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THE ROLE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT IN CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP BETWEEN  
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THE ROLE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT IN CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP  
BETWEEN AFRICAN AMERICAN AND CAUCASIAN STUDENTS

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## ABSTRACT

HARRIS, DENITA PH.D., PURDUE UNIVERSITY, MAY 2014. THE ROLE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT IN CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP BETWEEN AFRICAN AMERICAN AND CAUCASIAN STUDENTS.

Major professor: Dr. Marilyn Hirth, Purdue University

The purpose of this qualitative study was to closely examine the role of the superintendent in his or her attempt to close the achievement gap between Caucasian and African American students, with specific inquiry into the academic performance of these students on the 8th grade Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress Plus. The research consisted of a qualitative study interview approach where three Indiana superintendents of fairly large, diverse school districts of 10,000 + students participated in a combined interview approach of both informal conversations with standardized open-ended questions. The theoretical framework for the qualitative study was hermeneutic phenomenology. Data collected came directly from the interviews conducted with three acting superintendents. The interviews were administered in the personal offices of each participating superintendent. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed before the coding process and item analysis was carried out. Hermeneutic phenomenology was used to understand the world or in this case, the role of the superintendent who closes the achievement gap, from their experiences and perspectives.

The main purpose of this study was to thoroughly examine the actions, strategies, and techniques of a superintendent who seeks to close the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students. This study was intended to provide both current and aspiring superintendents essential skills and methods that could be transferred to any school district and who is determined to close the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

It has been nearly a decade since the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002; Hall, 2002) became a part of our educational system. One of the key elements of the law was to ensure that all subgroups, specifically those groups who have been underserved and underperforming in comparison to their White peers, were performing at or above grade level. Cooper and Jackson (2011) stated, “But today, just as surely as NCLB remains on the books, its goals for teaching and learning are more an aspiration than a reality – particularly for African American and Latino students” (para. 8). In the 1960s, a large achievement gap between African American and White students existed across all levels of schooling. “It typically ranged from a half a standard deviation (SD) deficit among black children in elementary school to more than a full SD difference by 12th grade” (Gorey, 2009, p. 3). It did not matter what year of schooling a student was in, the gap existed across all grade levels. America decided to provide additional resources to families in an effort to prevent poverty, as well as early childhood education. As a result, Grissmer, Flanagan, Williamson and Hedges, and Nowell reported, “The gap narrowed by about one tenth of a SD per decade for thirty years or so” (as cited in Gorey, 2009, p. 3). One would think since that time, we would continue to see the gap narrow or better yet close; that is not the case. Lee stated, “Regrettably, that trend began to slow and even to reverse in some places through the 1990s, and previous gains seem essentially to have

flat-lined during the NCLB era” (as cited in Gorey, 2009). Instead of the NCLB doing what it was intended to do, which was to close the gap between all students, the gap has remained the same or widened in many cases between African American and White students on standardized tests (“Black-White Achievement Gap Persists,” 2009).

Indiana’s accountability system was established to comply with the requirements of the NCLB, and the results of this legislation are being experienced in many school districts. Indiana did not only have to follow the guidelines of the NCLB, but its own accountability system, Public Law 221. In 1999, Public Law 221 became Indiana’s comprehensive accountability system, the law aimed to establish major educational reform and accountability statewide. To measure progress, Public Law 221 places all of Indiana schools into one of five categories, also known as the A-F grading system, based upon student performance and growth improvement as determined from the Algebra and English 10 End-of-Course Assessments and the 3-8 grade ISTEP+ assessments (Indiana Department of Education, 2013). Due to schools not being able to demonstrate adequate achievement scores levels across the board for various subgroups, in 2011, the Indiana Department of Education announced they would begin the state takeover process for five schools (Elliott, 2011). Unfortunately, these schools had continued to demonstrate low achievement and/or low growth in their respective school districts. As a result, three Indianapolis public schools were officially taken over by the state of Indiana, during the 2012-2013 school year. Also in November 2011, the state of Indiana applied for a flexibility waiver to come out of the requirements of No Child Left Behind, which resulted in moving down from two accountability systems to one. In spite of all the changes in accountability that have occurred in the last few years in the state of Indiana,

we still are faced with African American students who are not performing at the same level of their White peers. There still remains an achievement gap in many of the schools in the state of Indiana and throughout our nation, where African American students are not performing at grade level and in some cases are performing several grade levels behind their White peers (National Association of Educational Progress [NAEP], 2011).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The achievement gap is not only a school issue, but also a major societal concern. It is no longer enough for students to be prepared to take standardized assessments, but individuals must be ready at the end of their high school careers to enter society as productive citizens who are willing to contribute to the success of their community. If African American students do not have the skills to compete with their White peers, there is a strong possibility these lack of skills will prove to be a burden on society (McKinsey & Company, 2009).

African American students are graduating at lower numbers than their White peers; just a little over half of the Latino and African American students are graduating from high school (“Few Minority Teachers,” 2011). Even with the number of students who graduate from high school, only 56% of African American students and 64% of Latino high school graduates go on to college (“Few Minority Teachers,” 2011). In fact, “Less than half of both black and Latino students finished college in 2007” (“Few Minority Teachers,” 2011). Young people of color, specifically African American students will not be able to provide financially for themselves or their families without a proper education. Data and literature overwhelming support the lack of academic performance of our African American students.

As standardized tests continue to be examined, the data are persistent. African American students do not perform at the same level as their White peers. African American students typically perform at least two or three grade levels behind on standardized testing (McKinsey & Company, 2009). Eighth-grade data are essential to analyze when discussing the achievement gap; these students are leaving junior high/middle school, headed to high school where their course selections and transcripts are essential to the entrance of college, while beginning to think about their future. The success at the high school level is vital to their admissions into the college of their choice, and their academic performance while attending postsecondary schools (NAEP, 2011).

The following describes results from the three fairly large urban school districts in the state of Indiana (based on number of students and demographics) and how their African American students compared to their White students on the math and English portions on the middle school ISTEP assessments. The 2011 and 2012 eighth-grade ISTEP data from these three urban school districts in Indiana is very telling, in regards to the achievement gap. Two of three urban districts share similar demographics in terms of ethnicity and socioeconomic status.

When analyzing the Spring 2011 and 2012 ISTEP data for both seventh and eighth-grade students, one can easily see the disparities between African American and White students on percent passing of mathematics and English portions of the test. It was interesting to note that when visiting the Indiana Department of Education website, the state provides data based on the total number of students. In order to examine data by ethnicity, one has to click on the pie graph that takes the user through several screens.

The following is a breakdown of three school corporations' middle schools ISTEP scores taken from the results overview (pseudonyms were used to protect the school districts).

Table 1

*Percent Passing Both English and Math ISTEP for District A/School 1 – MSD of Fair Lane*

District A/School 1	Spring 2011 ISTEP	Spring 2012 ISTEP
Caucasian, Grade 7	67.0%/134 students	68.0%/135 students
Caucasian, Grade 8	73.0%/130 students	70.5%/146 students
AAmerican, Grade 7	44.0%/113 students	44.4%/106 students
AAmerican, Grade 8	42.1%/98 students	38.7%/103 students

*Source: Indiana Department of Education*

Table 2

*Percent Passing Both English and Math ISTEP for District A/School 2 – MSD of Fair Lane*

District A/School 2	Spring 2011 ISTEP	Spring 2012 ISTEP
Caucasian, Grade 7	53.7%/149 students	68.6%/190 students
Caucasian, Grade 8	52.1%/139 students	53.0%/158 students
AAmerican, Grade 7	44.4%/68 students	59.6%/68 students
AAmerican, Grade 8	39.0%/67 students	46.6%/68 students

*Source: Indiana Department of Education*

When examining District A, referred to as the Metropolitan School District of



Fair Lane for purposes of this study, students who passed both English and math portions of the Spring 2011 and 2012 ISTEP, Caucasian students either grew from seventh to eighth grade or remained consistent in their scoring, while African American students grew in their scoring or decreased the number of students with percent passing.

Table 3

*Percent Passing Both English and Math ISTEP for District B/School 1 – MSD OF Scottsdale*

District B/School 1	Spring 2011 ISTEP	Spring 2012 ISTEP
Caucasian, Grade 7	77.4%/24 students	86.4%/19 students
Caucasian, Grade 8	95.5%/21 students	83.3%/25 students
AAmerican, Grade 7	35.4%/63 students	44.8%/69 students
AAmerican, Grade 8	42.7%/70 students	40.6%/73 students

*Source:* Indiana Department of Education

Table 4

*Percent Passing Both English and Math ISTEP for District B/School 2 – MSD of Scottsdale*

District B/School 2	Spring 2011 ISTEP	Spring 2012 ISTEP
Caucasian, Grade 7	66.7%/10 students	61.5%/8 students
Caucasian, Grade 8	69.2%/18 students	46.7%/7 students
AAmerican, Grade 7	37.8%/70 students	44.2%/76 students
AAmerican, Grade 8	43.1%/81 students	33.7%/57 students

*Source:* Indiana Department of Education

Table 5

*Percent Passing Both English and Math ISTEP for District B/School 3 – MSD of Scottsdale*

District B/School 3	Spring 2011 ISTEP	Spring 2012 ISTEP
Caucasian, Grade 7	91.8%/56 students	85.5%/53 students
Caucasian, Grade 8	80.5%/33 students	92.5%/49 students
AAmerican, Grade 7	63.8%/81 students	56.3%/85 students
AAmerican, Grade 8	56.6%/77 students	60.5%/78 students

*Source:* Indiana Department of Education

In District B, referred to as the Metropolitan School District of Scottsdale for purposes of this study, there are three grade levels. Grades 6, 7, and 8 are in the middle school; however, for purposes for of this study, only data from Grades 7 and 8 were collected. Only School 1 demonstrated increase of scores of percentage of students, both African American and Caucasian demonstrating an increase in scores from both 7th to 8th grade. School 2 had a significant decrease in scores both in their cohort group and other students. School 3 had a slight minimum gain of one percentage point for their Caucasian cohort, while their African American cohort also showed a slight decrease in percentage passing.

Table 6

*Percent Passing Both English and Math ISTEP for District C/School 1 – MSD of Waldo*

District C/School 1	Spring 2011 ISTEP	Spring 2012 ISTEP
Caucasian, Grade 7	85.0%/176 students	85.5%/141 students
Caucasian, Grade 8	76.5%/169 students	83.9%/177 students
AAmerican, Grade 7	43.6%/78 students	46.3%/100 students
AAmerican, Grade 8	35.7%/71 students	49.4%/86 students

*Source:* Indiana Department of Education

Table 7

*Percent Passing Both English and Math ISTEP for District C/School 2 – MSD of Waldo*

District C/School 2	Spring 2011 ISTEP	Spring 2012 ISTEP
Caucasian, Grade 7	83.3%/169 students	88.8%/143 students
Caucasian, Grade 8	81.6%/164 students	80.0%/156 students
AAmerican, Grade 7	53.0%/115 students	53.5%/115 students
AAmerican, Grade 8	37.8%/76 students	58.9%/136 students

*Source:* Indiana Department of Education

District C's, referred to as the Metropolitan School District of Waldo, data are quite interesting that out of all three school districts, District C schools, both School 1 and 2, demonstrated a 5 percentage point gain of their cohort of African American students, which is much larger than their cohort gain in their Caucasian population. Even when not looking at their cohort group of students and comparing apples to oranges,

African Americans still demonstrated gains in percentage passing, with the minimum gain of .5% and the maximum gain of approximately 20 percentage points.

In order to gain perspective on the achievement gap in Indiana schools, it is necessary to look more closely at data at the school level. After reviewing these data, one begins to look closer at what appears to be an existing achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students on the eighth-grade ISTEP in the areas of both English and math for all three districts.

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study was directly related to the role of the superintendent and how he or she closes the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students. This study investigated the perceived role of the superintendent in addressing the achievement gap while closely examining the strategies, techniques, and practices used throughout the school districts. This research has significance in providing perspective and possible solutions to persistent educational inequities. Because superintendents are influential in determining the direction of educational reform in their districts, it was essential to learn more about their understanding of the perception of their role in closing the achievement gap. It was also important to understand the superintendent's vision for closing this gap and the plan of action that must occur in order to make the vision a reality in a school district. There have been a plethora of books written on strategies, techniques, and best practices for both teachers and building administrators that offer research based practices in terms of closing the achievement gap in the classroom and/or building level. Tenner (2010) suggested that if teachers follow her top 10 lists, they will be successful in closing the achievement gap between African

American and Caucasian students. Tenner (2010) believed that teachers have to work at bridging the home culture of African American students with the school culture; she provided insight on how to establish meaningful relationships and create standards based curriculum with high expectations. When it comes to teachers, many researchers have focused on the importance of teachers becoming culturally competent in having an awareness of the student population they serve and the ability to instruct using culturally responsive teaching strategies (Gay, 2010).

Building principals are another group of educators who have research literature they can access in order to gain some understanding on how to close the achievement in their schools and raise student achievement, regardless of the subgroups they serve. Taylor (2010) suggested there is no silver bullet when it comes to closing the achievement gap; she believed through consistency and the use of successful practices, building leaders would see a drastic change in their data. Although there is some research related to the role of the superintendent in closing the achievement gap, one of the main purposes of this study is to explicitly define that role, based on the lived experiences of three superintendents, in an effort for other superintendents to replicate best practices, strategies, and techniques in their school districts. Fink, from the University of Washington stated, “If we fail to take meaningful action, the achievement gap will further divide our nation, leaving as its legacy a permanent underclass with no meaningful stake in the citizenry or the economy” (as cited in LeMoine, 2011, p. 45). In order to combat the achievement gap, the leader of the school district must take “meaningful action” in his or her role to accelerate the academic achievement of African American students. The action of a superintendent can take many forms, such as allotting

for staffing specifically to work on closing the achievement gap, ensuring quality professional development in the areas of how to best educate African American students, and simply having the ability to be transparent and challenge the thinking of those working closely with African American students to encourage what Singleton and Linton (2006) referred to as *Courageous Conversations About Race*.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to closely examine the role of the superintendent and how he or she establishes strategies, techniques, and best practices into “meaningful action” that will close the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students, particularly on the ISTEP+ exam. NAEP scores were used to provide an additional data set while examining eighth-grade academic performance between African American and Caucasian students.

The research in this study resulted in the following:

1. Direct examination of the differences in the African American and Caucasian test results in English/language arts and mathematics in a three school districts and their middle schools in Indiana on the eighth-grade ISTEP+ exam and the eighth-grade NAEP exam of Indiana’s performance; these data served as the background information for understanding the extent of the achievement gap and informing subsequent interviews with the superintendents.
2. A clear definition of the role superintendents play in closing the achievement gap in African American and Caucasian students on the eighth-grade ISTEP+ exam in three school districts and their middle schools.

3. Strategies, techniques, and best practices other superintendents may replicate in an effort to close the achievement gap.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do superintendents understand their role in closing the achievement gap?
2. What institutional factors or actions are being undertaken related to the school district and/or leadership leading to a narrowing of the achievement gap?
3. What data do superintendents' examine in understanding the achievement gap? Is ISTEP the only key factor when examining data or are other measures used?
4. How much influence do superintendents believe they have in closing the achievement gap?
5. How important is it for superintendents to communicate about the nature and degree of the narrowing or success in closing the achievement gap with all stakeholders' teachers, parents, students, and the community? How is information communicated?
6. What is the leadership role of a superintendent in his or her district when closing the gap?

Priority/Vision

Planning/Researching

Directing/Staffing/Implementing

Allocating Resources

Assessing Results

### **Limitations of the Study**

This research study examined middle schools from three different urban school districts in the state of the Indiana. Two of three school districts were similar in demographics and population. A third superintendent who had similar demographics with their population did not respond to two requests to participate in this study. As a result, the two superintendents interviewed asked if I had interviewed a particular superintendent by name. When I reached out to that specific superintendent, I received an immediate response and a date was scheduled to conduct the interview.

The study was possibly limited to the perception of three superintendents who led the selected middle schools in their respective school districts. In addition, my desire to interview these three superintendents specifically was due to the perception of those in the county in which they lived that these superintendents played a critical role in closing the achievement gap.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following definitions were used throughout this study to ensure a common vocabulary amongst the researcher and the readers.

*Achievement gap* is the difference between low-income and minority students compared to that of their peers on standardized testing. For purpose of this study, focus was solely on Caucasian and African American students.

*Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress Plus (ISTEP+)* is the state of Indiana's measure of school accountability.



*The National Assessment of Educational Progress* (NAEP, also known as the Nation's Report Card) is an assessment given throughout the nation that informs us how students are performing in various content areas.

*Role* is the strategies, techniques, procedures, intentional practices, and leadership qualities a superintendent employs in his or her cooperation.

### **Summary**

All schools are charged in raising the achievement levels of the poorest performing students. A student's middle school career is a critical time period; students are preparing to earn credits at the high school level and participate in more standardized test settings to gain entry into college or some form of postsecondary education. The end of a student's junior high/middle school career "represents critical junctures in academic achievement" (NAEP, 2011). For all purposes of this study, the goal was to examine the ISTEP+ exam for eighth grade students in three urban Indiana school districts, both in English/language arts and math. Most importantly, the purpose of this study was to closely examine the role of the superintendent and his or her efforts in closing the achievement gap between Caucasian and African American students.

The literature on standardized testing by examining the history of standardized tests both past and present, how leadership plays a role in closing the achievement gap, and most importantly the superintendents' perception of their role in closing the achievement gap served as guidance in understanding the role of superintendents in closing the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students. A review of the literature in Chapter 2 is a clear indication as to why this research was

needed and may be of great value to current and aspiring superintendents in large, urban school districts.

Interviews with three superintendents led to better defining the role of the superintendent in his or her efforts to close the gap; the purpose of this study was to replicate these practices that lead to effective leadership at the district level that narrows the gap in urban middle schools. Most importantly, schools have a role in preparing all students to be productive citizens in society. If society fails to close the gap by not adequately educating African American students, our society fails..

## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides a thorough review of the literature pertaining to the achievement gap, standardized testing, and the superintendents' role. The purpose of this literature review was to exam the history of standardized tests both past and present, how leadership plays a role in closing the achievement gap, and most importantly the superintendents' role in closing the achievement gap. The literature examined provided insight into the achievement gap, standardized testing, and what superintendents have implemented in their efforts to address the gap in their respective school districts around the country.

### **The Achievement Gap**

The achievement gap continues to be one of the hottest topics in education, as educators, politicians, and society as a whole grapple with the fact that some of our students are excelling academically, while others are not. The data were fairly consistent, whether looking from a national or state level. Overall, African American students do not tend to perform as well as their Caucasian peers on standardized testing. Although there have been many reasons and speculations as to why that is, the achievement gap continues to be a topic of concern as we look at our educational system and attempt to determine how and why our students of color are not demonstrating proficiency on assessments.

