then using the data to plan for instruction as an effective way to plan for the closing of gaps in learning. Teacher D stated, “Analyzing so much data can become overwhelming, but it does allow me to explicitly see how students are performing in relation to expectations and goals.” Teacher L agreed and asserted, “Tracking data encourages teachers to actually use the data to inform their instruction [...] if done correctly and consistently, it can help to increase the reading achievement of Black boys.

### **Discussion of Planning and Preparation: Teachers’ Perceptions**

The three principals who participated in this study are charged with submitting annual school improvement plans (Getting Results Plans) to promote and increase student achievement. These plans should include provisions for closing gaps in achievement for Black students. While all three administrators asserted that they plan effectively to close gaps in achievement for Black students, 10 teachers that participated in this study possessed minimal knowledge of these improvement plans and five teachers asserted that they had no knowledge of the plan. Seven teachers possessed adequate knowledge of their school’s improvement plans, but contended that the plans failed to identify strategies to specifically address the reading achievement gap of Black boys. However, these seven teachers agreed

that its schools improvement plans were generally reasonable, and noted several strengths such as setting high goals/expectations for all students and continuously analyzing student data to inform instruction. Recommendations from the teachers to improve the plan were the inclusion of an enhanced parent engagement component, data analysis that includes teasing out disaggregate data for Black boys specifically, less emphasis on testing, and provisions for a more comprehensive mentoring program for Black boys.

As a principal in the same district as the administrators who participated in this study, I understand why there is such a discrepancy in terms of teachers' perceptions regarding the existence and effectiveness of its schools' Getting Results Plans. Like many top-down district mandates, the creation and submission of Getting Results Plans have become a task to simply get done and check off the "to do list" for principals. It is considered busy work that most principals would rather do themselves rather than establishing a committee involving teachers and other staff members to complete collaboratively. As a result, many teachers are not involved in the process and therefore lack comprehensive knowledge of the plan. However, this does not mean that the Getting Results Plan does not inform how teachers address the reading achievement gap of Black boys. Components of the plans are threaded throughout the culture of the schools. It is simply evident to most teachers.

#### Planning and Preparation: Administrators' Roles and Perceptions

The following are common themes that represent administrators' perceptions of their roles in planning to close the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys.

### ***Ongoing Data Analysis***

Overall, administrators stated that they are responsible for collecting and analyzing disaggregate data related to the performance of Black boys on an ongoing basis and ensuring that interventions are implemented to address gaps in reading achievement. Some remarks by administrators are noted:

I spend a good amount of time collecting and analyzing data, formally and informally. Benchmark and progress monitoring assessments are important as well. Helps to identify students for interventions. Have evidence that students are not on level or progressing at a typical rate. Managing the data and making teachers aware of the data is a big part of how I plan to close gaps in learning. (Administrator 2)

I conduct continuous analyses of PSSA and unit test data. I then determine strengths and weaknesses and get this information to the teachers. This is a great tool at the beginning of the year, but I need to do a better job of keeping it alive as the year progresses. Should get teachers more involved as well [...] it's tough because many are less skillful than others in dissecting the data. (Administrator 3)

Continuous data analysis is the key. Imperative. Essential. Subjective data from teachers [...] perceptions, observations, etc. are important as well. By looking at the data we are able to pinpoint who needs extra support or a different kind of support. The data also tells me how to shift and reallocate teaching assignments and resources based on who needs what. (Administrator 1)

### ***Professional Development***

Providing teachers with strategic and relevant opportunities for professional development emerged as a common strategy that administrators deemed vital for addressing the reading achievement gap of Black boys. Administrator 1 stated, "Be it creating a culturally responsive classroom environment or implementing strategies to facilitate differentiated instructional strategies, my role is to ensure that teachers are highly qualified and equipped with the resources needed to address the reading achievement gap."

One CSD administrator described his/her role in providing professional development:

My role is to make sure that teachers have what they need in order to be successful. I provide opportunities for them to tell me what they need from a professional development standpoint and then I do my best to align my goals for professional development with theirs. Sometimes professional development is more individualized based on my observation and evaluation of teaching and learning in the classroom. This piece is non-negotiable because the intent here is to specifically address concerns that I see in teaching practices in the classroom. (Administrator 2)

### ***Getting Results Plans***

The creation and implementation of school improvement plans represent a method by which principals plan and prepare to address gaps in achievement. All principals stated that their respective roles regarding closing the reading achievement gap of Black boys entailed completing an annual school improvement plan (Getting Results Plan). This plan requires principals to analyze summative and benchmark data to create appropriate achievement goals as well as to plan for instruction to meet these goals at the beginning of each school year. There is also a provision for principals to monitor the implementation of these plans and provide the superintendent of schools with periodic progress reports. Administrator 5 stated, “The Getting Results Plan requires us to analyze student data and to keep that analysis alive throughout the year. Specific to the achievement gap of Black students, it makes you confront the issue.” Administrator 9 recognized the overwhelming amount of work regarding the completion of his/her Getting Results plan:

That plan requires us to plan from the beginning of the year until the end of the year (chuckle). It’s a bit much, but the data analysis component allows you to see where the gaps are. And the fact that we have to submit a progress report forces you to take periodic looks at the plan to gauge its effectiveness. It doesn’t become a binder that is put on a shelf at the end of September to never be opened again. (Administrator 9)

### ***Principals' Goals***

It is the responsibility of all principals to submit four annual goals. Specifically required is a minimum of four outcome-based goals, at least one goal reflective of each of the following domains as determined by the Pennsylvania Department of Education: strategic cultural leadership, systems leadership, leadership for learning, professional and community leadership. These goals are submitted to the district's superintendent at the beginning of each school year. Included with each goal is a list of evidence that is to be used to assess, at the end of the school year, whether or not the goal has been accomplished. In addition, each principal is required to use this evidence to create a reflective narrative regarding how each goal was or was not met. All CSD principals submit these goals to the Superintendent of Schools at the beginning of each school year. Although there is some flexibility regarding the focus of these goals, all principals stated that at least one of their goals focused on closing gaps in achievement among disaggregate groups.

