THE BLACK-WHITE ACHIEVEMENT GAP THROUGH THE LENS OF CENTRAL
OFFICE ADMINISTRATORS

by

Roger S. Baskin, Sr.
A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
GeorgeMasonUniversity
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
of
Doctor of Philosophy
Education

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Date: _____ Fall Semester 2013
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UMI Number: 3606389

UMI

Dissertation Publishing

UMI 3606389

ProQuest

Dedication

This is dedicated to God who gave me strength beyond my strength in achieving the goal of completing a doctoral dissertation. This is also dedicated to Felicia Baskin, my wonderful wife, who never doubted my ability to accomplish this monumental task. This is dedicated to Roger, Nia, Joshua, and Thandie, my beautiful children, who motivated me to finish. Finally, this is dedicated to Eola Baskin, my mother, who always said I could do it.

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Abstract

THE BLACK-WHITE ACHIEVEMENT GAP THROUGH THE LENS OF CENTRAL OFFICE ADMINISTRATORS

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This study investigated the perceptions of Black and White central office administrators regarding the Black-White achievement gap. Four research questions (RQ) were explored: RQ1: How docentral office administrators understand the causes of the Black-White achievement gap? RQ2: How do central office administrators perceive their role in impacting the Black-White achievement gap? RQ3: How docentral office administrators address Black-White achievement gaps in their districts? RQ4: How do perceptions about achievement gaps and agency vary between Black and White central office administrators? Data for this qualitative study were gathered in 15 interviews with current and former central office administrators from seven districts in the Middle Atlantic region. Eight of those interviewed were White and seven were Black. Relationships between teachers and students were viewed as a major factor in the creation of achievement gaps. Raising the issue of gaps and providing professional development to educators are two major ways central office administrators viewed their

role. Teachers and their inability to develop positive relationships with students were identified by participants in the study as a major obstacle in closing achievement gaps. Administrators used a multifaceted approach to addressing achievement gaps including working directly with students, parents, educators (through professional development), and changing the structure of the school day to provide intervention. A major distinction between Black and White administrators in the study had to do with the perceived obstacle of alienation. Five of the seven Black administrators expressed some sense of alienation due either to job title (typically those who work in offices of diversity or equity) or race.

Chapter 1: Background and Significance of the Problem

The achievement gap between majority population students and historically marginalized students is a persistent problem in American schools. Although there are numerous ways of defining achievement gaps, including socioeconomics and language heritage disparities, achievement gap is defined in this study as an observable disparity on a number of educational measures between the performances of groups of students that differ based on racial identification.This study specifically investigated achievement gaps that exist between students identified as Black and those identified as White. Examples of achievement gaps are noticeable throughout the nation. According to Children's Defense Fund's *The State of America's Children 2011*:

> Many public school students, kindergarten through 12th grade, are struggling; minority children and poor children struggle the most. Too often they fall behind in school and drop out, increasing their risk of entering the cradle to prison pipeline. Staying in school and receiving a quality education are the best deterrents to juvenile delinquency and the surest route towards responsible, productive adulthood (p. H-2).

This study focused on school districts within the Middle Atlantic region. Each gives students a different assessment in reading and mathematics. However, each of the districts demonstrated achievement gaps to varying degrees. The growing diversity of

the region and its documented achievement gaps make it an ideal setting to conduct this study. Table 1 provides an example of Black-White achievement gaps that exist within the region in which this study took place based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Table1 shows the difference in pass proficiency between Black and White students. For example, both the national and Mid-Atlantic Region demonstrate a gap of 26% in the fourth grade mathematics assessment. This means that White students, both nationally and in the region of the study, passedmore often than Black students at a rate of 26 percentage points. Achievement gaps in mathematics and reading are comparable to national gaps in achievement. In mathematics, the achievement gaps between Black students and White students are equal to or larger than the national average. In reading, the gaps are smaller than the national average but are still over 20%.

Table 1

2007 National Black-White Achievement Gaps Compared to Regional Gaps

	Grade 4 Mathematics	Grade 8 Mathematics	Grade 4 Reading	Grade 8 Reading
National Gaps	26%	31%	27%	26%
Mid-Atlantic Region Gaps	26%	32%	24%	23%

(U.S. Department of Education)

The problem of the achievement gap also has far-reaching economic ramifications for the nation. According to *The Economic Impact of the Achievement Gap in America's Schools* (McKinsey & Company, Social Sector Office, 2009):

For the economy as a whole, our results show that:

If the gap between black and Latino student performance and white student performance had been similarly narrowed, GDP in 2008 would have been between $310 billion and $525 billion higher, or 2 to 4 percent of GDP. The magnitude of this impact will rise in the years ahead as demographic shifts result in blacks and Latinos becoming a larger proportion of the population and workforce. (pp. 5-6)

According to many educators, addressing the achievement gap is in the best interest of the public good (Howard, 2006):

A strong national commitment to public education is the quintessential embodiment of "the public good." This sacred trust to protect the good of the many is at the heart of our struggle for educational equity; it is the nesting ground for school reform, and it is the place from which we can best birth and nurture our shared national future as a free and democratic people (p. 135).