The achievement gap can be defined in many ways, but is usually defined by discrepancies in standardized testing data either at the national or local level. The achievement gap is defined as,

the disparity in academic performance between groups of students; it is most often used to describe the troubling performance gaps between African American and Hispanic students, at the lower end of the performance scale, and their non-Hispanic White peers, and the similar academic disparity between students from low-income families and those who are better off. (*Education Week*, 2004, p. 1)

For the purposes of this literature review, the gap between African American and Caucasian students were the only focus. Although many people disagree with the NCLB act, one thing that it required was for schools to take a closer look at how students of various groups were performing on standardized testing. Although African American students have made improvement throughout the years in reading and math, a gap of performance still exists when comparing them against their White peers (*Education Week*, 2004). On average, Black students are roughly two to three years of learning behind White students of the same age (McKinsey & Company, 2009). When students are at the same grade level, there is the expectation that they will be able to perform proficiently on grade level assessments.

However, what is not known is how to eliminate the differences in learning (and in consequent life outcomes) between economically advantaged and disadvantaged children when economic disadvantage is combined with minority group status and central city or extreme rural residence. (Guthrie, Hart, Ray, Candoli, & Hack, 2008, pp. 32-33)

Like anything studied, one must first examine the past, in order to gain an understanding of the present, and then eventually progress to the future. The phenomenon of the achievement gap and standardized testing did not just begin, but each has a history that is directly connected to the current condition in education.

### **The History of Standardized Testing**

Standardized testing is a part of the American culture. Every student at some point or another will participate in a standardized assessment throughout his or her educational career. In fact, Hall (2002) reported, “Almost every college-educated person in America, regardless of age, has taken at least one standardized test: the SAT. Children in public schools today will take between 18 and 21 standardized tests before they graduate” (p. 1). When examining the beginning of standardized testing, many writers/researchers like to begin in 1957 when the Russians launched Sputnik into space. However, even before Sputnik, standardized testing had already begun in our world. Standardized testing dates back to Socrates. Socrates, a Greek philosopher, engaged his students in oral questioning to determine their knowledge level of his material using a standardized format. The written format of standardized testing began in China, seventh century A.D. Similar to what is done today,

Anyone who wanted to work for the Chinese government had to pass a written exam. This exam tested the person’s knowledge and understanding of the philosophy of Confucius, the greatest of all Chinese philosophers. The reason we can call this the first “standardized test” is that the same standard was applied to everyone who took the test. (Hall, 2002, p. 1)

What was happening in the world was just the beginning of what was to come in the United States. Many forms of standardized testing occurred as early as the 1800s, when Horace Mann encouraged public schools to assess students in the following areas: spelling, math, and geography. By the early 1900s the multiple-choice test had been invented, and by the 1950s, “the average public-school student took three standardized tests before graduation” (Hall, 2002, p. 2). America began its journey of looking at data to see how students were performing against their peers when given a standardized assessment.

When the Russians launched the first satellite into the Earth’s orbit in 1957, Americans felt defeated. The United States used to being the first and best at just about everything, had been beaten by the Russians. Thus, the race with the Russians and the perceived need to be the first and the best in science and technology became a priority for Americans. The competitive spirit led to a focus on educational rigor and standards in the classroom. Unfortunately, with standardized testing in place, it became apparent overtime that American students were not performing well. By 1988, new standards for public school standardized tests were put in place and by 2002; President George W. Bush signed NCLB Bill into law (as cited in Hall, 2002, p. 3). The purpose of NCLB is to ensure “all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (NCLB, 2002). NCLB required public schools to closely examine the academic achievement of particular groups of students (minorities, special education students, gender, low socio-economic status, and English language learners) who had been underperforming for years. Schools were

required to raise their scores on standardized tests or face the consequences of losing federal funding (NCLB, 2002). No Child Left Behind brought focus to achievement discrepancies in various subgroups, but it still remains to be seen whether sufficient attention and programming are being provided to close the gaps. The achievement gap did not begin with No Child Left Behind, and it, too, has a history in our country.

### **History of the Gap**

The first time one ever heard the commonly used terminology *achievement gap* was in an article written in 1963 (Salmonowicz, 2009). Walker reported on the achievement gap between poor African American students and their affluent White peers (as cited in Salmonowicz, 2009). The phrase appeared in a public report approximately one year later. After reading various genres of literature on the achievement gap, an overwhelming majority of writers liked to start with the 1954 decision of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Although, one would certainly agree this decision changed history, in terms of how African American children are educated, the beginning of the achievement gap did not start with this case. According to M. Anderson (2007), there have been numerous gaps in our society that involved African American students and Whites. When examining the historical context of the gap, one learns that prior to the test score gap, there were three other achievement gaps that affected African Americans: The Literacy Gap, The Elementary School Attendance Gap, and The High School Completion Gap, all of which preceded the Test Score Gap (M. Anderson, 2007). For purposes of this literature review, I have discussed the very beginning of the gap and where we are now with the test score gap. The other gaps were listed to provide an historical context that the test score gap is not the only gap African Americans found themselves trying to

close or narrow. The literacy gap dates all the way back to slavery when African Americans were forbidden to learn how to read. “The Black-White achievement began over 200 years ago, and during the better part of the past two centuries the current achievement gap is much closer and less daunting than previous gaps” (M. Anderson, 2007, p. 1). During the time of slavery, it was believed that if African Americans learned how to read, they would be a threat to their Caucasian owners, as literacy was viewed as a connection to one’s freedom. Through perseverance, dedication, and educational reforms, African Americans were able to narrow the gap. “By 1900 slightly more than half of southern Blacks claimed to be literate, a remarkable achievement in light of conditions a generation earlier when the ex-slave population was more than 90% illiterate” (M. Anderson, 2007, p. 4).

The test score gap between African American and Caucasian students have been in existence for some time. According to the J. Anderson (2007), our focus on the test score gap is only due to having successfully closed the other gaps. According to J. Anderson (2007),

We must not lose sight of the fact that families and students of color have faced and been successful in closing major achievement gaps in the past. Second, we should analyze the current ‘race gap’ in test score performance as part of a national phenomenon and not become too preoccupied with test score gaps between White and minority students. (p. 11)

When discussing the achievement gap, this literature is rare in terms of the stance taken of not being overly concentrated on the results of a standardized assessment. This historical perspective took a positive approach in that the reader looked at the overall



history of gaps, along with what African Americans have been able to overcome and suggests that based on the history of the gap, this too shall pass.

The achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students is not new to the U.S. educational system. In fact, the achievement gap can be dated back to slavery. Although there was no standardized testing at the time, African Americans were still not reading or writing at the level of their Caucasian peers. Educational reform and *Brown vs. The Board of Education* leveled the playing field for African American students; however, a gap remained throughout history. The NCLB requires some form of standardized testing to measure how well students in certain groups are performing. Based on these performances, schools are held accountable for groups of students who are considered underperforming in comparison to their grade level peers. As educators, time is spent discussing the importance of triangulating various points of data to see if all aspects of the data come to the same conclusion. However, rarely does one capitalize on what is known to be a better indicator of student success, which is multiple points of data. Instead, one focuses on test scores and defines students based on those results. Standardized test scores have become a critical component to our educational system and the data only helps to reinforce the achievement gap. In order to truly understand if students, particularly African American students, are getting the instruction they need in order to successfully compete with their Caucasian peers, one must first understand the purpose of standardized testing.

### **Purpose of Standardized Testing**

Standardized testing has become a way of life for the students in U.S. society (Association of American Publishers, 2000). Everyone is aware of the fairly common

purposes of standardized testing: teachers have an opportunity to see where their students are performing academically, the community has an opportunity to see how various schools and districts compare to one another, and parents of students have an opportunity to see how their child is performing against their peers at their respective grade levels.

According to Association of American Publishers (2000) there are four critically important tasks or purposes for educators and the public that are provided through standardized testing:

Identify the instructional needs of individual students so educators can respond with effective, targeted teaching, and appropriate instructional materials; judge students' proficiency in essential basic skills and challenging standards and measure their educational growth over time; evaluate the effectiveness of educational programs; and, Monitor schools for educational accountability including under the NCLB Act. (p. 4)

When analyzing these four critical purposes, one cannot disagree that standardized tests provide very important information about how well students are achieving in the classroom setting according to grade level standards. The purpose of NCLB was to create a sense of urgency within our educational system to ensure American children are able to adequately compete or outperform students in other countries (Association of American Publishers, 2000). In addition, the NCLB Act, "requires tests to be the primary measure of school accountability, testing has taken on added significance" (Association of American Publishers, 2000, p. 3). Although many educators view standardized tests as very important, they are not alone. In a survey conducted by the American Association of School Administrators, "79 percent of parents surveyed agreed that standardized tests

are necessary to measure what students have learned” (as cited in Association of American Publishers, 2000). Even with progress reports, report cards, and teacher communications via e-mail and parent-teacher conferences, parents definitely see a need beyond grades to know how their students are performing. Parents see the purpose of standardized assessments as another means of knowing how well their students are performing in school.

There are obviously many purposes of standardized testing. Whether the assessments are used to judge schools, check on teacher performances, and/or to analyze student data, many do see value in standardized testing. However, the concern comes when standardized testing reports provide us with information that challenges our thinking and causes us to inquire about why some groups of students are consistently outperforming other groups (Association of American Publishers, 2000). There are key assessments at both the National and local levels that reflect persistent academic gaps between African American and Caucasian students. These assessments show gaps that exist across grade levels and across content areas (“Black–White Achievement Gap Persists,” 2009). This literature review looks specifically at the eighth-grade data of African American and Caucasian students in the areas of reading and mathematics. It first describes results from the NAEP to provide a national perspective and then discussed data from the ISTEP+, which is directly in relation to this study.

### **National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)**

The NAEP, also known as the Nation’s Report Card began in 1964 (NAEP, 2011). NAEP assesses students in fourth, eighth, and 12th grades in the areas of mathematics, reading, science, writing, the arts, civics, economics, geography, and U.S.

history (NAEP, 2011). As noted above, this review looked specifically at the eighth-grade data of African American and Caucasian students in relation to mathematics and reading to provide a national perspective. Vanneman, Hamilton, Anderson, and Rahman (2009) reported, during 2007 results from the NAEP showed the greatest rise in test scores for both African American and White students since 1997. It became obvious that schools were making gains nationwide; however, even with the rise in test scores, White students still scored higher than Black students on all assessments (Vanneman et al., 2009). In fact, Caucasian students were not marginally higher but had scores at least 26 points higher in each subject. In Grade 8, mathematics and reading gaps existed in 2007 in 41 states (Vanneman et al., 2011). NAEP acknowledged there are several different factors one must consider when looking at the gap, regarding assessments. The benefit of an assessment such as NAEP is that it does allow for various subgroups' performances to be disaggregated and examined more closely in relation other subgroups. It should be emphasized that scores on a standardized test reflect one component of a student's life and educational career. In addition, it is important to note that NAEP is not given every year. Many may say that NAEP compares apples to oranges, in that it is not necessarily the same group of students who are being tested at the fourth-, eighth-, and 12th-grade levels. This factor alone may cause some consideration to be taken regarding the mathematics and reading gaps founded in the NAEP data amongst Caucasian and African American students. Data at the national level provided another indicator of information that should be considered when looking at how various groups of students are performing. In addition, one must also take into consideration the

standardized state assessments to begin to see if there is a pattern of unsuccessful African American students.

### **ISTEP+**

In order to understand the nature of the achievement gap in Indiana, it is useful to first understand the nature of high stakes testing in the state. Currently ISTEP+ is the state of Indiana's measure of school accountability. In 1987, the Indiana General Assembly created this assessment tool to be given to Indiana students in Grades 1, 2, 3, 6, 8, 9, and 11; the first ISTEP was given in 1988 (Indiana Department of Education, 2011). Since the time of the first administration of the ISTEP, the assessment has changed frequently. Changes have included the types of questions asked on the assessment, the grades in which the assessment has been administered, and the inclusion of the Indiana Academic Standards that were adopted by the State Board of Education in November 2000 (Indiana Department of Education, 2011). During the first years of administration of the ISTEP, test questions and the format of the test included both multiple choice and extended written response. When the law changed in 1995 and the ISTEP became ISTEP +, multiple choice, applied skills assessments, and essay questions were included in the testing format. In 2009, the ISTEP assessment was moved from a fall administration to the spring. In addition, the ISTEP used to be administered during one testing window but is now given during two separate sessions. Once administered using only paper and pencil, the ISTEP now has two testing windows to accommodate the changes in test administration. One window of testing requires paper and pencil administration and the other requires computer administration. Due to the accountability movement, ISTEP+ now has become the primary factor in determining whether a school

is a success at educating student populations. Because of the weight and emphasis on ISTEP+ scores, schools now have the potential to be graded poorly or enter the turnaround process, which could eventually lead to school districts losing their schools to Charters or students to vouchers.

In order to gain perspective on the achievement gap in Indiana schools, it is necessary to examine data at the school level. After reviewing these data in Chapter 1, one begins to look closer at what appears to be an existing achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students on the eighth-grade ISTEP+ in the areas of both English and math for three selected districts in their middle/junior high schools.

As noted at the beginning of this literature review, standardized testing has been in existence since Socrates. Since that time, the world has redefined what those assessments should mean, look like, and how they should be administered to children. From Sputnik to the NCLB, America has been called to hold schools more and more accountable in ensuring our students get the best education possible. NAEP is a national measuring tool that allows one to see how children are performing during very critical times in their lives in specific content areas. The national NAEP assessment, along with the state of Indiana's ISTEP+ both provide disaggregated data where one can see how various groups are performing on these standardized assessments in relation to their peers. When looking at both NAEP and ISTEP+ scores, it is clear that African American students are not performing as well as Caucasian students in both English and math. This lack of performance has been coined the term—the achievement gap. As an educator, one must not only be aware of the term commonly heard throughout the teaching

profession but believe in the necessity of closing the gap and why it is essential not only to the U.S. educational system, but to society.

### **The Necessity of Closing the Gap**

Closing the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students is essential to the success of our society. These efforts should not only be considered because of the requirements of NCLB, but because there is an African American population of students who may or may not be ready for the 21st century. The current accountability system requires schools to show proficiency for each group of students they service, and many individuals in society feel that without this mandate, schools would continue to let certain groups perform well, while others consistently fail. Failure in the educational system may not only impact how well African American students may or may not perform in school; failure in the educational system has the potential to impact society as whole.

Closing the gap is essential to the success of not only schools being able to refrain from accountability but also a necessity for our society. Data for Indiana middle school and high school achievement can easily be accessed via ISTEP+, End-of-Course-Assessments, and ACT and SAT scores. In the 18-to 24-year old group, about 90% of Whites and 94% of Asians have either completed high school or earned a general education diploma (GED). Among African American student populations, the rate drops to 81% (Haycock, 2001).

Without a high school diploma or GED, African American student population may not be able to apply or perform at a proficient level for some of the most medial jobs. Employers have raised their standards of expectations throughout the years, and a

high school diploma or GED for most entry-level positions is a requirement. If the African American student population is even able to get hired for a medial position, the issue now becomes—if minimum wage will be enough to support them without government assistance. Postsecondary education is also an indicator of how well the African American population is prepared for jobs. Year after year, generation after generation, expectations of educational achievement for both K-12 and postsecondary students continue to increase. There was a time when a high school diploma or GED was enough of an education for young adults to go and obtain a job in a factory, be considered a middle class contributor to society, and live the American dream; this is no longer the case. The American dream has always been slightly more difficult for the African American population and now with, “young African Americans only about half as likely as White students to earn a bachelor’s degree by age 29” (Haycock, 2001, para. 8), the American dream seems more like a dream of the past instead of a sense of reality. Postsecondary education has now become the minimum requirement in order to gain access to the middle class. If the African American student population at the age of 30 fails to earn a bachelor’s degree, many of them will also fail to be able to take care of themselves, their children, and their families; this situation creates a permanent national recession (McKinsey & Company, 2009). How can African Americans truly support themselves without a solid educational background? The necessity to close the achievement gap is not only essential to the individual, but it is necessary for the government, in order to remain competitive with our foreign neighbors. “If the United States had in recent years closed the gap between its educational achievement levels and those of better-performing nations such as Finland and Korea, GDP (Gross Domestic



Product) in 2008 could have been \$1.3 trillion to \$2.3 trillion higher. This represents 9 to 16% of GDP” (McKinsey & Company, 2009, p. 5). The gross domestic product (GDP) is defined as,

The value of a country's overall output of goods and services (typically during one fiscal year) at market prices, excluding net income from abroad. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) can be estimated in three ways, which in theory should yield identical figures. They are (1) Expenditure basis: how much money was spent, (2) Output basis: how many goods and services were sold, and (3) Income basis: how much income (profit) was earned. (Gross domestic product, 2014)

The U.S. GDP plays a vital role in a recession. A recession occurs when there is a decrease in the GDP. If the African American population is not seeking further educational opportunities because of gaps in their learning, they are limited to only applying for jobs that do not pay well. When employed by businesses that do not pay decent wages, our African American population has a drastic impact on all three criteria for GDP: expenditure, output, and income (McKinsey & Company, 2009). African Americans cannot be expected to contribute back into the economy if they do not have the funds to do so. The financial impact on the state and country is only one aspect of the necessity to close the achievement gap. When African American individuals do not have an educational foundation or they are not performing as well as their Caucasian peers in middle school, high school, or postsecondary education, it is potentially setting them up for failure in all key areas of life. These consequences range from entry into our prison system, health care and costs, decision-making skills, and civic engagement (McKinsey & Company, 2009). Closing the achievement gap not only helps individual success, but

also the necessity to close the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students helps the success of mankind.

Closing the achievement gap is essential not only to the African American individual but to society. Regardless of the requirements of the NCLB to hold schools accountable for the success of individual groups, as measured by standardized assessments, willingness as individuals to see others perform at a proficiency level should be something a law should never have to require. As a society, it is imperative to see African American students' progress and become productive citizens. The success of African American students is not only their success but also our society's success. This success is not only measured by finances through economic gain, but it is also measured by the choices these young people will make throughout their life regarding health, life-choices, and being productive citizens. The gap is beyond test scores; the gap represents the potential future of society. Prior to the adult future of young African American students, educators still have a responsibility to prepare them in school to meet those postsecondary challenges. School districts have a major role in this preparation.

### **Effective Leadership**

Leadership is the key to successfully closing the achievement gap in school districts. An ineffective administrator has the ability to destroy a school district's culture and increase the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students, just as an effective administrator has the ability to rebuild and enhance a school corporation's culture and close or narrow the gap. Within every school district, it is important to have an effective leader who is devoted to insuring the academic success of all students regardless of gender, socio-economic status, language, and specifically race.