### ***Data Meetings***

All principals conduct some form of data meetings with grade level teams to plan for closing the achievement gap of Black boys. Administrator 2 stated, "We spend a good amount of time analyzing benchmark and progress monitoring data to identify students for interventions." He/she also reasoned, "It is critical to understand whether students are progressing year to year as there are both curricular and teacher effectiveness implications for why some Black boys are not progressing." Administrator 3 asserted, "I have to facilitate some uncomfortable conversations at times during our data meetings and challenge teachers to not use excuses of race and cultural differences to explain why some Black boys are not progressing." Administrator 3's comments align with Singleton's



perspective in that what is most courageous about interracial conversations about race is mustering the strength to facilitate them (Singleton, 2007). Administrators 1 and 7 noted the following:

I schedule data meetings in the middle of units of study to assess how well the students are progressing at the midway point. Take a look at the interventions, how are they being used and are they being effective? What do we need to do differently? I then schedule end of unit meetings to assess student progress overall and then we look ahead to the next unit. (Administrator 1)

Our focused has shifted. We used to meet to discuss groups of students. Now we focus more on individual students who are not progressing and many Black boys are involved in these discussions. We focus on specific skills such as decoding, fluency and comprehension. We almost create a little action plan for each student and then we group students together if possible to plan for interventions. (Administrator 7)

### ***Core Team Meetings***

Each principal has a quasi-leadership team comprised of the principal, curriculum specialist, reading specialist(s), and school psychologist. This team meets weekly and is charged with ensuring that at-risk students receive the appropriate interventions needed to progress through the curriculum. This team provides a forum to openly discuss matters related to closing the reading achievement gap of Black boys. “We meet and discuss children who are high profile kids, not performing and achieving. We then decide what to do differently for these kids,” said Administrator 1. Administrator 2, asserted, “I feel like the core team represents a group of experts and we do a really nice job of planning for students who are at risk. We exhaust all possibilities before we recommend an evaluation to determine if learning disabilities exist.”

### ***Teacher Selection***

Administrators agreed that there is a tendency to be strategic when assigning Black boys who struggle with reading to specific teachers. Administrator C stated, “At any given grade level, there are varying levels of instructional expertise among teachers. Of course I do my best to assign students who are really struggling with reading to whom I perceive to be the best teacher of reading at a given grade level.”

### ***Lesson Plans***

Comprehensive and strategic lesson plans were perceived to be a prerequisite to providing quality reading instruction, thus addressing gaps in the reading achievement of Black boys. Administrator 1 stated, “I used to minimize the importance of lesson plans, but now I realize how it encourages teachers to be mindful of the need for flexible and/or differentiated instruction as they are of district requirements.” Administrator 2 agreed with Administrator 1 and added that a part of his/her preparation for closing gaps in achievement is to review teacher lesson plans on a weekly basis, providing feedback for revisions and implementation accordingly.

### ***Collaboration***

During the interviews, each principal spoke at length regarding how members of the district’s central administration are an integral part of planning effectively to close achievement gaps. Specific to reading instruction, Administrator C stated, “Be it assistance with analyzing data or helping us with teacher observations, the level of support provided to building principals is tremendous.” In general, the principals appreciated the level of expertise that central administrators add to the planning for instruction in the area of reading and literacy.

### Discussion of Planning and Preparation: Administrators' Roles and Perceptions

All three CSD principals who participated in this study believed that they play an integral role in planning to close the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys. As previously stated, all three CSD principals who participated in this study plan for closing gaps in achievement by submitting school improvement plans and goals annually to the Superintendent of Schools. Included in these plans and goals should be provisions for appropriate professional development and a framework for the continuous analysis of assessment data to inform instruction. While both the plans and goals of the principals are fairly comprehensive, they do not address the reading achievement gap of Black boys specifically. In addition, the plans and goals do not include any professional development related to closing the reading achievement gap of Black boys or any disaggregate group.

CSD principals also believed that they have established effective ways to discuss data with teachers and other pertinent staff through data and core team meetings. The goal of these meetings is to discuss the progress of specific students and then plan for effective instructional strategies and interventions accordingly. In addition, brainstorming sessions during the data meetings can sometimes reveal teacher effectiveness implications as to why some Black boys are not progressing. Principals are then able to align these implications with goals and objectives regarding the observation and evaluation of actual teaching lessons.

### Planning and Preparation: Comparison of Teachers' and Administrators' Perceptions

I was unable to identify any research examining the differences in the perceptions of teachers and administrators regarding planning and preparing to close gaps in achievement and how these differences impact the reading achievement gap of Black boys.

Besides the lack of knowledge on behalf of most CSD teachers regarding their schools Getting Results Plans (see section on teachers' perceptions of planning and preparation), I did not note any major differences in teachers' and administrators' perceptions regarding how CSD administrators plan to close the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys. However, administrators' perceptions regarding their planning and preparation appeared to be far more comprehensive than what the teachers perceived. For example, administrators identified professional development, data meetings, lesson plans, and collaboration as ways in which they plan and prepare to close gaps in achievement. Teachers are integral parts of these methods, but they did not mention them in their responses during the interviews. One common theme that emerged from the perceptions of both teachers and administrators regarding planning and preparing to close the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys was the need to continuously analyze student assessment data to inform instruction and the selection of appropriate teaching strategies and interventions.

#### Planning and Preparation: Principals' Goals and Improvement Plans

In addition to conducting interviews, I used rubrics (see Appendices C and D) to review the goals and school improvement plans (Getting Results Plan) of each participating principal in an attempt to identify themes and patterns between teachers' and administrators' perceptions regarding how schools create and execute plans to close the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys. The examination of school improvement plans also provided pertinent data about principals' roles in planning to close the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys, which was one of the questions

addressed in this qualitative study. Findings are organized and reported in two categories, Principals' Goals and Getting Results Plans.

### Principals' Goals

The goals of the three CSD principals were examined and only one contained student achievement goals in the area of reading. More specifically, the one goal related to reading achievement is as follows- *Grade 3 students will increase the percent of all students proficient/advanced on the English-Language Arts Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) from 80% to 85%.* However, there was no evidence of a goal(s) specifically related to the reading achievement of Black students or Black boys. Because there are no specific goal(s) related to the reading achievement of Black students or Black boys, all three plans lack any evidence to measure the reading progress of Black students/boys or a reflective narrative to support the level to which those goals are met.

### Getting Results Plans

#### ***Goals***

All three Getting Results Plans examined contained student achievement goals related to the performance of third grade Black students on the PSSAs. However, there is no evidence of any goal(s) related to Black boys specifically.

#### ***Data Analysis***

There is evidence that disaggregate data for Black students were analyzed overall, but not by specific standards. There is no evidence of disaggregate data related to Black boys.

### ***Researched-Based Strategies***

Although there are provisions for the continuous analysis of disaggregate formative and summative reading assessment data of Black students, none of the plans reviewed encompassed specific strategies to address the reading achievement gap of Black students or Black boys.

### ***Monitoring***

Because none of the Getting Results Plans had achievement goals related to Black students or Black boys, no tools to monitor and assess Black students or Black boys were noted.

### ***Professional Development***

None of the Getting Results plans reviewed contained professional development plans related to improving teaching and learning opportunities specific to the reading achievement of Black students or Black boys.

### ***Alignment***

All principals who participated in this study stated that their respective roles regarding closing the reading achievement gap of Black boys entailed completing an annual school improvement plan (Getting Results Plan). However, my review of all three Getting Results Plans did not support their assertion.

For teachers who were familiar with their school's Getting Results Plan, some alignment existed between their knowledge of the contents of the plans and the actual plans regarding provisions for increasing the reading achievement of Black students or Black boys. The common themes related to alignment were:

- Ongoing data analysis to determine strengths and weaknesses, monitoring of student progress, and the informing of instruction. Ongoing analysis allows teachers to see how Black students are performing in comparison to other student groups.
- No evidence of any disaggregate data analysis specific to the reading achievement of Black boys. In fact, teasing out the data for Black boys was a recommendation as to how the Getting Results Plan could be made better.

#### Discussion of Planning and Preparation: Principals' Goals and Improvement Plans

In addition to conducting interviews, I used rubrics (see Appendices C and D) to review the goals and school improvement plans (Getting Results Plan) of each participating principal in an attempt to identify themes and patterns between teachers' and administrators' perceptions regarding how schools create and execute plans to close the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys. Only one set of goals contained student achievement goals in the area of reading. This was a general goal regarding the performance of all Grade 3 students. All three school improvement plans outlined reading achievement plans for third grade Black students, but not for Black boys specifically. In addition, there were no provisions for professional development or the selection of specific strategies or interventions to close the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys. I found no alignment between what principals' perceived their plans and goals to contain and what I revealed as a result of my examination of these documents. More importantly, for the seven teachers who were familiar with their school's school improvement plan only some alignment existed between their knowledge of the contents of the plans and the actual plans regarding closing the reading achievement gap of Black students or Black boys. Most

notable was the fact that five teachers knew that an improvement plan existed, but had never actually seen it and five teachers possessed no knowledge of a school improvement plan at all.

### Summary

The aim of this qualitative study was to examine educators' perceptions of strategies in place to close the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys. The study also addressed administrators' plans to close the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys. This chapter presented a multitude of findings which were organized by research questions. Teachers noted many non-instructional strategies, e.g. fostering positive relationships, and instructional strategies, e.g. differentiated instruction that they perceived to be effective in closing the reading achievement gap of Black boys; whereas administrators described general effective strategies more related to their roles as instructional leaders, e.g. facilitation of data team meetings. Both teachers and administrators provided descriptions of strategies in place that they perceive to be ineffective in closing the reading achievement gap of Black boys in a similar fashion. Teachers and administrators also provided their perceptions on ways administrators plan to close the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys, and the extent to which these plans are effective or not. Some of these plans include the facilitation of data teams to determine the appropriate selection of teaching strategies and interventions and the creation of improvement plans to establish learning goals and action plans. As is typical of qualitative research, samples of quotations from participants were included in this chapter. By using participants' own words, I aimed to build the confidence of readers by accurately representing the reality of the persons who were cited (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008).



A pattern that emerged from the study was that CSD teachers perceived many of the strategies that they have direct influence over to be the most effective in addressing the reading achievement gap of Black boys. Aspects of teaching and learning somewhat beyond their control were deemed to be ineffective. Administrators perceived strategies both within and beyond their influence to be effective in addressing the reading achievement gap and expressed the need to find ways to impact the strategies outside of their direct control. Like teachers, the administrators noted strategies and policies in place that are beyond their direct influence, but that contribute to the reading achievement gap of Black boys.

Another pattern that emerged was the discrepancy regarding the knowledge that teachers possessed about their school's Getting Results Plans. As a result of examining these plans, there was very little alignment between what administrators said the plans entailed regarding the closing of the reading achievement gap of Black boys and what was actually in the plan itself.

Overall, findings outlined in this chapter represent the knowledge and perceptions of those participating in the study. In general, teachers and administrators were eager and willing participants. Their knowledge and expertise provided insights and implications for practice and future research needed to address the reading achievement gap of Black boys. That research is outlined in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 5 INSIGHTS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Introduction

The intent of this qualitative study was to examine educators' perceptions of the effectiveness of strategies in place to close the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys. More specifically, this study answered two questions:

1. What are educators' perceptions of the effectiveness of existing strategies and conditions that are in place to close the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys at Doris, Dwight, Patricia, and Quendell Elementary Schools in the Crumpton School District?
2. What are the perceptions of leadership roles of administrators at Doris, Dwight, Patricia, and Quendell Elementary Schools in the Crumpton School District in closing the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys?