For all purposes of this literature review, effective leadership was defined by examining the role of the superintendent; superintendent; “role” was defined by the actions and steps he or she takes in being effective in closing or narrowing the gap in his or her school district. Some superintendents inherit districts which have what one would consider a small achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students, where *all* students are academically successful, leadership thrives, parental/community involvement is obvious, and professional learning communities are embedded into the day-to-day operations of the school, while some superintendents put actions in place that lead to successful outcomes. The purpose of this section in the literature review was to provide characteristics of an effective superintendent and how he or she successfully went about closing the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students.

### **Leadership of the Superintendent**

Closing the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students may seem to be a monumental task. For some educators, it may even seem impossible. A superintendent who is designated to lead a school district must look at multiple forms of data, including standardized test scores, graduation rates, attendance, and discipline to make a commitment to placing key indicators in action in order to achieve the goal of closing the gap. Closing the achievement gap has to become a goal when one understands how African American students are coming up short both in national and state standardized testing. African Americans have faced many past and current achievement gaps; these gaps have a direct correlation to the future of these students and our society.

In an effort to close the achievement gap between African American students and Caucasians, superintendents must be willing to stand boldly with their colleagues and stakeholders to address this charge of action with school communities. The NCLB has made this charge somewhat easier, in that many school district communities now have an understanding of what this accountability means to their neighboring schools, now in the current year of 2013, when all students are supposed to be 100% proficient on standardized testing or in many states where they have been granted a waiver from the NCLB, under President Obama. In 2002, a total of 18 school superintendents and the county superintendent in Contra Costa County in California took a bold step in an effort to address their achievement gap when they realized that although the African American and Latino students were making gains, they still fell 42% short of their White and Asian colleagues on their standardized assessment (Haycock, 2001). These 18 superintendents developed an Achievement Gap Task Force of educators to analyze data and study the gap within the county. The superintendents believed that, "Every responsible member of the community must be involved to eliminate the Achievement Gap: parents, families, senior citizens, business and labor leaders, as well as civic leaders" (Haycock, 2001, para. 34). The gap is an area that must be addressed through collaboration with stakeholders. Effective superintendents believe one of their roles in closing the achievement gap is to capitalize in the power of collaboration. These superintendents realized they could only do as much as one person; stakeholders had to be a part of the vision.

The Contra Costa County Achievement Gap Task Force made a tough decision in deciding what their recommendations would be both at the district and school levels. The very first recommendation at the district level was the level of commitment has to begin

with the superintendent (Haycock, 2001). In fact, out of the 12 recommendations for the district, four had the name of the superintendent explicitly stated in the plan beginning with wording, such as the *superintendent must* (Haycock, 2001). The other eight were all recommendations, in which the superintendent has total authority over, such as “planning of resources and time is essential, and insuring staff development is offered to the principals to be instructional leaders” (Haycock, 2001, p. 2).

There are certain expectations and a non-negotiable list that must be set at the district level by the superintendent. For many educators, they only understood the importance of closing the gap when it came directly from the chair of district leader. This school district defined the recommendations not only for the district level but for the school site level as well, in realizing the superintendent has a role in closing the achievement gap and the school site level is also responsible for doing their part.

An assistant superintendent was able to earn the position as the superintendent in his school corporation, because he was willing to openly discuss the achievement gap. Alson (2006) understood the importance of communication and even stated, “superintendents need to be politicians before they can be educators” (p. 49). In this particular curricular study, the role of the superintendent was clearly articulated, in terms of what Superintendent Alson did in his school district. Alson understood early that there were issues of race within the district that had been ignored by the current superintendent. As a result, he was delegated the responsibility of trying to figure out the achievement gap. Alson made a commitment from the beginning to be transparent about the data and what was happening in the district, as a direct result of the data. It was not just about numbers; he set out to get the story behind the numbers, in order to move the school

district forward in a positive way. When he became superintendent, closing the achievement gap became his top priority. Alson established committees within the corporation that would look at access into advanced-level courses, curricular equity, and culturally responsive teaching (Alson, 2006). Alson understood there was going to be a political journey he would have to endure in order to make closing the achievement gap a priority. “The belief was that proposals for systematic change would lead to improved achievement and a school more explicitly and implicitly responsive to students of color” (Alson, 2006, p. 55). This political shift and change in direction of the school district did not come with much hardship.

Alson (2006) started with looking at data in his school district. The results made many educators and community members uncomfortable. Alson did not stop there; he continued with critical conversations about race, and analyzing data through a cultural lens, in addition, he went a step further by requiring teachers to discuss and analyze student work, in order to address the lack of skills that were reoccurring on minority students’ assignments. Teachers learned quickly that they were either going to be committed to the work that was happening or this school district was not the place of employment for them. Alson (2006) had a true commitment to equity, “early staff development efforts and community conversations raised racial awareness, sensitivity, and understanding. Adults need to engage in honest, open dialogue about race and achievement in a safe setting” (p. 75). Alson understood he had a political role to play and part of his role as superintendent was communicating what the data are saying and gaining support to move forward in closing the achievement gap.

In Newton, Massachusetts, a veteran superintendent partnered with a colleague in order to create an anti-racist environment. Dr. Blumer did not have the answers, so he began working with an Efficacy Institute to provide professional development to educators. What began as a professional development opportunity turned into a semester class that focused on high expectations and open, honest conversations about race amongst educators. One of the assignments was for educators to create an action plan and from those plans, the district began a true shift in moving towards an anti-racist environment. The plans were able to incorporate support groups for African American students, newsletters to parents, and a new curriculum (Blumer & Tatum, 1999). The superintendent was able to see the results and established equity as a core value for the school district. Dr. Blumer created a document and from the input of many stakeholders, he was able to accomplish many of the following practices: school improvement plans that focus on being anti-racist, consistent evaluation of the progress of African American students, system-wide goals, anti-racist teams at individual school sites, further professional development, commitment to hiring more teachers of color, and an overall communication of what was happening in the district to teachers, students, and the community (Blumer & Tatum, 1999). It was not surprising that with this superintendent's leadership, African American achievement increased. The role of the superintendent included staffing, analyzing data, and communication with the stakeholders.

Superintendents have to understand the importance of collaboration and how each of them can take time to learn from their fellow colleagues. Cooper (2007) wrote about a Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN) that began with 15 superintendents who decided to work together to help one another combat the African American and

Caucasian achievement gap within each of their school districts. Like the others, these superintendents had open and honest conversations about race amongst each other and with their staff. However, unlike the others, the MSAN was founded on research. There was very little these superintendents implemented that was not grounded in research. A student survey was distributed amongst students in order to gain their thoughts and opinions about the school environments. Based on these results, goals were set, monitored, and evaluated. Mentoring programs were established and African American students were gaining access and support in courses, like algebra, in which they did not have past success. MSAN superintendents decided to not only read research but also act upon what research tells us needs to be done in many areas, in an effort to close the achievement gap.

It is not enough to know an achievement gap exists, but superintendents must be diligent in studying the data to be fully aware of what the data are saying, in order to help others meet the needs of their African American population. Navarro and Natalicio (1999) investigated the achievement gap in El Paso, Texas. Three superintendents along with many other district leaders, a total of 11 individuals, made an effort to renew their school districts when they recognized a need through data, “a large gap existed between the achievement of ethnic minority or port students and that of Anglo or more affluent students” (Navarro & Natalicio, 1999, p. 598). These superintendents really focused on four priorities: communicating and engaging the entire community, effective leadership that is committed to high expectations and high achievement for all students, teacher quality, and a rigorous curriculum. Accountability for these priorities was also a major



piece, along with quality professional development that assists both teachers and leaders alike in moving forward with the established goals.

Goals are important and cannot be established without a clear vision. In Norfolk, Virginia, a superintendent is considered a visionary for his work in closing the achievement gap between Caucasian and African American students in his urban school district. Superintendent Simpson has been recognized by the state of Virginia and nationally for his extraordinary work in an urban school district. Dr. Simpson set a clear vision from day one and was deliberate in celebrating students, staff, and anyone who was connected to the district. “It makes people feel appreciated . . . and motivated,” he said. “We needed some successes because success breeds success” (as cited in King, 2003, p. 2). Dr. Simpson was deliberate in sharing these celebrations anytime he had an audience.

Unlike other superintendents, Dr. Simpson had a personal connection to his vision in closing the achievement and raising the achievement scores of African American students. Interestingly enough as the eighth-grade +ISTEP examination was the data used in this study, when Dr. Simpson was in his eighth-grade year, he experienced integrated schools and how he, along with other African American students, were immediately labeled and placed in remediation classes. As a result of his own experience in middle school, he was diligent in placing resources, such as technology in the Norfolk middle schools. Although the middle schools still struggled, Dr. Simpson was able to close the achievement gap by half during his tenure (King, 2003). Dr. Simpson and many of his colleagues contribute his success as a superintendent in closing the achievement gap by setting high expectations, having a clear and communicated vision, providing

professional learning opportunities and book studies, creating an open door policy for staff, involving community, and parents to hear their thoughts, and seeking and participating with outside consultants who focus on closing the achievement gap.

Superintendents must also take into an account the voices of all stakeholders who have a vested interest in the academic achievement of all students in their school districts. As tax payers who contribute to the finances of a school district located in their area, whether they choose to send their children or not, poor achievement of students can decrease one's property value. An African American female superintendent who was able to make academic gains within her school district could also be said to have used her own personal struggles, as a means to decrease the achievement gap in her school district. Dr. Fisher contributes her success in South Carolina by making everyone feel a part of the process. No matter the idea or proposal or from whom the idea was shared, she always focused it back on how what is proposed will help the students grow academically. Dr. Fisher made a conscious decision to increase resources, in an effort to close the achievement gap, and she did this by lowering class sizes, ensuring students had an opportunity for both after-school and summer programs, and by increasing pre-kindergarten opportunities (Riede, 2011). Dr. Fisher realized she alone could not take on the tremendous task of a school district of 69,800 students, with a 48% poverty rate (Riede, 2011). She decided that the role of the community would be vital in closing the achievement gap, as she worked with her staff to be unified in one thing, and that was focusing on students and providing students with opportunities to help them grow as students and as individuals. As many school districts had undergone budget cuts and decreased the number of extra-curricular activities and elective classes, Dr. Fisher kept

these activities in her district, as they aligned with her vision of educating the whole child. Her role as superintendent was to unify stakeholders and keep students first.

Superintendents must fight to overcome educators' low expectations of African American students, as well as other potential outside factors. Ustray (2008) surveyed 80 Georgia superintendents regarding their perception of what he referred to as the minority achievement gap (MAG) and what they believe their role is, and how they can help close the achievement gap. Few of the superintendents offered concrete ideas or a means to address the achievement gap. Instead, superintendents responded with their perception of what it would take to close the achievement gap between minorities and Caucasians. The suggestions offered by many of the superintendents addressed what is out of their control. Some of the perceptions offered by the superintendents are as follows: fixing the economy, preschool, changing society's ideas about education, and fixing a student's home life. There were other perceptions that might aid in closing the gap, and these perceptions learned from Ustray's research resulted in many superintendents finding ways to communicate the need of maintaining high expectations for African American students with the adults in their school districts.

In all of the literature regarding superintendents, there was some common themes effective school district leaders did that aided in either closing or narrowing the achievement gap. The themes that read fluidly across the literature are as follows: communicating with all stakeholders, data collection and analysis of standardized assessments, requiring and putting forth a format for educators to take part in honest and open communications about race, high expectations, knowing the data, and setting core values and/or nonnegotiables regarding equity and anti-racism.

One must grapple and gain a true understanding of what the role of the superintendent is and how it looks on the day-to-day operations for a man or woman who is in charge of the academic achievement for all students they serve. One obvious role for all superintendents is to be instructional leaders. In a study by Peterson (1999) where these leaders focused on curriculum and instruction, superintendents were able to articulate their role in promoting instruction in their district. One cannot expect a superintendent to be in classrooms every day; however, there is an expectation that they promote the importance of instruction with their teachers and building level leaders. Some key components discussed in this study for superintendents as instructional leaders are communicating and establishing a vision, routine visits to schools, modeling expectations of character, recognizing and celebrating best practices throughout the school district, assessment and analyzing of data, managing the school board and central office staff, and promoting professional development with a focus on best instructional practices (Peterson, 1999). Although these characteristics were not specifically tied to closing the achievement gap, these superintendents have a focus on instructional practices tied to curriculum and instruction.

In the literature read, one would hypothesize through further research that with these roles of the superintendent in place, one would see success in closing the gap. The role of the superintendent in closing the achievement gap can vary from school district-to-school district, which was affirmed when reading the literature. One would believe there to be some consistent recommendations that can be replicated across our nation and state that would allow for the successful closure of all achievement gaps. In another study, Wright and Harris (2010) continued to build upon a theme consistent with

that of the previous data in which the focus was on curriculum and instruction. This review of the literature focuses on the leadership role the superintendent must have in order to see significant gains in student achievement with diverse groups of populations.

Educational leaders of academically successful districts with populations of demographically diverse students recognize the achievement gap has multiple causes and must be confronted with varied approaches, including training educators to understand the cultural differences of the students they teach.

(Rothman as cited in Wright & Harris, 2010)

The superintendent must understand the flexibility in his or her role to seek out resources in first understanding the achievement gap in his or her district and then have the courage to do something about it. Trumball, Greenfield, and Quiroz believed “one must be willing to learn about the various cultures represented in the school’s community and be willing to be a learner in an effort to understand those cultures” (as cited in Wright & Harris, 2010, p. 22). This act not only gives the superintendent an opportunity to be a learner but also to model the values that matter most in the district, this is to be cultural proficient (as cited in Wright & Harris, 2010). Being a culturally proficient superintendent and having a cultural proficient staff lends itself to closing the achievement gap. Educators begin to not only realize the importance of teaching grade level standards; they also understand individual students and the importance of building relationships.

Learning to be culturally proficient is a role that might not come easy for some superintendents, although it is very important. Professional development is essential for superintendents to understand the significance of training building leaders to work with

teachers, in order for them to work with students to close the gap between African American and Caucasian students. Marx reported that due to the change of demographics across our nation, it is believed that by the year of 2050, the United States will be a majority minority population with the White population dropping below 50% (as cited in Wright & Harris, 2010). One must have professional knowledge to work with the students who are going to be the leaders of society. If we continue to fail them in our school system, we are only failing ourselves. In addition to the need of professional development, the role of the superintendent in closing the achievement gap was also stated to be emphasizing high expectation for students, building and maintaining relationships, modeling expectations for culturally proficiency, creating cultures where all students can have and feel success, and responding to the data (Wright & Harris, 2010). This study was solely based on closing the achievement gap while the other was not; however there are many similarities to the role of the superintendent and the impact on student achievement. As one continues to link the role of the superintendent to closing the achievement gap, there is another study that gives 16 explicit strategies to aid in equity for various groups of students, including cultural and racial minorities (Ross & Berger, 2009). A few recurring themes are modeling equity beliefs, create a culture of learning, examine instructional best practices, monitor progress, professional development and involve stakeholders (Ross & Berger, 2009). Again, there are some key components to district leadership and student achievement. Marzano and Waters (2009) looked specifically at the relationship between overall district level leadership and average academic student achievement, finding a direct correlation. Both researchers reported that when district leaders are performing their district level responsibilities

efficiently and effectively their actions have a positive impact on student achievement (Marzano & Waters, 2009). The research in their study continues to provide guidance that must occur at the district level in order for student achievement to thrive (Marzano & Waters, 2009). The literature in this book does not single out the superintendent, although that position is mentioned throughout the text. Instead, the researchers take the approach at closely examining the work performed at the district level as a whole.

In an article read, the authors take the preparation of educational leaders as a clear link to closing the achievement gap. In referencing the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards, Johnson and Uline (2005) stated and defined the six areas: vision of learning, culture of teaching and learning, management of learning, relationships with the broader community to foster learning, integrity, fairness, and ethics in learning, and political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context of learning. Having a clear, communicated vision, along with creating a culture of learning, one that allows students to learn and teachers to teach is imperative in an effort to close the gap. Ferguson (as cited in Johnson & Uline, 2005) reported the importance of establishing relationships particularly with Hispanic and African American students to show students that one cares is crucial to the success of these students in any school. In addition, the authors connected the standards to specific examples related to junior high, which align perfectly to this study. One example in the text discusses how the time during a middle schools passing period was shortened, to allow enough time during the day for teacher collaboration. A separate example was used to discuss the number of eighth-grade students below grade level on a needs assessment. The author was conveying that

in order for educational leaders to close the achievement gap, he or she must get to the exact root of the issue that is causing the area(s) of deficiency.

This section of the literature review attempts to focus on the role of the superintendent in closing the achievement gap; it was made clear throughout Chapter 3 that the superintendent does have a substantial role in closing the achievement gap. In addition, there are several pieces of literature incorporated that focus on the role of the superintendent and overall student achievement.

### **Findings**

After reading several pieces of literature, common themes transpired in identifying the superintendents' role that he or she established in their respective school districts. These themes were as follows: communicating with all stakeholders, data collection and analysis of standardized assessments, requiring and putting forth a format for educators to take part in honest and open communications about race, and setting core values and/or nonnegotiables regarding equity and anti-racism. Previous research indicates there are some common themes/practices when it comes to leadership and increasing student achievement. "Therefore, leadership can influence reform which can have a positive effect on student outcomes" (Moore, 2009, p. 23). Because the gap is not a local problem, but a national one, no district leader can afford to not engage the community in collaboration, in an effort to openly address the data and any possible solutions. Stakeholders must be a part of the "together" in building a better school district. Reeves' (2000) 90/90/90 school research, where 90% or more of the students met district and state standards in reading and other areas, despite 90% of the students being children of poverty and 90% minority, did not address how effective administrators



changed cultures for learning. The study did cite specific characteristics of these schools such as “a focus on academic achievement, clear curriculum choices, frequent assessment of progress and multiple opportunities for improvement, an emphasis on nonfiction writing, and collaborative scoring of student work” (Reeves, 2000, p. 3).

An effective leader is not mentioned directly in the study, instead the effects are said to be sustainable through turnovers of both staff and administration. This study brings about more of the idea of sustainability than a person’s particular role in closing of the gap. At some point, sustainability is an issue that will need to be addressed, but prior to sustainability, one has to look at who sets the tone for the criteria of that in the 90/90/90 schools. One would strongly believe it would be the role of the superintendent.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this review was to closely examine the achievement gap, standardized testing both past and present, and the role of the superintendent in an effort to close the achievement gap. An effective superintendent must possess certain qualities in order to successfully increase student achievement amongst African American students and close the gap between them and their Caucasian peers. Some of the common themes read throughout the literature focused on conversations about race, providing professional development, setting and maintain high expectations for all students, allocating resources, analyzing data and making the necessary changes, as a result of data, and involvement of stakeholders in the process.