I interviewed teachers, specialists, and administrators of the CSD at one of its elementary schools during non-school hours. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and provided in - depth views of CSD staff's perceptions regarding the effectiveness of strategies in place to close the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys. In addition, I used rubrics (see Appendices C and D) to examine goals and school improvement plans to analyze CSD administrators' roles and plans in the closing of the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys.

The previous chapter outlined the findings that emerged from the interviews and examination of documents. Those findings were developed through discussions and related literature and research. This chapter provides an interpretation and synthesis of the findings for each research question. For the first research question, I identify what I believe to be

the most pertinent and common strategies/conditions that both CSD teachers and administrators perceived to have the greatest impact on the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys. For the second research question, I identify two methods to address the discrepancy between teachers' and administrators' perceptions regarding the preparing and planning of closing the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys. Next, implications for practice are developed for each research question. More specifically, I describe ways in which I believe CSD teachers and administrators could work to continue and enhance their efforts in closing the reading achievement gap of Black boys. When possible, I ground these recommendations in literature and research. Then, I describe limitations of my study and conclude with recommendations for future research. Recommendations seek to examine issues that my study did not address or new issues that surfaced as a result of my research. Recommendations for future research also attempt to confirm that educators' perceptions matter and have the potential to positively impact the reading achievement of Black boys.

#### Research Question #1: Pertinent and Common Strategies/Conditions

I believe that there were several pertinent and common strategies/conditions that both teachers and administrators perceived as having a negative impact on the reading achievement of Black boys. They are:

- **Cultural Gap-** A huge cultural gap exists between many CSD Black boys and their White teachers. This gap prevents CSD teachers from connecting with and relating to many of the Black boys whom they teach, thus contributing to the reading achievement gap of Black boys. Delpit's research (2012) supports this finding as she suggests that many White

teachers continue to struggle in the culturally foreign educational settings in which they find themselves. Delpit further notes:

When a child cannot connect the attitude and perspectives of a teacher with the attitudes and perspectives of community people who love them, understanding suffers. When teachers stumble over the unique names common to a place, then there is a deep disconnect. As one New Orleans child summed this up, “I don’t like it when they don’t say my name right.” (p. 115)

I believe that this cultural gap also prevents teachers and administrators from having “tough and uncomfortable conversations” about Black race and Black culture during data team meeting. These factors must be considered if mostly White teachers hope to consistently connect to and reach students who are very different from them.

- **Curriculum Pacing Guides-** Not all students learn the same way and at the same rate. It is evident that Black boys who struggle in the area of reading and literacy need extended and differentiated learning opportunities to accelerate their rate of progression. However, a highly prescriptive curriculum pacing guide prevents CSD teachers and administrators from creating and implementing specific plans to meet the needs of Black boys in their schools. The guides are ineffective and reflective of a one size fits all factory model, where the inevitable outcome for children is failure and hopelessness (Blankstein & Noguera, 2015). Blankstein and Noguera further note:

While child development follows typical patterns that correspond to age, there are also significant variations in how and when children acquire skills during different stages

[...] differences in culture have all been recognized as having a bearing on the developmental process. (p. 15)

CSD's one size fits all approach in matters related to the delivery of instruction at each grade level fails to take into account that Black boys who struggle with reading acquire skills at different stages and at different rates.

- **Lack of Relevance-** The most notable aspect of teaching and learning that CSD teachers and administrators perceived to be ineffective in closing the reading achievement gap is the fact that the prescribed district curriculum appears to lack relevance for many Black boys. More specifically, most required readings feature White main characters and their culture and experiences which contributes to the reading achievement gap of Black students. Kirkland (2011) believes that teachers must provide opportunities for Black boys to find themselves in reading selections, using texts as a form of self-expression to improve reading and comprehension (Kirkland, 2011).

Delpit (2012) digs deeper and notes:

Our young African American students need to know that their ancestors were not merely adept at sports. They must understand the intellectual achievements of ancient Africans in Egypt [...] so that they understand at a deep level that they come from brilliance. They must learn about current Black scholars, doctors, lawyers, etc. Their school curriculum should be filled with the stories of African American genius. They must not only have visions of themselves excelling on the basketball court but in every aspect of human achievement. (p. 156)

Steele (2003) contends that many schools offer such a paucity of curricular options in which African American students can find themselves represented that they believe themselves unaccepted by and unacceptable to

the school (as cited in Delpit, 2012). Similarly, when students feel a genuine connection to the school and have a sense of belonging, they feel the school values who they are and the culture they represent, and there is a greater potential for success academically (Byrd & Chavous, 2011; Hurd, Sanchez, Zimmerman, & Caldwell, 2012; Lemberger & Clemens, 2012). Clearly, based on my interactions and interviews with CSD teachers and administrators, they perceived their respective schools as offering the type of curriculum described by Steele, which greatly contributes to the reading achievement gap of Black boys.

- **Subpar Mentoring Programs-** CSD teachers and administrators agree that effective mentoring programs have the potential to indirectly improve the reading achievement of Black boys. However, their schools implement loose mentoring programs that are ineffective in meeting the academic or social needs of Black boys. While mentoring programs may not directly improve reading achievement, they can support Black boys and address some of the cultural and connection gaps that contribute to gaps in learning. Harris (1999) asserts that mentoring is a support strategy, one that promotes academic success among Black students. She further notes that effective mentoring programs develop skills and build self-confidence of Black both of students which foster a collective vision for enhancing individual, academic, and social success (Harris, 1999). CSD teachers and administrators should either create and implement effective mentoring

programs or use the time and resources to identify other measures to support the achievement of Black boys in their respective schools.