Superintendents must understand the closing of the achievement gap starts with leadership. He or she must know and understand the African American population to whom they serve, as well as educate and encourage others to become culturally

proficient. Cultural proficiency in the adults allows for a culture of learning for the students, in order to aid in closing the achievement gap. Superintendents focused on cultural proficiency allowed for multiple professional development opportunities and personal growth for adults. Standardized testing remains important due to the era of accountability; however, there is little need for concern when key strategies are in place to level the playing field and create a true culture of equity between African American and Caucasian students. This leveled playing field not only affects what is done today, but it also plays a key role in the future of society. When we do well educating our African American student population, we provide students the opportunity to do well in society by becoming law-abiding, healthy, and productive citizens.

To understand the role of the superintendent in closing the gap is probably the most critical in our attempts to address a gap that has been in existence for many years. As more educators have the desire and need to gain knowledge and a deeper understanding of this particular subgroup, we will no longer leave our African American students to the mercy of their classroom teacher or school culture. As high stakes testing continues and accountability measures begin to take a toll on superintendents, more school districts find themselves faced with an achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students. Studies for superintendents and their role in this particular area will become more and more critical to the field of education.

### CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

This research study was carried out by first examining the extent of the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students for eighth-grade students in selected Indiana schools, by examining the ISTEP+ examination of middle schools in three different school districts. The second part of this study consisted of interviewing the three superintendents of these schools and examining the role of the superintendent in regards to closing the achievement gap between these two groups of students. Superintendents were originally selected by using the demographics of their school district, to insure they were all fairly equal in demographics specifically of African American and Caucasian students; the original study warranted for both ethnicity groups to be over 35% each. In addition to ethnicity, eighth-grade scores on the 2011 and 2012 ISTEP+ were used, along with the perception of their colleagues of how certain school districts are working to close the achievement gap, and professional development presentations offered or provided in the respective school districts of strategies, techniques, procedures, and best practices initiated or supported by the superintendent. One superintendent, who was originally requested to participate in this study, did not respond to two requests to participate. As a result, the third superintendent in this study, whose data were not originally examined to participate, did respond and became a part of this study. Superintendents received an electronic request, in the format of a formal letter

requesting they take part in the interview process. Results from this study should assist both current and future superintendents, particularly those working in an urban setting on effective strategies to aid in closing the gap, as well as ineffective practices that have not proven successful.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to closely examine the role of the superintendent and how he or she established strategies, techniques, procedures, and best practices into *meaningful action* that would close the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students, particularly on the eighth-grade ISTEP+ exam. The research in this study resulted in the following:

1. Direct examination of the differences in the African American and Caucasian test results in English/language arts and mathematics in three school districts and their junior highs in Indiana on the eighth-grade ISTEP+ exam; these data served as the background information for understanding the extent of the achievement gap and informing subsequent interviews with the superintendents.
2. A clear definition of the role superintendents play in closing the achievement gap in African American and Caucasian students on the eighth-grade ISTEP+ exam in three school districts and their middle schools.
3. Strategies, techniques, and best practices other superintendents may replicate in an effort to close the achievement gap.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do superintendents understand their role in closing the achievement gap?

2. What institutional factors or actions are being undertaken related to the school district and/or leadership leading to a narrowing of the achievement gap?
3. What data do superintendents' examine in understanding the achievement gap? Is ISTEP the only key factor when examining data or are other measures used?
4. How much influence do superintendents believe they have in closing the achievement gap?
5. How important is it for superintendents to communicate about the nature and degree of the narrowing or success in closing the achievement gap with all stakeholders' teachers, parents, students, and the community? How is information communicated?
6. What is the leadership role of a superintendent in his or her district when closing the gap?

Priority/Vision

Planning/Researching

Directing/Staffing/Implementing

Allocating Resources

Assessing Results

### **Researchable Problem and Generative Promise**

District leadership is important to the success of any school district. The knowledge and expertise of the superintendent is critical to the mission and goals of the district. For all purposes of this research, the role of the superintendent was defined as the priorities, planning and research, techniques, procedures, allocation of resources or

any intentional practices a superintendent employs in his or her school district to aid in closing the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students. It has been reported that African American students are not achieving at the same level as their White peers and this is not only creating a problem in our school system, but it has the potential to create problems in the future of our society (McKinsey & Company, 2009). Often questions are raised regarding whose responsibility it is to close the gap. One would argue that it is all of our responsibilities to take part in closing the achievement gap; however, we know there is no doubt that the leader of the school district has a role in the process. Reeves (2002) stated in the section on leadership in action that effective leaders decide what is within their control, gain control of time, create a daily prioritized task list, and link leadership time to student achievement. In other words, they consistently invest their time and energy to what is truly important. Superintendents are often perceived as being too busy to take on certain tasks and responsibilities. Although not directly spoken of a superintendent, Lezotte and McKee (2002) defined an effective principal/administrator as one who acts as an instructional leader and effectively and persistently communicates the mission of the school to staff, parents, and students. The purpose of this study was to contribute to the field of education by defining the role of the superintendent in closing the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students. What is the role of the superintendent in closing the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students? What makes a superintendent effective or ineffective in narrowing or closing the achievement gap? The answer to these two questions will allow other professionals to know and understand what it is about a

superintendent's role that closes the achievement gap on standardized assessments or what strategies and techniques do not yield the desired results.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework used for this research study was hermeneutic phenomenology. "Hermeneutics takes the position that nothing can be interpreted free of some perspective," so the first priority is to capture the perspective of the superintendent being interviewed and to expound on his or her practices, regarding the achievement gap (Patton, 2002). Hermeneutic phenomenology is a human science that studies persons; it is the curriculum of being and becoming (Van Manen, 1990). This theoretical framework is important in defining the role of the superintendent in closing the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students. The goal of this study in using this theoretical framework

is to attempt to accomplish the impossible: to construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of the life world, and yet to remain aware that the lived life is always more complex than any explication of meaning can reveal. (Van Manen, 1990, p. 81)

Hermeneutic phenomenological differs from that of what one would consider direct phenomenological research in that, the researcher is seeking to understand the world from the participants' experiences and perspectives, while direct phenomenology is merely seeking to understand the descriptions of the life world. (Cole, 2010). As a researcher, I am looking at the role of the superintendent in diverse school districts where African American students may or may not be successful on the eighth-grade ISTEP+ exam. Each superintendent is seeking to understand their role in closing the achievement gap from

each of their own perspectives, as they discuss many of their personal stories in the interview; one can only take into account how their own stories may play a role in their efforts. The eighth-grade ISTEP is being used as a proxy to examine the achievement gap at a much broader level. Personal interviews, with the use of an interview guide, allowed me to examine and analyze responses in a flexible way while using the framework to develop questions (Patton, 2002).

Superintendents were selected by using the demographics of their school districts along with the scores of their eighth-grade ISTEP examination for the 2011 and 2012 school years. Spring 2013 data was not used in this study, as results were not back at the time of the interviews. The Indiana Department of Education was in the process of an investigation to determine whether the ISTEP+ data was reliable, due to several online glitches that occurred during the online testing window. Each superintendent had the opportunity to explain and give significant detail of how they make meaning of what they do, in an effort to close the achievement gap. Through analysis and interpretation of data, the goal is to communicate these findings to school districts and universities who will hopefully use the research to hire quality superintendents for urban districts and/or train current superintendents who need to grow in this area to be more effective district leaders. The interviews with the superintendents revealed the perception of their role in closing the achievement gap and the strategies, techniques, and practices they considered effective or ineffective. These superintendents were identified by the demographics of their school districts, along with the knowing efforts superintendents have made that have been shared throughout the state by educators or past professional development conferences.



### **Research Design, Participants, and Outcomes**

The research design is that of basic research in which “knowledge will be gained for the sake of knowledge” (Patton, 2002, p. 215). To reiterate the purpose of this study is to contribute to the field of education by defining the role of the superintendent in closing the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students. This definition will allow other aspiring superintendents to know and understand the effort and role they, too, must offer to the field of education, in order to make a sincere commitment to closing the achievement gap, with the ultimate goal of raising academic achievement for all students.

The research design occurred using a qualitative interview approach. Interview questions were open-ended to allow the superintendents the opportunity to openly express themselves about their role in attempting to close the achievement gap. During the interviews, it was imperative for me to capture the exact words of those being interviewed; quotes from the participants are the prize of the qualitative researcher (Patton, 2002). All fieldwork for this basic research project includes personal interviews with the superintendents that all lasted approximately one hour and continued after all the questions were asked. “The purpose of interviewing is to allow us to enter into the other person’s perspective” (Patton, 2002, p. 341). A qualitative interview provides the opportunity for the researcher to learn directly from the interviewee what he or she believes and perceives about a certain topic or issue. A researcher cannot observe certain aspects of a person’s role, such as one’s thoughts, past behaviors, or how they may make meaning of events or data; instead, a researcher has to be intentional about inquiring and capturing those thoughts and perceptions through a skillful interview.

When looking at the three types of interviewing approaches, a combined approach of the informal conversation with the standardized open-ended interview lent the best opportunity for superintendents to share the perception of their role in closing the achievement gap. An interview guide was used to ensure consistency of questions amongst the interviewees, along with the ability for me, as the researcher, to be flexible and ask additional questions or seek further clarification once answers had been provided. The purpose of the research design was to gather as much data as possible in regard to the superintendents' role in closing the achievement gap.

There were a total of three participants in this study, all of whom were urban superintendents whose years of experience ranged from approximately 3 – 11 years in their current role as superintendents. Although the quantity is not large by any means, it is not the quantity of participants interviewed, but it is the quality of each superintendent and what he or she brings to the field of education. Sanders (1982) reported that in order to engage in effective qualitative interviews, the researcher should keep the participant count to a minimum of three participants to a maximum of six. Too many participants do not yield to better data.

Several open-ended questions were asked about their role and the practices, strategies, and techniques used in an effort to close the gap between African American and Caucasian students. The interviews allowed the participants the opportunity to provide their own perception and perspective to the achievement gap in their districts (Patton, 2002). In an effort to gain some insight into the participants' perspectives and how others may understand their role, it was imperative to include some background information about each participant, along with the junior high data from the 2011 and

2012 ISTEP+ scores. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the superintendents and their respective school districts.

Dr. David Cole is an African American man serving in his 11th year as superintendent of schools. Dr. Cole grew up in an urban environment. He later went on to graduate with a bachelor's degree, master's degree, and furthered his education to become a superintendent. He spent a total of five years as a classroom teacher and 35 years as an administrator. When asked why he decided to become a superintendent, there was no direct answer given but throughout the interview, the reasons became very obvious. Mr. Cole had a strong religious background and believed God gave him every opportunity he had been awarded. Mr. Cole had a passion for students, specifically the African American urban child.

Dr. Cole was the superintendent of the Metropolitan School District of Scottsdale also known around the city as the MSD of Scottsdale. Dr. Cole had a total of nine elementary schools, three junior highs, and one high school in his school district. For the 2012-2013 school year, approximately 11,000 students attended Scottsdale schools. The MSD of Scottsdale served a fairly large African American population in comparison to the other two school districts represented in this study. Mr. Cole pointed out that he had the largest African American middle class population living within his school district and the highest African American adult population with postsecondary degrees. Table 8 contains the general district data for the 2012-2013 school year.

Table 8

*General District Data for the 2012-13 School Year – MSD of Scottsdale*

Demographic	%
Ethnicity	
African American	58.9%
Hispanic	19.8%
Caucasian	12.2%
Multiracial	6.8%
Asian	2.2%
Lunch program	
Free lunch	58.0%
Reduced lunch	7.4%
Paid lunch	34.6%
Education	
General education	87.7%
Special Education	12.3%
Non-English	83.5%
English learners	16.5%

*Source.* Indiana Department of Education

The data charts gives a clear indication that the MSD of Scottsdale had an overwhelming majority minority school district when combining African Americans, Hispanics, Multiracial, and Asian students, with a combined percentage of 87.7% of minorities attending Scottsdale schools. However, for the purposes of this study, the focus continued to be on the Caucasians and African American students. The African American students exceeded the Caucasian population by 46.7% or close to 50%. The data for the MSD of Scottsdale – District B were presented in Chapter 1 for the 2011 and 2012 ISTEP scores in Tables 3, 4, and 5.

The next participant was Dr. Carolyn Friedman. Dr. Friedman was not Caucasian or African American but was of another ethnic descent. I did not ask her ethnicity; however, a colleague informed me that she was of another ethnicity. Dr. Friedman grew up in an urban environment. She received both her bachelor's and master's degrees from the same university and went on to obtain her doctoral degree from a neighboring state. She spent a total of 13 years as a classroom teacher and guidance counselor, 23 years as an administrator, and 11 years as a superintendent in what many consider some of the best school districts. When asked why she wanted to become a superintendent, she simply began by stating, "Ego." Dr. Friedman said it was others who told her she should become a superintendent, and she really did not have a desire at the time to pursue it. She openly admitted not wanting to be a target by sitting in the political seat of a superintendent. However, she proclaimed after being encouraged by others and knowing superintendents who had held the position, she had to finally say, "If they can do it, I can."

Dr. Carolyn Friedman was the superintendent of the Metropolitan School District of Waldo Community Schools, also known around the city as the MSD of Waldo. Dr. Friedman had a total of 11 elementary schools, two junior highs, and two high schools, and an early childhood center. During the 2012-2013 school year, approximately 15,100 students attended Waldo Community Schools. The MSD of Waldo served a diverse population in terms of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and student groups. Table 9 contains the general district data for the 2012-2013 school year.

Table 9

*General District Data for the 2012-13 School Year – MSD of Waldo*

Demographic	%
<b>Ethnicity</b>	
African American	40.8%
Hispanic	16.8%
Caucasian	33.9%
Multiracial	7.1%
Asian	1.3%
<b>Lunch program</b>	
Free lunch	50.7%
Reduced lunch	8.2%
Paid lunch	41.1%
<b>Education</b>	
General education	87.9%
Special Education	12.1%
Non-English	89.0%
English learners	11.0%

*Source. Indiana Department of Education*

The data gave a clear indication that the MSD of Waldo was also a majority minority school district when combining African Americans, Hispanics, Multiracial, and Asian students, with a combined percentage of 66% of minorities attending Waldo Community Schools. For purposes of this study, the African American student population exceeded the Caucasian population by 6.9%.

The last participant, Dr. Zachary May was a Caucasian man in his early forties. Dr. May grew up in a suburban area, where he taught middle school. Dr. May graduated with a bachelors' in education, and spent only a total of four years in the classroom. He was in his 17th year of education and two and half of those years were served as the

superintendent of the Metropolitan School District of Fair Lane. Dr. May was married. When asked why he wanted to become a superintendent, Dr. May responded by stating, “I have always aspired to lead in each endeavor. As an educator, the superintendents’ office gives me a greater chance to lead.” The data for the MSD of Waldo – District C, was presented in Chapter 1 for the 2011 and 2012 ISTEP scores in Tables 6 and 7.

Dr. Zachary May was the superintendent of the Metropolitan School District of Fair Lane, also known around the city as the MSD of Fair Lane. Dr. May had a total of 11 elementary schools, two junior highs, one freshman center, and two high schools. For the 2012-13 school year, approximately 15,500 students attended Fair Lane schools. The MSD of Fair Lane continued to service a very diverse population in terms of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and student groups. Table 10 contains the district data for the 2012-13 school year.

Table 10

*General District Data for the 2012-13 School Year – MSD of Fair Lane*

Demographic	%
Ethnicity	
African American	30.9%
Hispanic	20.6%
Caucasian	41.2%
Multiracial	6.1%
Asian	.8%
Lunch program	
Free lunch	64.4%
Reduced lunch	9.5%
Paid lunch	26.1%
Education	
General education	88.3%
Special Education	11.7%
Non-English	85.5%
English learners	14.5%

*Source. Indiana Department of Education*

The data provided a clear indication that the MSD of Fair Lane was a majority minority school district when combining African Americans, Hispanics, Multiracial, and Asian students, with a combined percentage of 58% of minorities attending Fair Lane schools. However, for purposes of this study, the focus was on the Caucasians and African American students. The data for the MSD of Fair Lane – District A was presented in Chapter 1 for the 2011 and 1212 ISTEP scores in Tables 1 and 2.

Two of three school districts (District A and District C) had very similar demographics. The third school district (District B) led an overwhelming majority African American student population, but was not initially a part of this study. This was due to the superintendent who shared similar demographics with the other two schools not responding to two requests to participate in this study. As a result, the superintendent who did respond and was mentioned by the two previous superintendents to interview, after they were interviewed, responded in a timely manner. All three participants were asked the same protocol questions.

### **Interview Protocol**

#### **Perception**

1. To what extent is the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students an issue in your school district?
2. What do you believe contributes to the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students?
3. Is closing the achievement gap a priority in your district, and how have you incorporated this priority into your district's vision?



4. How do you as the superintendent understand your role in narrowing or closing the achievement gap in your school district?

### **Best Practices**

5. What strategies, techniques, procedures, or best practices have you initiated in your role as superintendent, in an effort to close the achievement gap?
6. What do you consider are the best practices you have identified or adhered to when attempting to close or narrow the achievement gap?

(Probing)

What plans do you have in terms of closing the achievement gap, and what research have you used or done that supports the future plans of your school district?

How do you go about allocating resources that aid in your priority/vision of closing the achievement gap?

Does staffing play a role in corporation's priority of closing the gap?

How do you insure effective implementation of best practices across the district?

### **Communication**

What role does communication play in closing the achievement gap? (internal and external, formal and informal, media)

### **Leadership**

What approaches have you used in an effort to close the achievement gap that you would consider successful or unsuccessful?

Through the use of the interview guide, I sought the superintendents' opinions, feelings, and perceptions on how and what they believed they did to close the

achievement gap. Analysis of the data needed to be descriptive in order to provide the reader with a clear picture of strategies, techniques, and practices through the words of the superintendent. Each interview was tape recorded and transcribed with open coding practices, themes, and categorizing of the data. Common themes were sought in the open-ended responses of the superintendents. Themes developed and emerged from the interviews which led to assertions regarding the role of the superintendent in closing the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students.

### **Perceptivity and Ethical Considerations**

My perceptivity in terms of this research weighed heavily on my experience in education along with the fact I am an African American woman. I am currently in my 16th year in education. I have worked in two school districts. In the first district I served as a teacher, a language arts coach, and a professional developer for the district. As a current employee in an urban school district, I served as an assistant principal for eight years and now as a Curriculum Coordinator/District Administrator, in my third year. All of these experiences allowed me to work for a total of three superintendents in two urban school districts with similar demographics, all of whom played a role in attempting to close the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students. These roles ranged from providing significant professional development to staff to establishing equity teams throughout the school district. These experiences provided me with insight to the role some superintendents might play in closing the achievement gap.

My bias to this study included the following: knowledge of the school districts within the state, my relationship with staff members throughout these districts, and my African American heritage, where data of African American children is very dear to my

heart. I was very intentional in asking the right types of questions to capture the role of the superintendent and his or her perceptions regarding the achievement gap. I remained neutral at all times by constantly reflecting on each school districts ISTEP+ scores; I personally transcribed the tapes by analyzing the qualitative data provided during the interviewing process. The ethical dilemmas I faced fell directly under confidentiality. Because I know several educators who work throughout the state of Indiana and several educators were aware of my topic, I had to be extremely careful in not adding my presumed knowledge to the data and/or become engaged in conversations about practices in the district, of which I am aware. My historical knowledge of each district interviewed did not become a part of the current superintendent's interview, unless he or she chose to bring a historical context into the interview. My potential biases were kept in check by creating my interview protocol as a guide prior to conducting the actual interviews and staying on task with a more standardized format of the questions being asked, with some flexibility of allowing the participants' answers to guide me.

### **Data Analysis and Strategies**

Data analysis procedures weighed heavily on coding procedures. It was essential for me to use the first pass, second pass, third pass, and fourth pass in coding all of the interviews by each of the participants to create categories, in order to gain central tendencies (Smith, 2004), or assertions to provide declarative sentences on what emerged from the data about the characteristics of superintendents who were attempting to close the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students. Written data and analysis also include direct quotations, which were a great way to really dig deeper into understanding the superintendents, "experiences and their basic perceptions" (Patton,

2002, p. 21). Originally, the superintendents were identified by the demographics of their school districts, along with knowing efforts made that have been shared throughout the state, by educators or through reputation of past professional development conferences. It was important to note that one of the original superintendents identified to participate, based solely on demographics, did not respond to be a participant in this study. As a result, I reached out to a few other superintendents and was able to get a timely response from Dr. David Cole.

### **Summary**

Peshkin (1993) stated theory development is a likely consequence of qualitative research, though not yet a common one. Glaser and Strauss (as cited in Peshkin, 2003) termed the grounded-theory notion in which qualitative researchers indicated they do not begin research with a theory but the theory is generated through the course of data collection and analysis. I believe this has been found true of this research project. The end result is to allow the assertions and declarations gathered from the interviewing process to conclude those strategies, techniques, procedures, and best practices that are critical in the role of a superintendent in closing the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students.

There is plenty of research written about the characteristics of effective building administrators, some of which can be implied of district leadership and specifically that of the superintendent. I did find information written about district leadership and am hopeful that more will be written. Closing the achievement gap is not left to coincidence; it is heavily due to an effective leader who establishes this as a priority through their own character and decisions that directly impact the district as a whole. My goal is to

contribute knowledge regarding the role and perceptions of the superintendents in the systematic methods they create in an effort to close the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students.

## CHAPTER 4 RESULTS OF THE STUDY

The research for this study was conducted in August and September 2013. Three superintendents, who led urban school districts of 11,000 or more students in Indiana were interviewed in their personal district offices. In an effort to maintain confidentiality of those who were interviewed, each school superintendent was given a pseudonym for his or her name and school district. For purposes of this study, a female or male name given as a pseudonym did not constitute the participant as a man or a woman but simply a name to preserve anonymity.

### **Qualitative Analysis**

Each superintendent was provided a list of the questions via electronic mail prior to the actual interview. This was given in an effort to have well thought out responses to the questions being asked, as well as to preserve time of the participants who were extremely busy getting the new school year underway in their school districts.

Qualitative analysis was conducted using a detailed format that allowed for common themes and out-liers to emerge through the coding process.

Upon completion of the interviews, I personally transcribed all three tapes. Although time consuming, there was great benefit in transcribing one's own audio tapes, as the one-on-one interview began to play out again while listening and typing the information verbatim. It is as if one was viewing a movie he or she had seen been before,

while the actors and actresses were acting out the parts in the mind of the researcher, as he or she transcribed. In addition, transcribing audiotapes verbatim allowed for me to remain objective and keep my views from potentially corrupting the data. After the transcriptions were complete for all three interviews, I read through the transcripts multiple times before beginning the coding process. The coding process allowed for common themes and out-liers to emerge. Again, the purpose of this study is for current and/or aspiring superintendents who were struggling with their role in closing the achievement gap to gain insight from the assertions that were developed, as a result of the interviews.

The interviews were very telling as each superintendent responded to the questions that targeted their role in closing the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students. All three of the superintendents brought in their personal perspectives, which are a key component to that of hermeneutic phenomenology. Each interview was unique in its own right; however, there were some common themes that emerged, as well as a few out-liers. Chapter 4 is devoted to the reporting of those themes and out-liers that were determined as a result of the interviews. All three of the superintendents who participated in this study were very passionate about closing the achievement gap and the role they played in their school districts as leaders. The interviewing process allowed the participants to speak openly and share their personal thoughts and perspectives about the achievement gap, race, poverty, and what they considered being effective ways in closing the gap. The three superintendents interviewed had a distinct conviction when it came to closing the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students that went well beyond the tape. The

most interesting part of the interviews was when the tape stopped and all the questions were answered; the conversation continued between the interviewee and me in every instance. I learned each superintendent is unique both in experience and character.

### Open Coding for Superintendent Interviews

Question 1	Dr. Friedman	Dr. May	Dr. Cole
To what extent is the achievement gap between AA and Caucasian students an issue in your school district?	It is the issue, I say that because our test scores, if you disaggregate it our White children are performing exceedingly well, our top 30 at the high schools predominately White, our national merit semi finalist and finalist are White, our AP classrooms are White, our IB...I could go on and on with the racial disparity that exists right here.	Well, I believe we do have an achievement gap but not to dissimilar from a lot of other areas around the state of Indiana and the country. Interestingly enough we do see a bigger achievement gap in the elementary and middle school levels.	Not very much. Because we raised the expectations of everyone, which is causing everyone to now, achieve higher. Now uh when I go back and disaggregate my uh data it is still true that my uh White students are outperforming my black students, but here's my here's my theory on that. If it's a White test then the White students will always have an advantage anyway. This test was developed for White students.

Figure 1. Open coding chart for question 1.



Question 2	Dr. Friedman	Dr. May	Dr. Cole
<p>What do you believe contributes to the achievement gap between AA and Caucasian students?</p>	<p>-Umm I will say there are several environmental issues. I will say there are cultural issues. I will say the number one issue is low expectations of teachers being they black or White or Hispanic for children of color. I think that as long as we have those kind of core beliefs that are hidden. Nobody says (in a funny voice), "No I don't believe black kids can't do as well as White kids." (back in regular voice) No, nobody says it, but watch their actions, watch how they deliver instruction; there there are some tasks and things that occur that tell us there's not a strong belief system that all children can truly succeed at those highest levels.</p> <p>- Now I'll go to poverty. I think a lot families that live in poverty uh are struggling so with just basic survival and um I do believe that uh a lot of young women who live in poverty , grow up in poverty, have babies too young, they really don't have an understanding of what they have to do to stimulant intellectually their child and unfortunately, we attack the problem too late with social services</p>	<p>-Um you know I think there are a number of factors. We can't discount the fact that that um there are some outside factors that influence where children how where they are when they arrive uh in our classroom and in our buildings and some of the social factors that impact them outside of the school.</p> <p>-Yeah, you know I think umm if you look at umm for instance umm where where our students live, what kind of a environment do they live in, uh are they in a high density, low income complex that uh, that uh where there are lots of things going on where they frequently see violence and crime and uh those types of things uh or they in more of a neighborhood development of some sort of single family unit development um or they in an area um a little bit more affluent within our community um which we don't have too many of those but there are some um are they an in environment where um its more of a poverty type environment.</p>	<p>-There are so many variables. Low expectations.</p> <p>-I think also a change in our family structure in the homes uh these babies do not have structure in the house anymore. You know Grandma, "Big Mama" is trying to raise them. Uh their mamas are trying to be at the club on Friday and Saturday, and I'm just being honest. That's what I see a lot of. Sitting down reading, kids don't read anymore because technology takes over.</p>

Figure 2. Open coding chart for question 2.

Question 3	Dr. Friedman	Dr. May	Dr. Cole
<p>Is closing the achievement gap a priority in your district and how have you incorporated or communicated this priority into your district's vision?</p>	<p>-We, first of all have one of the best policy statements I have seen on equity. Um and that's kind of the teeth that I have (Stresses I Have) from a school board that says we will do this (stresses We Will), we will be sure we're seeing equity in Advanced Placement classes, and uh that children of color have full opportunity in uh advanced sciences and marching band.</p> <p>- we are very open in our direction around being an equitable district we require our professional learning communities when they study, look at their data, it must be broken down by race.</p> <p>- every (stresses every in everything) thing we present to the school board is broken down by race and the school board says and what are we doing about this, how are we changing (stresses changing) our models, and (pause) it just keeps forcing the question, so I love that (pounds lightly on desk) it's so cool (voice elevates with a smile). I love it.</p>	<p>I have been focusing on that individual child and I think that's uh, it's maybe kind of slicing things a different way but I think it's important that we focus on every child individually um and not group all of our children together because of a circumstance. Because of how much money their parents make, because of where they live, because of the color of their skin, because of their their gender, you know I think it's important that we continue to remember that each one of our children are different that their individuals and that they each have different needs, needs that we need to focus on, that being said um I do think it's important that we realize and we do look at the cohorts to and determine if we have a significant gap in achievement and should also clarify that I think we are talking about achievement based on standardized tests so which is a whole another topical study that we can do on whether or not that's a true measure of achievement.</p>	<p>*Although Mr. Cole did not answer this question directly, one can derive the answer throughout the interview by his responses. He was the only superintendent who submitted tangible items that clearly communicated the priority of the achievement gap in his school corporation.</p>

Figure 3. Open coding chart for question 3.

Question 4	Dr. Friedman	Dr. May	Dr. Cole
How do you as the superintendent understand your role in narrowing our closing the achievement gap in your district?	<p>-If I am not openly vocal about this issue people can pretend it's not important and so I am the first person at the table who will bring up the issue of race as we look at data, as we develop programs, and you know I'll say why are there only White kids in this program, where are children of color.</p> <p>-And I'll take it a step further, hold people accountable.</p>	<p>-One make sure that we acknowledge the fact that it exist um that it's okay to talk about it. That it's okay to acknowledge that it's a factor that we need to focus on.</p> <p>-The second most important thinks is that I have the right people in the right places that can keep it as a priority that can make sure that it is addressed as part of the school improvement plans um part of the professional development.</p> <p>-Thirdly, accountability just following up making sure that it's getting done um making sure that it doesn't slip slip through the cracks.</p>	<p>-It's my role, I am the instructional leader for the district. I'm totally different than the average superintendent. I'm instruction and curriculum. I do not share my authority.</p> <p>-Very collaborative, we have uh, uh a great family atmosphere out here.</p> <p>-They should never have to worry about anything, just focus on my babies, you know, and I'll take care of everything else. And that's how we function out here.</p> <p>-The other part of that, too is my role in narrowing the gap is to make sure I communicate with my families.</p>

Figure 4. Open coding chart for question 4.

Question 5	Dr. Friedman	Dr. May	Dr. Cole
<p>What are some of the specific strategies, techniques, procedures, or best practices that you've initiated in your role, in an effort to close the achievement gap?</p>	<p>-Staff development and not that mamsy pamsy stuff but I, you know I always giggle when people say you know (in a small voice) it's really about poverty so we should study Ruby Payne. No Ruby Payne's cute little anecdotes do not cut it in our situation. I said there meaningless to us, I said this is about race not about poverty. -It's not because White kids are sliding, it's because our children of color are REEEAally moving up quickly at some schools. Those teachers have learned so much about creating culturally competent classrooms and how to reach children who uh in the past have not been included in the mainstream where true learning is.</p>	<p>-I don't know if I've brought anything new in as superintendent because the work was ongoing prior to me getting here. -I rely heavily upon our District Equity Committee, our building principals, upon all the folks we have in the buildings to uh to really be the experts and my jobs is then to support what they are doing and and provide as much resources and as much support as I possibly can. -To continue to communicate the message and to continue to um to make sure people understand we are going to serve all kids, regardless of any of the different ways we can slice our data. -Developing that capacity within our own district so that we don't always have to rely on the outside external consultants.</p>	<p>-The best practice, you won't believe this, is to get principals who understand instruction. -Then number 2 who are not afraid of developing relationships with kids. -Number 3, understand the need to make their staff go to the next level. -Um you may not be aware of this but I evaluated seventy-two teachers last year. I do that every year; I am then considered an expert in instruction. -If you are in needs of improvement that means you are sub par to me. Why should my, why should our kids have a sub par teacher?</p>

Figure 5. Open coding charge for question 5.

Question 6	Dr. Friedman	Dr. May	Dr. Cole
What do you consider are the best practices you have identified or adhered to when attempting to close or narrow the achievement gap?	-All right, culturally competent classrooms where children of color or of ethnicity other than White mainstream, can look around and feel...I belong here. -I have a teacher who builds a relationship with me and my family seeks to learn and understand who I am. That's all part of a culturally competent classroom.	-I always believe and will always believe our very best proactive approach for closing the achievement gap is making a connection with children. -Once we develop that relationship once we once we build upon and a child feels safe and secure and and there's that level of respect then we've got them.	-It's like how many years does a kid have to suffer because you as an adult want to adorn a program or a certain best practice. If you have three years of data and your kids still aren't achieving at the level you want, stop that foolishness and revamp. -I need my kids to have a ...more structure, so we structure our classes really different now and uh as a result we start seeing achievement just choo choo choo (raises hands as if rising) you know.

Figure 6. Open coding chart for question 6.

The next set of questions were initially written as probing questions, in case there was a need to delve deeper into each participants' responses. As Cole (2010) reported, hermeneutic interviewing is truly grounded and based on the form of conversational dialogue. As a result of the interviewing process and openness of each respondent, the interviews went extremely well. All three participants were very easy to talk with and their passion for the topic was quite obvious; I decided to continue the conversation and

asked all three participants the additional questions, which were intentionally set aside to ask, in case it was difficult getting participants to respond.

Question	Dr. Friedman	Dr. May	Dr. Cole
What plans do you have in terms of closing the achievement gap, and what research have you used or done that supports the future plans of your district?	<p>-I am looking at restorative justice. Uh, I think their on the right track academically.</p> <p>-But guess what happened when we disaggregated that data. Same thing. 80% African American being suspended, you know 12% Hispanic, 8% White. Really? So, even though we're better about keeping kids in school we still don't understand how to help children uh belong, learn, and behave um through a sense of trust and understanding.</p> <p>-There are elements within restorative justice that I think we need to consider very carefully and can we get them embedded in what we are trying to do to uh eliminate disproportionality.</p>	<p>-I go back to my role in the corporation; I rely heavily on on the experts who we have, to be the experts on on closing that achievement gap.</p> <p>-The plans are to continue to try to build capacity within are staff to help build that level of our understanding.</p> <p>-We've made a push over the last three years and will continue to make a push to hire staff that are more reflective of our children.</p> <p>-It's been a struggle for us to find minority teachers um and find good quality minority candidates for other positions.</p>	No clear response

Figure 7. Open coding charge for probing question 7.

Question	Dr. Friedman	Dr. May	Dr. Cole
How do you go about allocating resources that aid in your priority/vision of closing the achievement gap?	<p>-Um, I do uh differential staffing. My schools of low achievement poverty high Title markers, uh they better staffing (with a laugh) more teachers more support staff.</p> <p>-I try to put my best leaders in the school that...(laughing) where I think they can make a difference.</p> <p>-I would say differentiated staffing is one uh is one way that I deliberately address uh our diversity.</p>	<p>-Delicately. Uh as we try to uh, as we've cut the budget by 11.5 million dollars what we've tried very hard to do is not negatively impact those programs that we've found to be successful for our children.</p> <p>-We've tried to change as many external things as we can so don't take away that important funding that happens in the classroom that that will help our teachers to be able to meet the needs of all children.</p>	<p>-Our people have everything they need and all they have to do is ask. I have not laid off a teacher; our teachers get raises every year.</p> <p>-Uh if you look at my facilities, they are top of the line.</p>

Figure 8. Open coding chart for probing question 8.

Question	Dr. Friedman	Dr. May	Dr. Cole
Does staffing play a role in the corporations' priority of closing the gap?	<p>- Well I'm so glad you asked that question. When I came here I'm not now I'm seeing all these White teachers. I said now what a minute, I know beautiful black people go to college, they get educational degrees so why are they not here, why am I not seeing them.</p> <p>-Now, I'm just telling you and now we are rich in our diversity, we have so many principals of color, leaders, all of our leadership roles um and it's exciting for me to see.</p>	<p>*This question had been previously answered in Figure 7, so it was not asked.</p> <p>-The plans are to continue to try to build capacity within are staff to help build that level of our understanding.</p> <p>-We've made a push over the last three years and will continue to make a push to hire staff that are more reflective of our children.</p> <p>-It's been a struggle for us to find minority teachers um and find good quality minority candidates for other positions.</p>	<p>-We have full time principals, full time assistant principals. I have counselors at the elementary. I have instructional uh coaches, Title I teachers, all of those are in all of our buildings at the elementary so there's nothing that they need that they can not have what they need. I don't give wants I only give needs; that's the difference and uh they have everything.</p>

Figure 9. Open coding chart for probing question 9.



Question	Dr. Friedman	Dr. May	Dr. Cole
How do you ensure effective implementation of best practices across the district?	<p>- That's the hardest question. No...the hardest thing to do as a superintendent. Um we know what needs to be done, we tell our principals, we stop and visit buildings, and we make comments to our principals.</p> <p>-So, you always keep it out there on the point but sadly that that intentional work and the fidelity of it, that lies with the principal; they're the ones that live and breathe in that building every day.</p>	<p>- Uh, I think again you have to have your evaluators, your administrators, your instructional coaches, your folks across the district, they have to know what to look for, they have to know what those best practices that we are implementing um and they have to hold people accountability for them and so it has to be systematic.</p> <p>-I have to live it uh if people are going to if people are going to also implement the culture, believe in the culture across the district then I have to be the one, then I have to be the champion for that cause.</p>	<p>-I run my own leadership academy here.</p> <p>-Our leadership meetings are more of a professional development for them uh I do all of mine. I do all of mine. I do all of my retreats myself and I conduct them. I do that because I try to uh , you have to lead by example.</p> <p>-Servant leadership – putting your personal leadership down. It's about serving the people.</p> <p>-We should never feel comfortable to put things in place that are not working, so I constantly reevaluate and data, so when somebody tells me these are effective, I say, 'Show me the data.'</p>

Figure 10. Open coding chart for probing question 10.