#### Research Question #1: Implications for Practice

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the perceptions of strategies and interventions in place to close the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys at Doris, Dwight, Patricia, and Quendell Elementary Schools in the CSD. As noted in the literature review of this study, teachers' perceptions and belief systems about reading instruction can be the most direct and immediate influence over students' reading success (Iaconelli. 2015). Educators have the greatest influence on the daily decisions regarding the selection of best instructional strategies used to inform teaching and learning opportunities. Without doubt, these perceptions can have the potential to positively or negatively impact student academic performance. This section examines the implications and insights of CSD's teachers' and administrators' perceptions of the effectiveness of current practices to address the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys in their elementary schools.

#### *Courageous Conversations*

A theme that emerged as a result of interviewing teachers and administrators in the CSD was that many data and planning meetings are held where staff collaborate to discuss student data and to select appropriate strategies and interventions for students who are not making adequate progress. These students are often a large percentage of Black boys at any given grade level. As a principal in CSD, I often facilitate or co-facilitate some of these meetings, but despite their good intent far too many Black boys continue to lag behind their White counterparts in the area of reading achievement. In addition, this study revealed that

some CSD teachers do not recognize the cultural backgrounds of students in relation to how these various backgrounds impact student achievement. I believe this results in teachers not knowing all there is to know about their students, many of whom are very different from them, which contributes to the reading achievement gap of Black boys (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 2003). To remedy this, I believe that CSD staff must begin to engage in what Glenn Singleton refers to as “Courageous Conversations About Race” during its data and planning meetings. Through Courageous Conversations, educators attempt to break down racial tensions and ignorance that hobble our progress as a school system (Singleton, 2007). Courageous Conversation is a strategy for school systems to close the racial achievement gap by developing racial understanding, conducting interracial dialogue about race, and addressing racial issues in schools (Singleton, 2007). More specifically, Singleton provides the following framework for facilitating Courageous Conversations:

- Engage those who will not talk.
- Sustain the conversation when it gets uncomfortable or diverted.
- Deepen the conversation to the point where authentic understanding and meaningful actions occur.

CSD must begin to have conversations about race and how race impacts teaching and learning. Closing the racial achievement gap begins with an examination of self rather than others. Therefore, I believe that CSD should create a systematic professional development opportunity for all its staff. I recommend that participants read Glenn Singleton’s book, *Courageous Conversations About Race*, and then use the accompanying field guide for achieving equity in schools as a tool to teach participants how race plays a



role in students' struggle to achieve at high levels. More specifically, the field guide can help facilitators to engage study groups in reflection, group discussion questions, activities, and journal writing at the conclusion of each chapter. The field guide also recommends additional resources for extending learning. Eliminating the racial achievement gap begins with refocusing philosophies, policies, programs, and practices on the educational needs of children rather than on the professional comforts of the adults who inhabit schools (Singleton, 2007). Integrating Courageous Conversations in preparing and planning to close the reading achievement gap of Black boys promises to reveal unacknowledged and unaddressed issues that contribute to the reading achievement gap of Black boys. In addition, sustaining this practice may help to narrow the cultural gap that appears to exist between some CSD teachers and the students whom they teach, thus creating a learning environment that is welcoming to diversity and change.

### ***Curriculum Pacing***

Be it extended time instruction beyond the regularly scheduled school day or additional opportunities to be engaged in teaching and learning during in-class time, both CSD teachers and administrators believed that many Black boys simply need more time to progress and meet intended goals and objectives. However, the CSD curriculum pacing guide requires all teachers in the district to teach and assess units of studies in all content areas at the same time for all students. These pacing guides fail to meet the need of Black boys who struggle with reading and literacy. These boys are often moved along scope and sequence learning activities prematurely and, as a result, learning gaps in reading achievement form and widen over time. In order to address the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys, CSD administrators must develop and implement a differentiated

approach to curriculum pacing. They must abandon the “one size fits all” approach and identify realistic goals and expectations for Black boys. The new priority must be grounded in students grasping pertinent skills in order to evolve into proficient readers and not on teachers covering topics within a specified amount of time and then moving on to new topics despite the fact that some students may not be ready to move on.

### ***Relevance of Curriculum***

All CSD teachers who participated in this study mentioned some aspect of the curriculum as a barrier to closing the reading achievement gap of Black boys. In general, they believed that the curriculum was too regimented and focused too much on assessments and standardized test preparation. More importantly, the reading curriculum lacks diversity among main characters and themes integrated within the required reading selections. These readings are mostly about White characters and White experiences and therefore Black boys often do not see themselves in what they are required to read. This leads to many Black boys becoming disconnected and disengaged with reading, again contributing to the reading achievement gap. Some teachers supplement required reading materials with more diverse books and stories at times. However, teachers are still mandated to teach and assess what is required so time constraints sometimes inhibit their ability to supplement.

When a major issue arises in the CSD, there is often a Superintendent’s Committee formed to address that issue. This committee is comprised of pertinent stakeholders such as school board members, district staff (administrators, teachers, and support staff), parents, students, and community members. The committee is charged with researching the issue and resolving it to best meet the needs of the school district. Most often a new school board policy and administrative procedures for implementing that policy is the end

result of the work of a Superintendent's Committee. As one of the more diverse school districts in its county, I believe it is necessary for CSD to convene a Superintendent's Committee to address the lack of diversity in its curriculum.

### ***Mentoring Program***

Research suggests that effective mentoring programs for Black boys positively impact their achievement. In a study that investigated the impact of involvement in Benjamin E. Mays Institutes (BEMI) mentoring program on the academic performance of 61 eighth grade Black boys, it was found that exposure to and interactions with minority men who have achieved professional and personal success may help to open alternative educational opportunities and motivation for African American boys (Gordon et al., 2009). The student questionnaires, grade point averages, and standardized test score were collected from the schools. Results revealed that students in the BEMI mentoring program had significantly greater academic attachment scores and academic success than their non-mentored peers (Gordon et al., 2009).