Question	Dr. Friedman	Dr. May	Dr. Cole
<p>What role does communication play in closing the achievement gap (internal and external; formal and informal; media)?</p>	<p>-When I came here and our White parents, in particular, our affluent White parents started hearing me talk about excellent and excellence for all children and we have to help all of our children be highly successful, um people always believe if you want to help everybody it's going to take something away from what you have.</p> <p>-The media and this is where I get very very disturbed about how and and it's not their fault per say but his emphasis on accountability and test scores, it's also misused.</p> <p>-This is not an educational issue. This is a social issue.</p>	<p>- It does. I believe it does, um, and I'll go back to a lot of the communications that come from our offices and from our schools.</p> <p>-That can be as simple as the pictures that we put in our newsletters that we schedule um and that we offer and you know we need to be mindful of and uh the services and really the services that we provide.</p> <p>-I've always believed that words are cheap, you've got to show people...you can't develop a relationship with every single parent and community member in the in the district because you just don't have those interactions all the time BUT where possible you need to show people where where your heart is. You can't fool people for very long.</p>	<p>-Presentations out in other states.</p> <p>-Typically, I am the quietest one.</p> <p>-How to be a servant leader, how to uh learn to listen and not react. You don't have to give a response. My famous words are. . . . Okay I hear you, let me get back with you on that, because I want to think through the process or if there is a teach who needs your help, you don't say, I'm busy. You stop what you are doing and you help that teacher or that parent. I said, "That's where you survive."</p>

Figure 11. Open coding charge for probing question 11.

Question	Dr. Friedman	Dr. May-	Dr. Cole
<p>What approaches have you used in an effort to close the achievement gap that you would consider successful or unsuccessful?</p>	<p>-(Successful) I think the best thing we could have done here is having a consistent instructional core that is very prescriptive, in terms of instructional strategies that are best practice.</p> <p>-I don't see pictures of people of color here. Their cute but they're not representative, and not that a picture makes a difference, but if I were a child, I'd notice. I'd notice.</p> <p>-Our instructional core that has been made systematic is a is a mechanism for us to help hold teachers accountable through making certain our children are learning.</p> <p>-I think our ongoing assessments and looking at data through our professional learning communities.</p> <p>-(Unsuccessful) Oh my gosh, I'm sure there were many things. We spent a lot of money, and we just couldn't see any real evidence that it it worked. Mostly the quote, unquote deans or behavior specialist we hired were just as quick as anybody else to say, 'Ah, he's</p>	<p>-(Successful) There successful on a smaller scale because it involves students that I've directly had an opportunity to develop a relationship with to get engaged with to kinda follow up with and um in my role, I don't have the opportunity to do that with as many children as you know as a teacher, as a principal, or somebody in the building. Um so that's probably been the most successful approach for me is that that ability to develop that relationship.</p> <p>-(Unsuccessful) Um unsuccessfully, you know discipline is never it's a short term success sometimes handing problems but you know it's not a long term success on dealing, with you know dealing with problems that we have and that's and that' snot necessarily with the achievement gap.</p> <p>-Again, it's</p>	<p>-(Successful). . . . my kids get more advantages than anybody else. . . .I put more programs in than anybody. I have an all boy school... I have an all girls program, a school within a school... we are working on 9 district committees, that's what I was working on before you came, they are going to address major areas for our district including academics of course academics, you know.</p> <p>(Unsuccessful)- . . .I had to go and revamp and make it work for our kids. Because our teachers didn't get it. First of all, you can't have independent reading, if the kid can't read yet.</p>

	<p>talking back, he needs to be suspended.’ Well, uh duh (started laughing) I could have done that you know, I hired you.</p>	<p>systematic because if you don’t address the issue of the relationship and of the connection why should they, why do they want to be in school then what what is it about school that excites them.</p>	
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Figure 12. Open coding charge for probing question 12.

Upon completion of the standard open-ended response and probing questions, I asked each participant if they were willing to share any information about their role in closing the achievement gap that was not asked during the interview.

Question	Dr. Friedman	Dr. May	Dr. Cole
<p>Is there anything that you just want to share with me that I haven’t asked that you think would be important for anyone who would read this dissertation to know about your role and the achievement gap and how it is addressed in your school district?</p>	<p>-I think if they’re (predominately White staff) in schools that have diversity they must they must not shy away from it. That’s real and it’s different, and you have to make sure everything is put in place at that school.</p>	<p>- I can just tell you on a personal level um not growing up with great diversity, because I didn’t deal with that achievement gap, and um dealing with some of the other factors that come along with it, um it’s something that I I have to be very intentional about.</p>	<p>-No additional information was shared</p>

Figure 13. Open coding chart for additional question 13.

## **Emerging Themes**

After personally transcribing the audiotapes, reading through the transcripts several times, and coding the transcriptions, themes emerged from the participants' responses. Sometimes the themes emerged within the same question, while other themes emerged throughout the interview. The following themes emerged as superintendents began to define and reflect on their role in closing the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students: communication, high expectations, hiring practices, quality professional development, and data and data interpretation. For purposes of this phenomenological study, specific quotes were used to support the themes that emerged during the interview sessions.

### **Communication**

Superintendents are responsible for leading their school districts. As a result, each participant felt a huge responsibility to serve ALL students, families, and the community by communicating the issues, concerns, or success of the achievement gap, and keeping it at the forefront of the organization. The superintendents expressed that communication had to first start with them, in order to be truly effective and establish the foundation for others to follow their lead. The following commentary provides examples of how superintendents expressed how they communicate in their role in closing the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students.

#### **Superintendent commentary on communication.**

Dr. Cole:

. . . that was not a letter to you, that was a letter to my parents. What I tend to do if something comes up that is something for my parents, I analyze, I write a

comparison, I send it out to them and ask if they have questions to please let me know I'd be glad to come and meet them in their apartment complexes or in their building.

Dr. May:

You know my role is to one make sure that we acknowledge the fact that it exist um and that it's okay to talk about it. That it's okay to acknowledge that it's a factor that we need to focus on. My my job is to make sure that I communicate that.

Dr. Friedman:

. . . I was really pleased about that until I disaggregated test scores, I said, "Ah, I said, quit patting yourself on the back. I said, "We are a White A, and a White B." I said, "Until all of our children are achieving at lofty levels, and I can't see a difference, we have a ways to go."

### **High Expectations**

The ability of teachers to create and maintain high expectations for students is critical to the success of many African American students. Two of the three superintendents shared their belief that low expectations play a role in their districts as a contributor to the achievement gap. The only way to combat low expectations is to stress the importance of maintaining high expectations.

#### **Superintendents' commentary on high expectations.**

Dr. Cole stated,

. . . They were doing much higher work, because we became Black, they assumed then that we weren't going to perform at the same level, though in their minds

they just lowered the expectations; that was the way to deal with it. Why get upset, they're just black people, you know. Now the same way I'm talking to you; I talk that way to my community, and that's how I talk to my staff, because I wanted to teach them what they were doing that they may not be, they may not be uh aware. Because it became part of their culture, and I started bringing in examples. You gotta raise the expectations for everyone. You never lower the expectations because kids start then doing uh doing what you want.

Dr. May shared,

When you look at especially our that kind of 6th through 9th grade level that adolescent period of growth ummm that really, I think a critical point in which we can reach our children and (pause) work on work at at closely that divide that gap um because I think that's the point that it's easiest to lose lose our children and um for them to become disengaged in their learning um disenfranchised with their public school or school in general, and not have that connection that helps them um to feeling schools a safe place schools a place they want to be, schools a place that is exciting to them and and a place they're respected, a place where they are valued, and um a place where they can really mean something.

Dr. Friedman said,

. . . I said the first thing we are going to do is develop an an incredible policy around equity, and I said because I need to have teeth with some things I'm going to be doing in the future and some demands and expectations that I am going to make of this faculty. I said because right now I can tell you one of our biggest problems is that we have a faculty and staff, way too many, who don't believe

children of color are bright, can be successful, and who can achieve at a high level. I said we have to change that.

### **Hiring Practices**

As superintendents reflected on their role, they took time in the interview to discuss the importance of hiring practices. Who you hire to teach African American students is just as important as the credentials he or she possesses. The staff must be able to relate to the students they serve and for at least two of three superintendents interviewed, that even included the very color of their skin.

#### **Superintendent commentary on hiring practices.**

Dr. Cole:

The best practice, you won't believe this is to get principals who understand instruction and then number two, who are not afraid of developing relationships Number three, understand the need to make their staff go to the next level. . . . Because everybody that wants to teach cannot teach all kids. That's not saying they're a bad teacher, they're just not a good teacher for minority populated school districts. Hire the very best teacher is one of the...

Dr. May:

. . . to help build that level of our understanding of all children um multiple strategies of of focusing on our children and their achievement on um we'll continue to and and we've we've made a push over the last three years and will continue to make a push over the to hire staff that are more reflective of our children uh and I say that and you look at our school board and they're all White people. . . . It's been a struggle for us to find minority teachers um and find good



quality minority candidates for other positions that we've we've had. Either they're not applying or they just haven't been the right fit for whatever reason. Um you know my cabinet is a perfect example, you've got eight White people sitting around this table, and there is no diversity on my cabinet um part of that, hopefully as positions open up we'll have that opportunity to change that, um but as it sits now we don't.

Dr. Friedman:

I do uh differential staffing. My schools of low achievement poverty, high Title Markers, uh they get better staffing (with a laugh). . . . I try to put my best leaders in that. . . (laughing) where I think they can make a difference. And I uh...I shouldn't say that anymore, that was my old habit. I've got good leaders everywhere, because I've had to ask many of them to step down. . . . When I came here I said now wait a minute, I know beautiful Black people go to college, they get educational degrees so why are they not here, why am I not seeing them. We didn't have many administrators of color and so I told the school board three to four years ago, this unacceptable, we have been very negligent in recruiting outstanding people of color to come to our district to teach our children, and I said our children of color must have like role models that they can look up to and say wow here's somebody like me and we've got too many schools where we've got one black teacher in the whole faculty, really? Every year since I've been here, the first year I think we hired 12 African American teachers we only had thirty slots that year. Last year I think it jumped up to 27. They need to see that women and men of color lead, you know.

## **Importance of Quality Professional Development**

Professional development is a critical component to teacher success. Once an educator graduates from a higher learning institution, it is the expectation of the state of Indiana that he or she either go back to school to earn additional credit hours in education or work towards 90 professional growth points, in order to meet the requirements to renew a teaching license. There has been much research done in the importance of teachers becoming “life-long learners” and participating in quality professional development or what some may call professional learning communities (PLC). As demographics change and schools are faced with more diverse populations, it has become quite evident that some higher institutions have not adequately prepared their college students to work in some school districts, particularly those who have a significant number of African American students.

### **Superintendent commentary on high quality professional development.**

Dr. Cole:

I want you to hear that what I am sharing with you is accurate information that I am in their buildings. I sit down with them for discussions. Our leadership meetings are more of a professional development for them uh I do all of mine. I do all of my retreats myself and I conduct them. I’m going to give the results of the last one (provided me with a copy of the feedback results). I do that because I try to uh, you have to lead by example. You know, so I do that to create an atmosphere to say to them at all times a superintendent should be a leader 24/7. I want to leave a legacy of great administrators that are going to keep it up, that’s my goal. Someone told me that I’ve already started that. I run my own leadership

academy here. They are amazed, they said of the quality of people that came through my program that I do myself and then a lot of times, they come in to see if they want to be administrators.

Dr. May:

I guess to know to what degree is something culturally that we are doing um I . . . I do know that as a district um we've still got far to go um in being culturally responsive in in our instructions in our practices in developing that, a culture that um um is really welcoming to all. Um and and I think that you know we're moving in that direction, but we still have far to go uh before we become a district that that we can say we're truly culturally responsive.

Dr. Friedman:

How should I put this, we are very open in our direction around being an equitable district we require our professional learning communities when they study, look at their data, it must be broken down by race. It is was funny because um some of our professional learning communities are very good at it because they have assistant principals and you know when you get a little lax and starting looking the other way things start slipping. And I said I said now how are you going to attack this differently (voice lowers) with your teachers. I said this is about race sweetheart (laughs) this is not about anything but race (voice lowers). So she trotted off with a new perspective and a new plan. (She laughs loudly). So, what I'm telling you is that we (pause) it's out there, we are nooooot (stretches out) uncomfortable about putting race on the table here. It is on the table and (pause) and our new induction for teachers is a three day training and one of those

trainings is all about cultural competent classrooms, how we look at race, how race is a factor, and how we educate children and we can't pretend it's not. There's no such thing as color blind, we see color and and I mean it's refreshing but and but as a leader I am very (stresses very) comfortable. I said they're meaningless to us, I said this is about race not about poverty. And so it was imperative to me, our people had this strong foundation of . . . Whiteness . . . uh . . . White entitlement . . . and so we actually uh had every single person in this district including bus drivers, and cooks, and custodians, trained around beyond diversity with Glenn Singleton. Now that's smarts, if you're White . . . that's smarts because all of a sudden for the first time, you have to talk about race and and be honest about what we see uh about . . . mystical grass repeating itself over and over again so the whole racial conversation that we have been trained and retrained and updated. It is part of our BIG staff development effort here, because to me we are not going to be a successful district, we cannot claim success. . . . Those teachers have learned so much about creating culturally competent classrooms and how to reach children who uh in the past have not been included in the mainstream where truly learning is really happening.

### **Data and Data Interpretation**

No one can argue the importance of looking at data and being able to interpret what the data are saying when it comes to ISTEP+. As each superintendent shared their views regarding data, it was interesting to note that all three superintendents believed analyzing data is very important in their role of closing the achievement gap, and the way each participant analyzes data is very unique.

**Superintendent commentary on data and data interpretation.** Dr. Cole:

This numeral that they use, is that they assume because we are African American we're all the same and I and I've had to teach my people out here a cultural thing. African Americans are as different as Whites. All Whites are not the same, why would you assume that all African Americans are the same. So what they tend to do are they come up with research and say oh this program works. Then you ask them what was the cohort group that you used to base that off, they never can tell you, they just talk about research. So as we started digging into it a little deeper, I found that in many cases a lot of the research they were referencing, that they never used cohort groups like my kids. It wasn't a predominately African American population. Now I want you to go back and look at our ISTEP scores compared to everyone else's ISTEP scores, now if you don't have it, you need to go and look at it, because one of the things you're going to see is which school districts ISTEP scores are constantly going up every year, and we go up 3% every year and 3% is the standard deviation which is significant.

. . . Because we show increases and my black population is increasing. . . . And when did they up the standards when the African American achievement started going up. That's when they . . . that's documented if you go and do your research on it. So uh, I've been studying this for awhile and I know it's unfair, but that's the way it is. We're in a society that's really unfair to our Blacks kids, you know. Um, so what I've done to what extent, I am trying to raise the achievement of every kid period and and the gap for me, is my comparison to the state. I compare my Black kids to the state average of Black kids not to White kids because that's

apples to apples. Black kids to Black kids and you'll see that's what we've done in my uh right here that report here (he points to the report given to me). I think we also provided data on that. That's what you want to do when you start looking at uh your performance when you are a minority majority school district like we are. They should start looking at how our Black students are comparing to Black students throughout the state average. And we are kicking butt. We are well above the state average for Black performance and national by the way, so we've got that information in there. Uh, we are never going to be 90% uh ISTEP passing for my Black kids. Babies come in and they don't even know their names, you know some of them, we've got to get them at a different level (little chuckle). But I think we are doing a heck of a job with what we do have in place for them. The reading program is horrible, here is the data that shows it. Your reading program, and so you know, when you talk about the characteristics of change, it's like how many years does a kids have to suffer because you as an adult want to adorn a program, or a certain best practice. If you have three years of data and your kids still aren't achieving at the level you want, stop that foolishness and revamp. Three years is all you need to know, it's five years they say, but you should start seeing it in three, really you should, because if you don't, you've got five years of kids failing and why do they have to fail because of some adults thinking. We should never feel comfortable to put things in place that are not working, so I constantly reevaluate data, so when somebody tells me these are effective, I say, "Show me the data." Um what we do here, I keep data. I review data constantly.

Dr. May:

I think it's important that we continue to remember that each one of our children are different that their individuals and that they each have different needs, needs that we need to focus on, that being said um I do think it's important that we realize and we do look at the cohorts to and determine if we have a significant gap in achievement and should also clarify that I think we are talking about achievement based on standardized tests so which is a whole number topical study that we can do on whether or not that's a true measure of achievement but uh at any rate if we are using that as our measure then I do think it's important to look at that data set to know if there is a particular um growth of children that have like characteristics that we are not meeting the needs of uh and that will at least generate the conversation of as to why, um which may help us drill down as to how to educate that child and more individuals. We have found some success when it comes to graduation rates with our different minority . . . all of our populations ummm and and in closing that achievement gap and so what that would indicate to me is that while we tend to do more of a traditional ummm one-size-fits-all type of a model at the elementary and and middle school levels, of of our instruction, umm I think we have set up the high school, 9-12 in a way that allows us to provide some different pathways. And that conversely had led to us percentage wise having a higher percentage of our African American students graduating than our our White students and I think that um is a wonderful thing a wonderful thing for our our school district. And I think when you look at it

systematically we want them to be successful at the end of their high school career, which is a high school diploma.

Dr. Friedman:

. . . I mean she had all this data. And I looked at her and said you know (pause) it really disturbs me and I'm going to have to bring this to your attention. And I said what is missing here is disaggregation by race. I said but you know what, I said you don't have to disaggregate by race in this case, not that I'm being stereotypical but this list of names is primarily African American. Oh last year everybody was all happy happy, happy, happy as that crazy duck dynasty guy says, um because one of our junior highs, and I am proud, one of our middle schools was an A, well, an urban middle school, really that's great. Our two high schools were a B, the second middle school was a B, and I was really pleased about that until I disaggregated test scores (last three words said with a little bit of laughter), I said, Ah I said quit patting yourself on the back, I said we are a White A, a White B, I said until all of our children are achieving at lofty levels and I can't see a difference we have a ways to go. I am proud to report to you that the racial achievement gap in End of Course Assessments in mathematics has disappeared. Our children of color are performing as high as our White children. Um we're still seeing disparity in language arts uh but not, I mean its closing its closing rapidly and it's not because White kids are sliding, it's because our children of color are REEEAlly moving up quickly.



## **Assertions**

All of the above stated themes derived from the phenomenological study were informative in that each theme and superintendents' commentary provided current superintendents and aspiring superintendents insight into what a superintendent's role is and is to be if he or she is to ever close or attempt to close the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students. The themes are interrelated because each theme is closely connected as each superintendent performed in his or her role in their perspective school districts. A total of five themes were drawn from the research and through more analysis and careful study of the qualitative data, assertions have been derived and noted as the most relevant and key pieces of data for current and aspiring superintendents seeking to close the achievement gap.

**Assertion #1.** Communication is critical in the role of the superintendent. One must first know an achievement gap exists, in order to close the gap between African American and Caucasian students.