All schools that participated in this study have created some form of a mentoring program designed to engage and support Black boys. However, the design and implementation of these programs are disjointed, inconsistent, and lack specific goals and objects. It appears that these programs are in place simply because the research suggests that they should be and therefore CSD teachers and administrators deem them ineffective in engaging and supporting Black boys. I believe that the CSD should conduct some research on effective mentoring programs for Black boys and then redesign their programs accordingly. I recommend that any program considered adhere to the following framework, as suggested by (DeBois & Rodes, 2006), to ensure positive outcomes:

- Reasonably frequent contact
- Sufficient interactive time together
- Emphasis on building relationships and effective exchange of information
- Attention to the mentor's role as a model for the mentee
- Attention to the vision that the mentee brings to the relationship

Specific to Black boys, I think that it is also important for the CSD to incorporate an Afro-centric component in order to assist Black boys in understanding Black culture and its historic roots (Utsey & Williams, 2003). An Afro-centric framework is congruent with the concept of mentoring and may help empower traditionally disenfranchised groups such as African American boys (Asante, 1998). Gordon's framework for the creation and implementation of effective mentoring programs, coupled with the integration of an Afro-centric component, could enhance and increase the effectiveness of CSD's mentoring programs designed to engage and support Black boys.

#### Research Question #2: Planning Discrepancies

There were some discrepancies between teachers' and administrator's perceptions regarding how administrators plan for closing the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys in their schools. More specifically, more than half the teachers who participated in this study possessed little or no knowledge of its school's Getting Results plan, which encompasses strategies to close gaps in achievement. In addition, although the three principals who participated in this study stated that their Getting Results Plans addressed the reading achievement gap of Black boys, my examination of these plans did not confirm this. I believe CSD administrators can address these discrepancies by redesigning the

Getting Results plan framework and executing a more inclusive method in its creation and implementation. Both recommendations are described in detail in the section that follows.

#### Research Question #2: Implications for Practice

As previously stated, educators have the greatest influence on the daily decisions regarding the selection of best instructional strategies used to inform teaching and learning opportunities. As instructional leaders, principals and administrators must lead the way in assisting teachers in providing equitable opportunities for Black boys to excel and evolve in the area of reading and literacy. Specific to CSD principals and administrators, this section provides implications as to how to plan more effectively to close the reading achievement gap of Black boys. Two recommendations, outlined below, involve the creation, implementation, and dissemination of their Getting Results plans.

#### ***Redesigning Improvement Plan Framework***

Any attempts to close the reading achievement gaps of third grade Black boys in the CSD must start with strategic and comprehensive plans and goals designed to specifically address the needs of Black boys. Although detailed plans and goals are in place to promote student achievement in CSD, none of these plans and goals are differentiated to support Black Boys. Therefore, to effectively address the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys, CSD administrators must redesign the framework of their Getting Results Plans to include the following:

- **Analysis of Data** - Conduct an ongoing analysis of reading achievement data specific to Black boys. This analysis would pinpoint precisely how Black boys are performing in comparison to their White counterparts and would more specifically define gaps in reading achievement.

- **Specific Goals** – Use the continuous analysis of reading achievement data of Black boys to create reading achievement goals specific to Black boys. These goals should be specific, measureable, achievable, results-focused, and time bound.
- **Research-Based Strategies** – Select appropriate strategies and interventions for Black boys to meet goals. These strategies and interventions should be researched - based and reflective of what CSD educators perceive to be effective in addressing the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys. Some examples include the teaching of active reading strategies to build upon the background knowledge that many Black boys lack and providing opportunities for kinesthetic learning activities to foster engagement and stimulation.
- **Progress Monitoring** – Select appropriate tools to monitor and assess the progress of Black boys on an ongoing basis. An example can include a sixty second oral reading fluency test to assess if Black boys are progressing toward expected grade level oral reading fluency benchmarks. Data collected as the result of progress monitoring should be used adjust strategies, programming, and interventions accordingly.

### ***Aligning Improvement Plans***

Planning and preparation for the closing of the reading achievement gap of Black boys must be an inclusive process. Based on the data collected during this qualitative study, far too many CSD teachers possess little or no knowledge of school-wide improvement plans designed to promote achievement for all students, let alone specifically for Black

students or Black boys. While administrators draft these plans, it is the primary responsibility of teachers to implement the plans. Therefore, teachers need to have a stake in the creation of school improvement plans and be aware of intended goals and expectations of those plans. In order for school improvement plans to address the needs of third grade Black boys, the following are recommended:

- **Collaborative Planning Approach** – The creation of school improvement plans should begin with a planning committee. This committee should be comprised of school administrators and pertinent staff such as curriculum specialists, reading specialists, and a few teachers. This committee would be charged with creating a draft plan whose purpose is to increase student achievement as well as to specifically increase the reading achievement of Black boys.
- **Communication, Articulation, and Buy-In** – The committee established above should be charged with articulating the draft plan to members of the entire staff. This can take place in the form of small group presentations during faculty meetings or during professional development sessions. At these presentations, one goal should be to obtain feedback from the staff regarding the intent and predicted effectiveness of the plan. Essentially, to obtain buy-in from all stake holders, all teachers should have an opportunity to suggest additions, changes, and revisions to the plan. Ultimately, feedback regarding potential revisions should be relayed to the original planning committee. The planning committee will then review all recommendations and revisions, and make changes to the draft plan

accordingly. Finally, a complete school improvement plan should be presented to the entire staff. The plan should clearly note all teachers' and administrators' roles in implementing, monitoring, and assessing the plan.

### Limitations of Study

Because this was a qualitative study, the results only reflected a sample of participants in four schools within one school district. However, the conclusion of the study produced insights and implications for similarly situated school districts. In addition, the findings may have produced new issues that can be applied to larger and future studies. It should be noted that the reading achievement gap of Black boys in the Crumpton School District has been an issue for many years, and, as a result, teachers and administrators hold deeply rooted biases as to why the reading achievement gap exists. Some programs and interventions that have been employed over the years to eliminate the reading achievement gap have not been successful or sustainable. Therefore, it was difficult to obtain permission from all targeted participants to participate in this study, as 14 teachers did not respond to an invitation to be interviewed. It is my assumption that some may have feared that this research project would simply be another study comprised of hope and optimism with no chance of truly narrowing the reading achievement gap of Black boys. Finally, as a principal, part of my responsibility includes supervising and evaluating people who perform the same professional responsibilities as the individuals who participated in this study, i.e. teachers and other building level administrators. Therefore, some participants may have provided inaccurate or misleading information to project themselves in a positive light from an evaluative perspective.



### Lessons Learned

Conducting this study as both a researcher and a principal of one of the schools that participated in this study has been an enlightening experience. One aspect of the study that became evident is that in a district as diverse as CSD, issues of race, cultural gaps, and cultural proficiency are not easy topics of conversation in matters related to student achievement. I believe that my school does a particularly good job in providing all students with equitable opportunities to learn and excel. Curriculum and standardized summative data confirm that our students, which include our disaggregate student groups, have improved exponentially in reading achievement over the past six years. We have received local, state, and federal recognition for notable increases in student achievement. However, an achievement gap still exists between our Black students and our White students, even more so for our Black boys and all other disaggregated groups. Historically, I have largely addressed the achievement gap through the implementation of specific teaching strategies, such differentiated instruction and general strategies, i.e. building positive relationships. Conducting this qualitative study, however, has encouraged me to challenge the historical manner in which I have led the way in creating and implementing strategies to close the reading achievement gap of Black boys in my school. I am now motivated, more than ever, to confront sensitive issues of race and cultural gaps and to address their impact on the reading achievement of Black boys in my school.

### Recommendations for Future Research

The intent of this study was to examine teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of strategies and interventions in place to close the reading achievement gap of third grade Black boys. While I was collecting and reflecting on the data, something emerged that I

did not anticipate, namely, the perceived high level of expertise on behalf of the participants regarding matters related to closing the reading achievement of Black boys. By eagerly participating in the interviews, and freely sharing their thoughts on what some perceive to be a difficult topic to openly discuss, the teachers and administrators of CSD demonstrated a desire to be heard and to be involved in promoting the achievement and progress of Black boys in their respective schools. I believe that teachers and administrators have the greatest impact on student achievement. As professionals in the field of education, their perceptions of what is best for students should be a part of the decision making process regarding how to provide Black boys with equitable opportunities to excel and evolve. To that extent, I believe that future research should be geared toward confirming that educators' perceptions matter and have the potential to impact student achievement. More specifically, implications for future research include:

- Conducting a comparative study that investigates participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of strategies in place to close the reading achievement gap of Black boys in a Title I school and a school that does not receive Title I funding.
- Utilizing a larger sample size including teachers and administrators from more than one school district.
- Conducting a cohort study of Black boys from age three to kindergarten who attend preschool and those who do not attend preschool. Compare each group's reading readiness skills just prior to the beginning of kindergarten.
- Replicating this study with participants at other elementary grade levels.

- Utilizing a comparative study to determine if a relationship exists between teachers' perceptions and administrators' perceptions of the effectiveness of strategies and interventions in place to close the reading achievement gap of Black boys.
- Conducting a qualitative study using classroom observations as a data source, in addition to interviews, to eliminate the effects of using exclusively self-reported data.
- Utilizing a correlational study to determine if a relationship exists between participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of specific teaching strategies and student achievement as measured by classroom-based and/or standardized assessment measures.
- Conducting a quantitative study that examines the effects of the various strategies and interventions that educators believe to be effective in closing the reading achievement gap of Black boys.
- Replicate this study and reveal participant demographics e.g., gender, race, years of experience etc. and examine if these demographics have a significant impact on the findings.
- Conducting a qualitative study to specifically identify successful strategies and conditions in place that have proven to be effective in closing the reading achievement gap of Black boys. This type of study would reverse the trend of research that consistently identifies Black students as a deficit regarding achievement.

- Using the implications of practice from this qualitative study, conduct a qualitative study to determine if the implications for practice have a significant impact on the quality of teaching provided by teachers.

### Conclusion

An achievement gap separating Black from White students has long been documented - a social divide extremely vexing to policy makers and the target of one blast of school reform after another (Gabriel, 2010). While some research suggests that the achievement gap is closing, a multitude of studies confirm that the achievement gap between Black and White students still exists and may be widening. Of greater concern is the reading achievement gap between Black boys and their White counterparts. Nationally, only 12 percent of Black fourth-grade boys are proficient in reading, compared to 38 percent of White boys (Gabriel, 2010). The aim of this qualitative study was to examine educators' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of strategies and conditions in place to close the reading achievement gap of third grade Black Boys. Teachers and administrators have the greatest knowledge of what best practices are most effective in meeting the academic needs of Black boys. They are in the teaching and learning "trenches" daily and possess extensive knowledge of what works and, more importantly, what does not work. Therefore, educators' perceptions should matter in a majority of decisions that inform opportunities for Black boys to progress and evolve. However, in many public schools, educators do not have seats at the table when major decisions regarding curriculum and instruction are made. Hopefully, the findings in this study will encourage CSD and similarly situated districts to implement a more inclusive process to determine how to close

the reading achievement gap of Black boys. That process most definitely should include principals, classroom teachers, reading specialists, as well as community input.