All three superintendents felt that a major component of their role was communication. All three superintendents had very different ways of how they disseminated information to their school communities, but nonetheless, they each believed that in order to close the achievement gap, they had to be open enough to inform others that an achievement gap exists in their school districts. All of the superintendents understood clearly that communicating their school districts were experiencing an achievement gap was just the very first step.

None of the superintendents shied away from communication. In fact, all of them seemed to embrace and understand that communicating, the good as well as the not so

good, is just as important for them to do as anything else; communication of the achievement gap is simply part of a superintendent's role. Dr. Cole had no issue with expressing how it communicates,

. . . because we became Black, they assumed then that we weren't going to perform at the same level. Why get upset, their just black people, you know. Now the same way I'm talking to you, I talk that way to my community, and that's how I talk to my staff.

Dr. May came right out and defined communication in his role,

You know my role is to, one make sure that we acknowledge the fact that it exist um that it's okay to talk about it. That it's okay to acknowledge that it's a factor that we need to focus on. My my job is to make sure that I communicate that.

Dr. Friedman says, "If I am not openly vocal about this issue, people can pretend it's not important and so I am the first person at the table who brings up the issue of race as we look at data." Each superintendent had their own way of how they communicate and in what manner and style; however, the fact remains that a superintendent has to keep all stakeholders informed of the status of student groups.

The importance of communication is not new to superintendents and research clearly explains that not only is communication the first step, but sometimes the most important step. In a study where researchers interviewed school board members, superintendents, and school staff, who had experienced both high and low achievement on standardized test scores, board members had actually reported in those schools that had consecutively experienced three years of low achievement felt, "the superintendent owns information, and indicated it was the superintendent's responsibility to learn,

interpret information and recommend solutions to problems”(The Iowa Association of School Boards, 2000). Where problems or issues need attention, the school boards in this study believed it is the superintendent’s role to communicate those needs and offer guidance as to how these issues should be addressed. It is the expectation of any school board that superintendents communicate failing schools along with an explanation as to why and how the district plans on fixing the issue. Communication is a part of the superintendent’s role.

Superintendents cannot afford to shy away from the fact that an achievement gap exists. In another research study where researchers examined how central office staff builds trust with school sites, it became obvious that even when an achievement gap exists, school administrators still want to know what is happening with students and potential plans. An administrator who was interviewed stated during his interview, “I think even if it’s communication and acknowledgement that the demographics have changed, and that they don’t know what they’re doing to help the kids we have in or district...it’s not a shift that anybody really talks about” (Chhuon, 2008, p. 245). The key is people desire and need communication. The more transparent a school superintendent can be about the achievement gap, the chances are he or she will have a greater chance of not only building trust amongst stakeholders, but he or she may also gain insight on how to address the gap between African American and Caucasian students.

**Assertion #2: Superintendents must own the data of their African American students.** Superintendents are the leaders of their school districts. There is no doubt that all three superintendents interviewed have a lot of power and respect both at their local and community levels. With the power and respect given to their position, one could

easily infer during their interviews that the role of the superintendent must not just be about communicating the achievement gap, but also owning the data that constitutes the gap. Each superintendent took ownership over their district data and talked specifically about the importance of trusting and relying on others in the school district to take the necessary steps in an effort to close the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students. Dr. Cole shared specifically how he owns his data, “I am trying to raise the achievement of every kid period and the gap for me, is my comparison to the state. I compare my Black kids to the state average of Black kids not to White kids . . . .” Dr. Cole trusts and relies on his principals to make the necessary changes to close the gap in each of their respective buildings. He stated, “. . .get principals who understand instruction, and then number two, who are not afraid of developing relationships with kids, number three understand the need to make their staff go to the next level.” Dr. May insisted,

to continue to um to make sure people understand we are going to serve all kids um regardless of any of the different ways we can slice our data, we are going to find a way to connect with our children.

Dr. May suggested that making sure people understand how he feels all had to do with, “the right people in the right places that can keep it as a priority.” Dr. Friedman proclaims, “I believe that these are some underlining factors um for lack of success, but (Dr. Friedman stresses the word ‘but’ during the interview) that is not an excuse. Even though we are getting the child a little late in their early development . . . five years old is a little late, but we can work miracles if we care to.” The superintendents interviewed are not the only superintendents who understand the importance and need to own the data of

African American students. Superintendent Mike Grego, Pinellas County, Florida, immediately began his position with a desire to address what some had considered a consistent issue in the school system. Superintendent Grego stated, “The focus will be on closely tracking student data and repeatedly asking, “How are our African American students doing” (Fitzpatrick, 2013)? The question being asked is one both current or aspiring superintendents must ask anytime the opportunity presents itself to analyze data. In a summary report written by a research team, researchers surveyed both California superintendents and principals. Superintendents were surveyed through interviews and principals responded to open-ended questions; 20 superintendents had an opportunity to give feedback on what they considered to be the most effective strategies for improving schools. The number one strategy cited as the most effective by nine superintendents and mentioned by 19 were data and assessment (EdSource, 2006). Superintendents realize analyzing data and asking key questions regarding African American achievement has to be a part of their role, in order to help others understand the importance and to increase levels of accountability. When superintendents begin to ask specific questions about data and how certain groups are performing, in comparison to others, people pay attention.

**Assertion #3: The superintendent must stress the importance of maintaining high expectations for all students, specifically African Americans.** There is no doubt that high expectations are critical to the success of all students. When faced with an achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students, maintaining high expectations are not only critical in closing the achievement gap, but they are essential to the school and district environment. During each of the interviews, none of the superintendents shied away from the idea that they felt many of their staff members had

lowered or may be lowering their expectations for their African American population. As a result, each of them deemed it necessary to express their thoughts about their role in stressing the crucial importance of teachers maintaining high expectations for African American students, in order to contribute to their success in the educational system.

The three superintendents spent a considerable amount of time discussing their feelings and how they tackle low expectations in their districts. Dr. Cole was very passionate when he stated,

You never lower the expectations because kids start then uh doing what you want. And that then if it's lower, this is my level of performance, you're happy, I'm happy. Keep your expectations up here and make the kids start jumping. Because we kept getting complaints at the beginning, this is too difficult, the kids can't do it. Yes, they can. If you are teaching correctly and you believe they can do it, they can do it."

Dr. May reported, "...build that level of our understanding of all children um multiple strategies of of focusing on our children and their achievement." Dr. Friedman continued,

Well, you know these children, they come from these homes and they uh...they love them to stupidity. As I say, ya'll have to quit loving them to stupidity. You have to say, Oh no no no no no child, you are going to learn this, you have to be very insistent that these children will achieve. Oh, well you know, mama's a junky and daddy's in jail and grandpa and grandma were murdered. I said Mmmhmm that doesn't work for me. I said you have to insist that these children will learn and I don't care what their background is, and I said you can't carry it. You have to care about teaching them.

Working with others to maintain high expectations for African American students must be embedded in the role of the superintendent. Although the superintendents interviewed understood there may be other key factors that contribute to the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students, they each understand their role is imperative in helping teachers and administrators get passed the excuses and inadvertent bigotry. A Stanford University psychologist conducted several studies that revealed a condition known as the “stereotype threat.” This condition determined negative stereotypes of African Americans abilities to perform at proficient levels of standardized assessments resulted in actual poor performance on standardized test (Rothman, 2001/02). Because low expectations were expected of African American students, performance was low, thus feeding into what so many have referred to over time as “a self-fulfilling prophecy.” If these studies have shown us that African American students will perform as expected, then the reverse of having high expectations must also be true. In an article that explores the role of district and school leaders, an assistant superintendent stresses the importance of modeling and maintaining expectations, communication, and keeping at the forefront the importance of raising the bar for all students by having high expectations (Rorrer & Skrla, 2005). Superintendents must be intentional and stress the importance of having and maintaining high expectations for all African American students while being relentless in their efforts to ensure this happens. Results from a study in which interviews and site visits were conducted with four superintendents who were able to narrow the gap demonstrated that when minority students were placed in more challenging courses and provided with support, the achievement gap narrowed (Simons & Friedman, 2008). Superintendents must be

diligent in their role in helping others understand that in order to close the achievement gap we have to expect more of our African American students and believe they can achieve at much higher levels.

### **Summary**

At the conclusion of all three interviews and the analysis of the data through open coding, this qualitative study revealed that superintendents do have a role in closing the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students. The three superintendents interviewed: Dr. David Cole, Dr. Carolyn Friedman, and Dr. Zachary May were interviewed to share their lived experiences through their perspectives. The conversational dialogue that occurred during the interviews allowed the participants to be open and honest about who they are and how they have come to understand their role in closing the achievement gap. I attempted to reveal these perspectives through the language quoted throughout this chapter. After the necessary research steps were taken by reading a plethora of reading material, interviewing the participants, transcribing the audiotapes, and analyzing the transcription through coding, five themes emerged from the data. The five themes were as follows: communication, high expectations, hiring practices, quality professional development, and data and data interpretation. The commentary of the three superintendents and the frequency to which they provided insight of their role allowed for clear development of the five themes.

Three assertions were also developed in the further analysis of this study. The assertions were as follows:



1. Communication is critical in the role of the superintendent. One must first know an achievement gap exist, in order to close the gap between African American and Caucasian students.
2. Superintendents must own the data of their African American students.
3. The superintendent must stress the importance of maintaining high expectations for all students, specifically African Americans.

The superintendents' commentaries are in direct correlation to both research and their individual responses. Further exploration of this study, including recommendations for future research and the research questions will be discussed in Chapter 5.

## CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter focuses on the overall implications of this study, including the research questions examined, the limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research pertinent to the achievement gap and specifically the role superintendents' play in closing the gap between African American and Caucasian students. One of the unique aspects of this hermeneutics phenomenological study was the voice of the superintendents when explaining their role in closing the achievement gap. Each superintendent brought his or her own perspective into how they view the gap and how they operate in their respective school districts. Although the study looks at some key data points, the primary focus of the study is the voice of the superintendents, in an effort to assist both current and aspiring superintendents in their role. As five core themes emerged and three assertions derived from the study, each theme and assertion is directly intertwined. The awareness that communication, high expectations, hiring practices, quality professional development, and data and data interpretation are essential components of a superintendents' role, comes as no surprise then that all three assertions really encompass all of the themes. In addition, each assertion is grounded in research and commentary of the superintendents interviewed. The superintendent is expected to be the leader of his or her school district. As a result of that leadership, there are principles each superintendent must enact in order to get closer to achieving their goals

and the goals of the school district. Closing the achievement gap is not a new issue in our school systems; however, it is an issue that remains a challenge for many districts. This study will hopefully assist those existing and aspiring leaders to put indicators in place that will assist in closing the gap.

The following research questions were used as the foundational premises to direct these study:

1. How do superintendents understand their role in closing the achievement gap?
2. What institutional factors or actions are being undertaken related to the school district and/or leadership lead to a narrowing of the achievement gap?
3. What data do superintendents examine in understanding the achievement gap?  
Is ISTEP the only key factor when examining data or are other measures used?
4. How much influence do superintendents believe they have in closing the achievement gap?
5. How important is it for superintendents to communicate about the about the nature and degree of the narrowing or success in closing the achievement gap with all stakeholders' teachers, parents, students, and the community? How is information communicated?
6. What is the leadership role of a superintendent in his or her district when closing the gap?

Priority/Vision

Planning/Researching

Directing/Staffing/Implementing

Allocating Resources

Assessing Results

This qualitative research lent itself to addressing these six research questions related to the study.

### **Discussion of the Findings**

Research Question #1. How do superintendents understand their role in closing the achievement gap? The superintendents interviewed appeared to have a clear understanding of their role in closing the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students. Each superintendent understood his or her primary role as the one who communicates the importance of the gap and the reasoning behind why the gap needs to be addressed. The superintendents interviewed understood the power of influence in their role and their ability to hold others accountable like no other position held in a school district. A superintendent is the most important person hired in a district and with that title comes great responsibility; responsibility that not only lies within the individual but a responsibility to ensure key people are entrusted with responsibilities and relied upon to assist in executing the vision of closing the gap. Each superintendent is aware that one person, no matter what the title of the individual, cannot address an issue this big alone. In some cases the next individual(s) to assist in executing the communicated vision was the assistant superintendent(s), and in other cases, it was the building administrators, nonetheless, each of them understands that if they do not communicate the importance of the issue, nothing will come of the efforts to close the achievement gap. In addition to communication, as the primary vehicle of their role, the superintendents expressed in their commentaries the understanding of their role by their

ability to impact the following: high expectations, hiring practices, quality professional development, and data and data interpretation. Although superintendents may not be directly responsible for these areas, superintendents are responsible for communicating the achievement gap to the individuals who oversee these areas and their understanding of how their role impacts the closure of the gap.

Research Question #2. What institutional factors or actions are being undertaken related to the school district and/or leadership lead to a narrowing of the achievement gap? Interestingly, the superintendents interviewed expressed different beliefs as to how they were narrowing the gap between African American and Caucasian students, in which some ways were not at all related to their junior high ISTEP + data. Instead, the superintendents expressed narrowing the gap in comparison to how each one of them chose to analyze and interpret their school corporations' data. One superintendent looked at the data of their African American students in comparison to other African American students. He was not concerned about how his Black students fared against their Caucasian peers because of his personal belief of Black students' participation in a biased assessment. Another superintendent did not appear to be able to speak specifically about ISTEP+ data but chose to focus on the graduation rates of his students and was proud to state that his African American male students were graduating at higher rates than the Caucasian male students in his school district. The third superintendent professed the gap had closed in her school district and contributed that closure to her clear focus on equity for students.

The institutional factors contributing to closing the gap are based on the superintendents' perception of the gap being narrowed or closed and had a lot to do with

the emphasis on hiring practices, high expectations of students, and best practices. Each superintendent spoke about the importance of hiring the right educators to teach students in classrooms and the right administrators to lead their respective buildings.

Superintendents felt it was imperative to hire African American educators in an effort to have educated, positive role models for African American students. Although superintendents did not report having a personnel quota, each of them reported some form of intentionality when filling positions in their districts. Most importantly, superintendents understood hiring African American educators was only one factor that may contribute to narrowing or closing the gap; all educators, regardless of color, had to have high expectations of students. School administrators also had to have high expectations of teachers to ensure they, too, had expectations of students by believing African American students can achieve at high academic levels. High expectations in the classroom can be contributed to the type of instruction provided to African American students, which have been termed culturally competent and culturally responsive classrooms.

Building positive relationships is also important for current and aspiring superintendents to undertake in their school districts. These relationships are not limited to any particular group and are inclusive of the many groups represented in school districts: superintendents and community members, superintendents and administrators, administrators and teachers, and teachers and students. Superintendents must have the ability to communicate the achievement gap to all groups who have a vested interest in student success. Honest communication can only occur when trusted relationships have been established and become a part of a school corporations' culture. An institutional

factor that focuses on the importance of building relationships not only to understand the gap but also to motivate others to assist in narrowing the gap, and then ultimately impact students who only contribute academic success to a relationship they had with an educator.

Superintendents believed in accountability of administrators who were hired and charged with assisting in narrowing or closing the gap, and teachers who are ultimately responsible in ensuring high academic achievement for African American students. Current and aspiring superintendents must understand that when truly focused on the achievement gap, there has to be some level of accountability involved in ensuring the gap is being narrowed.

Research Question #3. What data do superintendents' examine in understanding the achievement gap? Is ISTEP the only key factor when examining data or are other measures used? The superintendents interviewed discussed several data points they examined when attempting to understand the achievement gap and how it existed in their respective school districts. None of the superintendents strictly focus on ISTEP+ as their main data source. Instead, the superintendents mentioned several different types of data they took into account, as well as the many different ways they looked at data when examining the achievement of African American students in comparison to their Caucasian peers.

The different types of data mentioned during the interviews were as follows: ISTEP+, discipline, graduation rates, End of Course Assessments, and IREAD. Each superintendent was made aware of the focus of ISTEP+ for purposes of this study; however, they each mentioned at least one other source of data they analyzed in order to

get a grasp as to how they were managing closure of the achievement gap. In addition to the discussion of what data are analyzed, it became evident when discussing the gap, there are several ways to examine the data. Superintendents discussed the difference between analyzing a cohort of students, in comparison to looking at the same grade levels of students' year after year and attempting to compare two different types of students.

Superintendents obviously disaggregated data by race to some extent. One superintendent discussed looking specifically at his school graduation rates and being able to compare the rate of not only his Caucasian students to his African American students but he mentioned specifically the rate of his male students. Another superintendent discussed IREAD data and made mention although the scores of the students and the districts grade, as a whole were fairly good, whenever she looked at data, her Black and Brown students were consistently the bottom performers.

Superintendents disaggregate data in many ways and analyzing data by ethnicity is only just one way they choose to look at data. Each superintendent spoke about the outside factors that influence the gap between African American and Caucasian students.

The factors mentioned by the superintendents were directly related to environmental and social issues tied directly to poverty. Ladd stated, "The gap between poor and advantaged students is greatest, she found, where income inequality is greatest (Ravitch, 2013, p. 98).

Superintendents spent a considerable amount of time talking about the achievement gap in relation to where they feel the achievement gap begins with African American students in comparison to the Caucasian students. According to at least two of the three superintendents, the achievement gap remains an issue once students begin



school because of the low expectations some educators have for African American students. The thoughts from the three superintendents interviewed is that the gap exists because many African American students begin their school careers already behind their Caucasian peers or many of their middle class classmates; when poverty is added to any ethnic group, the data take another dynamic. Darling-Hammond (2010) had already given her readers the “less likely’s” of children in poverty, when she discussed the many limited opportunities students have before they enter kindergarten. When keeping this in our background, the state of Indiana does not require kindergarten and students do not have to start school until the age of seven. Darling-Hammond reported that, “By first grade, only half as many first graders from poor families are proficient at understanding words, in context and engaging in basic mathematics as first graders from nonpoor families” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 33). No one can deny that poverty is a factor to achievement; it serves as another data source when analyzing who is achieving and who is not.

It is imperative for current and aspiring students to look at multiple forms of data in many different ways when engaging in conversations about the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students. Superintendents must not just be aware of the gap in different data sets but one must also have an idea or theory on how the gap first emerges in the school district, in order to effectively combat the gap.

Research Question #4. How much influence do superintendents believe they have in closing the achievement gap? Superintendents believe they have an enormous amount of influence on how others in their school district perceive and react to the achievement gap. The superintendents interviewed understand that not much in their school districts

happen unless they first communicate a gap exist in their school district and then hold others accountable to help fulfill the district's vision, mission, and/or goals surrounding the gap that exists.

Research Question #5. How important is it for superintendents to communicate about the nature and degree of the narrowing or success in closing the achievement gap with all stakeholders' teachers, parents, students, and the community? How is information communicated? A superintendent's ability to communicate the nature and the degree of narrowing or closing the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students are probably the most important contribution a superintendent can make in his or her role. As a leader, it is imperative for all stakeholders to have a clear understanding of the challenges and successes in the school district. There is no one better to communicate those challenges and successes than the superintendent of schools.