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APPENDIX A  
TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What factors, in your opinion, contribute the most to the reading achievement gap between Black and White elementary students?
2. What do you consider is your role in closing the reading achievement gap between Black and White students whom you teach?
3. What do you see as the biggest barriers to closing the reading achievement gap between Black and White students whom you teach?
4. What do you do to try to narrow the reading achievement gap between Black and White students whom you teach? (Repeat the subsequent questions accordingly).
  - a. One strategy you indicate is \_\_\_\_\_. How effective is this strategy in closing the reading achievement gap?
  - b. Another strategy you indicate is \_\_\_\_\_. How effective is this strategy in closing the reading achievement gap?
5. What does your school do to try to narrow the reading achievement gap between Black and White students whom you teach? (Repeat the subsequent questions accordingly).
  - c. One strategy you indicate is \_\_\_\_\_. How effective is this strategy in closing the reading achievement gap?
  - d. Another strategy you indicate is \_\_\_\_\_. How effective is this strategy in closing the reading achievement gap?
6. What else could you do to strengthen the academic performance of Black students whom you teach?

APPENDIX B  
ADMINISTRATOR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What factors, in your opinion, contribute the most to the reading achievement gap between Black and White elementary students?
2. What do you consider is your role in closing the reading achievement gap between Black and White students in your school(s)?
3. What do you see as the biggest barriers to closing the reading achievement gap between Black and White students in your school(s)?
4. In general, what are you doing in your school to narrow the reading achievement gap between Black and White students? (Repeat the subsequent questions accordingly).
  - e. One strategy you indicate is \_\_\_\_\_. How effective is this strategy in closing the reading achievement gap?
  - f. Another strategy you indicate is \_\_\_\_\_. How effective is this strategy in closing the reading achievement gap?
5. Specifically, how do you plan for closing the reading achievement gap between third grade Black boys and White students? (Repeat the subsequent questions accordingly).
  - g. One strategy you indicate is \_\_\_\_\_. How effective is this strategy in closing the reading achievement gap?
  - h. Another strategy you indicate is \_\_\_\_\_. How effective is this strategy in closing the reading achievement gap?
6. What else could you do in your school(s) to strengthen the reading achievement of Black students?

APPENDIX C  
RUBRIC FOR REVIEW OF GETTING RESULTS PLANS

Section 1: Goals	Many Goals	Some Goals	Little Goals	No Goals
Student achievement goals related to closing reading achievement gap of Black students				
Student achievement goals related to closing reading achievement gap of Black boys				
<b>Section 1 Notes</b>				
Section 2: Data Analysis	Yes	No		
Data disaggregated by Black students				
Data disaggregated by Black boys				
Data disaggregated by Black students and by assessment anchor				
Data disaggregated by Black boys and by assessment anchor				
<b>Section 2 Notes</b>				
Section 3: Strategies to promote student achievement	Many Strategies	Some Strategies	Little Strategies	No Strategies
Specific strategies to address reading achievement of Black students				
Specific strategies to address reading achievement of Black boys				
<b>Section 3 Notes</b>				
Section 4: Monitoring and Assessment	Many Tools	Some Tools	Little Tools	No Tools
Tools to monitor and assess the reading achievement of Black students				



Tools to monitor and assess the reading achievement of Black boys				
<b>Section 4 Notes</b>				
<b>Section 5: Professional Development</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>		
Plans related to improving teaching and learning opportunities for Black students				
Plans related to improving teaching and learning opportunities for Black boys				
<b>Section 5 Notes:</b>				
<b>Section 6: Inclusion of proven, researched-based strategies/interventions designed to close achievement gaps of Black students</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>		
Interactive teaching				
Parent and community engagement				
Teacher collaboration				
Extended day (before or after school) programs				
Integration of technology				
Student choice in selection of books, topics, activities				
Differentiated instruction				
Flexible group instruction				
Exploratory learning				
Use of manipulative materials				
Variety of text used to teach a single topic				
Insert Additional Examples Below				

<b>Section 6 Notes</b>				
<b>Section 7: Alignment of interviews and Getting Results Plan</b>	<b>Full Alignment</b>	<b>Some Alignment</b>	<b>Little Alignment</b>	<b>No Alignment</b>
Alignment of administrator's interview responses and provisions outlined in the Getting Results Plan regarding closing the reading achievement gap of Black students				
<b>Section 7 Notes</b>				
<b>Section 8: Alignment of teachers' interviews and Getting Results Plan</b>	<b>Full Alignment</b>	<b>Some Alignment</b>	<b>Little Alignment</b>	<b>No Alignment</b>
Alignment of teachers' interview responses and provisions outlined in the Getting Results Plan regarding closing the reading achievement gap of Black students				
<b>Section 8 Notes</b>				

APPENDIX D  
RUBRIC FOR REVIEW OF PRINCIPALS' GOALS

<b>Section 1: Goals</b>	<b>Many Goals</b>	<b>Some Goals</b>	<b>Little Goals</b>	<b>No Goals</b>
Student achievement goals related to closing reading achievement gap of Black students				
Student achievement goals related to closing reading achievement gap of Black boys				
<b>Section 1 Notes</b>				
<b>Section 2: Evidence used to measure progress toward meeting goals</b>	<b>A lot of Evidence</b>	<b>Some Evidence</b>	<b>Little Evidence</b>	<b>No Evidence</b>
Specific evidence e.g. differentiated instruction plans, reading instruction schedules, building climate plans, reading instruction schedules, professional development plans, parent/community engagement plans to address reading achievement of Black students				
Specific evidence e.g. differentiated instruction plans, reading instruction schedules, building climate plans, reading instruction schedules, professional development plans, parent/community engagement plans to address reading achievement of Black boys				
<b>Section 2 Notes</b>				
<b>Section 3: Reflective Narrative</b>	<b>A lot of Evidence</b>	<b>Some Evidence</b>	<b>Little Evidence</b>	<b>No Evidence</b>
Summary of data and information to support the level to which goals are met to close the reading achievement of Black students				
Summary of data and information to support the level to which goals are met to close the reading achievement of Black students				
<b>Section 3 Notes</b>				