Parents and community members have a vested interest in the success of students who attend schools, in which they send their children and/or pay taxes. As high stakes testing results in the assignment of school and district letter grades, communication becomes even more essential as the public attempts to understand the meaning of school grades and ultimately decide if the school and/or district grade is good enough for their child(ren) or property value(s). Superintendents often have to be the ones who translate for community members and parents what laws have been passed and how these directly impact schools. Superintendents also have to be the ones to share with stakeholders what it truly means to work in a diverse school district and unique opportunities that arise when schools serve large, urban school populations. Communication can also come in a

variety of forms. Superintendents take advantage of newsletters, formal letters, school board meetings, and presentations regarding the subject specifically.

Superintendents must also be sure to communicate to all educators, both teachers and administrators, employed by the school district that an achievement gap exists and he or she must either collaborate with those individuals on ways to narrow or close the gap, or if the gap has been narrowed or closed, he or she must be intentional about sharing the success of the school district, in an effort to maintain best practices and institutional factors that can be contributed to closing the gap. School leaders and teachers are the essential driving force in carrying the message of the achievement gap and the priority it must take in each respective school. Communication to educators can also come in many different variety forms. Superintendents most often will communicate the nature and degree of the achievement gap directly to the building administrators whose data communicates a need to address the gap or the success of narrowing or closing the gap. The administrator will then directly communicate the directive or vision of the superintendent to his or her building staff. One superintendent spoke directly about being an instructional leader and evaluating over seventy teachers in the past year. The other two superintendents would communicate to building administrators and trust that building administrators would convey the necessary message.

African American students were not discussed as stakeholders who were clearly communicated with in terms of the nature or degree of the achievement gap. Students were mentioned throughout the interviews and it is obvious superintendents must feel very passionate about not only their African American students but all of their students. However, closing the achievement gap and narrowing the gap appeared to be up to the

adults to decide on what would work best. There was no mention of any students being informed of the nature or degree of the achievement gap between the African American and Caucasian students, or any ideas or suggestions students could offer to adults to narrow or close the gap.

Research Question #6: What is the leadership role of a superintendent in his or her district when closing the gap? The leadership role of the superintendent when expressing the need to close the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students encompasses the following: the ability to communicate an achievement gap exist in the district between the two ethnicities, to analyze data that he or she deems meaningful and relevant as determined by that particular school district, to interpret data in a way that gets at the deeper issues of the gap, to communicate the importance of maintaining high expectations for all students, regardless of their background or color, and to hire people, both teachers and administrators, who are effective are in working with students of color.

All three of the superintendents agreed.

Priority/Vision – Superintendents must first acknowledge an achievement gap exists between African American and Caucasian students and establish a clear vision that articulates the importance of closing the achievement gap and certifies it as a priority.

Planning/Researching – Superintendents must create an intentional plan that combats the achievement gap. They should surround themselves with individuals who are capable of carrying out the vision and understand the importance of collaboration.

Plans should be research based and yet allow superintendents and educators enough

flexibility that when programs do not narrow or close the gap, educators are courageous enough to make the necessary changes.

Directing/Staffing/Implementing – Superintendents are intentional about hiring African American educators to serve as positive role models. Since they themselves do not hire staff, they direct their personnel offices to be intentional about recruiting African American educators. There is no guarantee or research that supports African American educators are better suited in educating African Americans; therefore, superintendents are compelled to look beyond color for educators and ultimately attempt to find teachers and administrators who have high expectations for African American students. Staffing is important for school districts because the right person has to be teaching students, and the right administrator has to be leading the school.

Allocating Resources – When asked about allocating resources, all three superintendents associated resources with staff and were very focused on the people in their districts. In addition, each superintendent was intentional when speaking about staff and talked specifically about their own individuals' successes or challenges with staff. For example, one superintendent spoke about not laying off teachers and being able to provide monetary raises each year to his staff. Another superintendent talked specifically about “differentiated” staffing and looking at the needs of each of her individual schools. Another superintendent spoke about the ability to retain staffing and save successful programs.

Staffing is obviously a priority in the role of the superintendent. In order to be effective in closing the achievement gap, appropriate staff must be allocated. Teachers were not the only staffing allocation superintendents considered important when

attempting to close the achievement gap. Superintendents discussed staffing buildings with principals, assistant principals, support staff, instructional coaches, counselors, and Title I teachers. Two superintendents spoke about allocating Title I funds to assist in staffing needs.

During the interview, each superintendent immediately equated allocating resources to allocating staff. In an effort to meet the needs of students, superintendents spoke about staffing as a priority in closing the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students. Superintendents do not view the term staffing as synonymous to the word teachers. Instead, superintendents speak about staffing in terms of those who are able to assist in meeting the needs of students.

Assessing Results – Superintendents assess results in many different ways. Although the study focused on ISTEP+, superintendents take advantage of analyzing multiple forms of data comparing African American and Caucasian students, as well as individual growth of students. Superintendents examine standardized testing, attendance, discipline, and graduation rates of students in their respective school districts. Ethnicity is not the only factor that is examined when looking at the achievement gap and comparing African American students to their Caucasian peers. Ethnicity is just one of many ways data are broken down and assessed; superintendents assess results in diverse ways. Superintendents analyze data by gender, compare cohort groups, compare their schools data to the state's average, and compare ethnicity to ethnicity. When data are assessed, there is some form of follow up of the results with those who have a vested interest in the data. Those vested in the data include all stakeholders, such as parents, teachers, community members, administrators, but intriguing enough not students.

Superintendents acknowledge that in order to make certain the narrowing or closing of achievement gap is kept at the forefront, there must be some level of accountability for educators that occurs directly or indirectly from the superintendent's chair.

### **Recommendations**

Although the superintendent's role in closing the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students has been clearly defined, further research in this area is warranted to assist both current and aspiring superintendents who have a desire to close the achievement gap on standardized testing between African American and Caucasian students. Additional research is necessary to support the three assertions that the superintendent's role must include direct communication regarding the achievement gap, owning data of African American students, and stressing the importance of maintaining high expectations for African American students with all stakeholders, in order to close the gap between African American and Caucasian students.

Further research could include a follow up with the superintendents that would include an opportunity to observe him or her in their role. Superintendents are very capable of being able to speak eloquently in front of large groups; communication is essential to the position. However, the actions of a superintendent are just as important as what he or she says. Actions that align with what is communicated during the interview would create a direct correlation between what each superintendent says about their role and the actions taken in their school districts. Being able to make use of the interview, along with observations, and the latest ISTEP+ results of Caucasian and African American students would allow all three data sets to be triangulated to affirm the

superintendent's role in closing the achievement gap. In addition, the ability to examine the data alongside the superintendent would allow for more meaningful dialogue in terms of the superintendents' ability to interact with the numbers and multiple forms of data.

Additional studies could also include a quantitative measure that would lend itself to hearing from several superintendents. Although three superintendents were sufficient for this study, further research could include both a qualitative and quantitative measure. A survey would be ideal and provide several different perspectives of superintendents in how they perceive their role in closing the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students. One advantage to the addition of a survey is the data would allow aspiring or current superintendents to analyze which role, best practices, and/or techniques would be best suited for their personality and individual district. Because each district is unique, a superintendent has to be able to align his or her personality and character with the role he or she has to portray in order to fulfill the demands and growing needs of diverse populations.

In researching the role of the superintendent in closing the achievement gap between Caucasian and African American students, we have determined essential elements superintendents' must have as a requisite in order to make the closing of the gap a priority and a reality. Further research will disclose deeper roles of a superintendent or affirm the current roles mentioned in this study to those who aspire to be or currently serve in the role as a superintendent particularly in diverse school districts where Caucasian students are outperforming African Americans on standardized assessments.



### **Limitations**

There were some obvious limitations to this study. It was imperative that these limitations be thoroughly discussed. The ISTEP+ data used in this study was examined for only two years, Spring 2011 and Spring 2012. At the time this study was conducted in the summer of 2013, ISTEP+ results were not yet calculated by the state of Indiana, due to several technical issues that took place during the second administration of the Indiana assessment. ISTEP+ Spring 2013 results were not made official until the fall, after superintendent interviews had been complete. As a result of analyzing only two years worth of data, I was only able to see one cohort of Caucasian and one cohort of African American students move from 7th to 8th grade. The other data included in this study was the yearly data provided by the state of Indiana; however, it is difficult to focus on an ethnic group without seeing how they fare as a cohort year after year.

Another limitation to this study was determining first the school districts and then the superintendents to be selected for this study. When comparing data for three urban school districts, two of the three superintendents along with their school districts that actually participated in this study were not originally selected to participate. The idea behind this study was to find three school districts with matching demographics and superintendents who would have something meaningful to contribute. When those three school districts were found, the data for those districts were used in the proposal. However when attempting to gain participation from two of the superintendents through two electronic mails and a follow up telephone call, neither superintendent responded. When no response was given, the study had to be opened to those superintendents who were willing to participate and shed light on their roles. One superintendent, who had not

initially responded but later came forth as a willing participant in this study, had scheduled time to be interviewed. I spent over an hour waiting for the participant to show up only to no avail. When an electronic mail was sent to the superintendent, she did call me and an interview was conducted over the telephone. After careful consideration, the interview, with what would have been the fourth superintendent, was not chosen to be a part of this study. The comments felt rushed and the superintendent was not as specific in the responses, as the three prior participants of this study. A telephone interview does not lend itself as distinctively as a face-to-face interaction. The ability to elicit participants to be interviewed is important, and just as important is the quality of the interview.

The most meaningful and relevant limitation of this study is that superintendents were not able to directly correlate their ISTEP+ data with their role and their success of closing or narrowing the achievement gap between Caucasian and African American students in their individual school districts. All superintendents were made aware the questions being asked about their role, and the data piece centered on the questions was ISTEP+ at the middle school level. Although data was gathered in all of the middle schools the superintendents' oversee, it was not provided to them during their interview. Instead, superintendents discussed various forms of data and how they felt they were closing the gap, but it was not directly connected to the middle schools and their data specifically. This limited the interview and how the superintendents might have responded if the data gathered would have been sitting in front of them during the interview. The themes and assertions of this study were connected to the role of superintendent in closing the gap; however, the themes and assertions derived of this

study may have been different if superintendents had access to the ISTEP+ data during the interview. Therefore, current or aspiring superintendents cannot solely use the themes and assertions in their efforts to close the achievement gap. Instead, current or aspiring superintendents must be intentional about meeting standardized testing in both a broad and focused manner when analyzing data.

### **Conclusions**

Superintendents have several roles and responsibilities they render to the students and community they serve. As minority populations continue to grow and become more the majority in student populations in urban school districts, the achievement gap becomes more relevant in how African American students are performing in comparison to their Caucasian peers on standardized testing. With the new systems of accountability for schools, teacher evaluations that are directly tied to student performance, and teacher and administrator licensure being more relaxed, the superintendents' role becomes more paramount in the success of students. Both aspiring and current superintendents alike must have some guidance in their role when it comes to closing the achievement gap, hence they can demonstrate success with African American students in relation to their Caucasian peers.

The superintendents interviewed all have different educational backgrounds and have experienced different upbringings. However, they all shared some common experiences in their role on how they address the achievement gap in their school districts. One district is an overwhelming African American school district, while the other two school districts are both majority minority school districts. The superintendents who supervise these school districts have an awareness of the skills and

characteristics one must have to begin to tighten the division between African American and Caucasian students. Although the qualitative data provided does not mirror the results of the ISTEP+ data in this study, it does lend itself to the superintendents' role in closing the achievement gap in much more of the broader sense of standardized testing.

The superintendents' role has continued to evolve from managerial to instructional, and now the role requires quite a bit of both. The superintendent has to be clear on the vision he or she has for their school district and provide the right support and resources to ensure the vision is carried out in a way that ultimately increases student achievement. The superintendents interviewed have found success in their data and contribute that success to communication, high expectations, hiring practices, quality professional development, and the use of data and data interpretation. Although the data each of them chose to refer to during the interview may have been different, there is a connection with the actions they took and the success they spoke about when contributing their role to the closure of the gap. In addition, the ownership and responsibility each person took for their role and their data speaks to the commitment a superintendent must have for each and every student in their school district. As the role of the superintendent continues to be defined and redefined, aspiring and current superintendents must be intentional about the meeting the academic needs of various student populations they serve and ensure complete closure of the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students in order to be truly successful.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Introductory Letter

May 2013

Dear Superintendent of XXXXXXXXX School Corporation:

Greetings! My name is Denita Harris, and I am currently a doctoral student at Purdue University. I am conducting a study on *The Role of the Superintendent in Closing the Achievement Gap between African American and Caucasian Students*.

After careful review of the last two years of your corporation's junior high ISTEP scores, I would like the opportunity to sit down with you and discuss your data. In particular, I am looking to explore the efforts and/or impact you feel you have, as the corporation's superintendent, towards the achievement of your African American students in comparison to their Caucasian peers.

I would like to schedule a convenient time to sit down and interview you to discuss your role in closing the achievement gap. The interviews will last approximately 1.5 – 2 hours and should be conducted in a private location, as the interview will be audio recorded to allow for transcription of your responses.

Please know your participation in this research is strictly voluntary, and your identity and the identity of your school corporation will be kept in strict confidence. There is minimal risk to you and your school corporation.

Your participation will greatly benefit both current and aspiring superintendents, as they face many similar challenges.

Please respond to me at [Denita.Harris@wayne.k12.in.us](mailto:Denita.Harris@wayne.k12.in.us), with several dates and times you are available to participate in this interview within the next two weeks, or you may call me at (317) 716-6655, to schedule a time that is convenient for you. If I have not heard from you within 24-48 hours, please expect a follow up telephone call.

Thanks and I look forward to speaking with you.

Sincerely,

Denita Harris  
Purdue University, Graduate Student  
Ph. D. Candidate

**Appendix B: Research Participant Consent Form**

For IRB Office Use Only

**RESEARCH PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**

The Role of the Superintendent in Closing the  
Achievement Gap between African-  
American and Caucasian Students

Dr. William McInerney/Dr. Marilyn Hirth  
Purdue University  
School of Education

Purpose of Research: The purpose of this research is to closely examine the role of the superintendent in closing the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students. By examining, the superintendent's perspective on how he or she establishes strategies, techniques, and best practices into "meaningful action" that will close the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students, particularly on the ISTEP+ exam.

Specific Procedures: We will begin with the consent form, so you thoroughly understand your participation is voluntary and the risks involved in being interviewed. In an effort to minimize the risk, pseudonyms will be used in place of your name and your school corporation. I am requesting to take notes during the interview, as well audiotape the interview, beginning with gathering some of your background information. Once your permission is granted and the research participant consent form is signed, we will begin the interview, using an interview protocol. Upon completion of this interview, all notes, audiotapes, and consent forms will be kept in a locked file cabinet until successful completion of this research.

Duration of Participation: 1.5 – 2.0 hours

Risks: Based on data provided in the research, readers may be able to link you, as the superintendent, to your school corporation, as one of the superintendents being interviewed.

**Benefits:** Current or aspiring superintendents will be able to access and learn from how you, as the superintendent, in an urban school perceive your role in closing the achievement gap on standardized testing, particularly at the junior high level. In addition, current or aspiring superintendents will be able to glean strategies, techniques, and practices that aid in closing the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students, based on your responses and actions.

**Compensation:** No cost will be given to participants.

**Extra Costs to Participate:** Not Applicable

**Injury or Illness:** Not applicable

Purdue University will not provide medical treatment or financial compensation if you are injured or become ill as a result of participating in this research project. This does not waive any of your legal rights nor release any claim you might have based on negligence.

**Confidentiality:** The project's research records may be reviewed by departments at Purdue University responsible for regulatory and research oversight.

**Voluntary Nature of Participation**

You do not have to participate in this research project. If you agree to participate you can withdraw your participation at any time without penalty.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Initials

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Initials

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Contact Information:**

If you have any questions about this research project, you can contact Dr. William McInerney at (765) 494-9731 or Dr. Marilyn Hirth at (765) 494-7299. If you have concerns about the treatment of research participants, you can contact the Institutional Review Board at Purdue University, Ernest C. Young Hall, Room 1032, 155 S. Grant St., West Lafayette, IN 47907-2114. The phone number for the Board is (765) 494-5942. The email address is [irb@purdue.edu](mailto:irb@purdue.edu)

**Documentation of Informed Consent**

I have had the opportunity to read this consent form and have the research study explained.

I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the research project and my questions have been answered. I am prepared to participate in the research project described above.

I will receive a copy of this consent form after I sign it.

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Participant's Signature

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Date

---

Participant's Name

---

Researcher's Signature

---

Date



## Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Dissertation Topic: *The Role of the Superintendent in Closing the Achievement Gap between African American and Caucasian Students*  
Denita Harris, Ph.D. Candidate

### Perception

1. To what extent is the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students an issue in your school corporation?
2. What do you believe contributes to the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students?
3. Is closing the achievement gap a priority in your district, and how have you incorporated this priority into your district's vision?
4. How do you as the superintendent understand your role in narrowing or closing the achievement gap in your corporation?

### Best Practices

5. What strategies, techniques, procedures, or best practices have you initiated in your role as superintendent, in an effort to close the achievement gap?
6. What do you consider are the best practices you have identified or adhered to when attempting to close or narrow the achievement gap?

(Probing)

What plans do you have in terms of closing the achievement gap, and what research have you used or done that supports the future plans of your corporation?

How do you go about allocating resources that aid in your priority/vision of closing the achievement gap?

Does staffing play a role in corporation's priority of closing the gap?

How do you insure effective implementation of best practices across the district?

### **Communication**

What role does communication play in closing the achievement gap? (internal and external; formal and informal; media)

### **Leadership**

What approaches have you used in an effort to close the achievement gap that you would consider successful or unsuccessful?

VITA

## VITA

Denita L. Harris

## EDUCATION

- 2014                      Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana  
Ph.D. in Educational Leadership
- 2003                      Butler University, Indianapolis, Indiana  
M.S. in Educational Administration
- 1996                      Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana  
B.S. in Secondary Education, English

## PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

- 2011-Present            MSD of Wayne Township, Indianapolis, Indiana  
Curriculum Coordinator
- 2003-2011              MSD of Wayne Township, Indianapolis, Indiana  
Assistant Principal
- 2002-2003              Indianapolis Public Schools, Indianapolis, Indiana  
Literacy Instructor
- 2001-2002              Indianapolis Public Schools, Indianapolis, Indiana  
Language Arts Coach
- 1998-2001              Indianapolis Public Schools, Indianapolis, Indiana  
Secondary English Teacher
- 1996-1998              Marion County Juvenile Justice Complex, Indianapolis, Indiana  
Juvenile Probation Officer