Hence, this study is concerned with an issue of national importance and is closely connected to the overall well-being of America's future. As Howard asserts, the public good is tied to educational equity. Achievement gaps are an indication of a lack of equity. Given the influence central office administrators wield over what school districts

do about achievement gaps, what better group to study than the individuals who direct the decisions and actions of entire school districts?

The role of the perceptions of teachers and school-based administrators in impacting this phenomenon has been researched from a variety of methodological perspectives (Uhlenberg & Brown, 2002). The role of the perceptions of central office administrators, though significant in the direction that schools take, has not been thoroughly researched regarding its impact on the achievement gap. Additionally, the way central office administrators understand the achievement gap and its solutions has not been dealt with among leadership scholars.

The significance of this project lies in the cost of what happens if districts do not work more effectively—the quality of life for whole groups of students is in jeopardy. Further, budget cuts at the federal, state, and local levels create a scenario where competing interests of programs and personnel may hinder some efforts at closing achievement gaps. Although the perspective of individual causes of the achievement gap has taken prominence in research and in some political spheres, there is a growing interest in the systemic influences related to the gap. Some researchers suggest that the achievement gap is due in large part to the will of leaders who permit status quo practices that work to the disadvantage of students from historically marginalized backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 1999, 2006). Ignoring the role that social capital plays in the attainment of high achievement is one example of how leaders can allow the dynamic of the gap to continue. The study described here comes at a time when educators and policy

makers are looking for answers regarding the influences beyond the classroom that lead to student achievement for all students.

Additionally, much has been written about the role of leadership in creating an atmosphere of successful change. This study is significant in that there is very little research concerning the central office role in student achievement. Although much is researched regarding the school-based administrator role and that of teacher leaders, very little points to the impact that central office leadership plays in terms of addressing issues contributing to the achievement gap. There is, however, a great deal that central office administrators do that impacts the work of school administrators and teachers.

The interpretation of federal and state mandates is typically communicated (through direct and indirect means) by central office administrators to school personnel, and the curriculum is developed at the central office level. Even in those cases where the teachers and school administrators play a part, the direction and tone of these efforts is set by central office administrators. The decision to fund particular efforts that can either support or hinder the closing of the achievement gap, moreover, are influenced greatly by central office administrators, and the work of interpreting trends to school board members is also a matter of central office administrative influence (Mizell, 2010).

Hence, the role of central office administrators is very significant and has had very little attention paid to it in light of student achievement, especially regarding students who have historically underachieved. The perspective of individuals who work within this context is very important in understanding how school districts approach both the problem and possible solutions. Further, there may also be an opportunity, within this

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context, to learn more about perceived barriers school district leaders face in accomplishing the task of closing the gap.

My research explored the following questions:

RQ1: How do central office administrators understand the causes of the Black-White achievement gap?

RQ2: How do central office administrators perceive their role in impacting the achievement gap?

RQ3: How do central office administrators address Black-White achievement gaps in their districts?

RQ4: How do perceptions of Black and White central office administrators vary?

Definition of Terms

This section will briefly discuss terms that are relevant to the study—*achievement gap*,*central office administrator*, *social capital*, *deficit thinking*, *color-blindness*, *White privilege*,and *identity*. An achievement gap refers to an observable disparity on a number of educational measures between the performances of groups of students, especially groups defined by race/ethnicity. In the context of this study, the disparity that exists between Black and White students is of particular importance.

Central office administrators are people who work at the district level of a school system. They interact with school board members, reporting on matters related to the attainment of district goals. They interact with school administrators as supervisors and suppliers of services including professional development. They also interpret federal, state, and local policy for their school districts. Additionally, central office

administrators interact with the community to communicate district goals and objectives, and to encourage support of those goals and objectives.

Social capital is defined as the collective advantage of social networks that lead to economic, cultural, and further social advantage. The value of a group or individual's social capital is relative to cultural and social context and may or may not be deemed of value in another context. For example, being a member of a fraternity may be deemed valuable in the pursuit of seeking a job interview in certain circles. However, it may be deemed a detriment among people who see membership in the fraternity as antithetical to the goals of the organization.

Deficit thinking is defined as thinking that identifies limitations rather than ability. This manner of thinking is typically deterministic in its approach to identifying student ability to achieve. This is particularly applied to educators who see only limitations in students who are Black or low income.

Color-blindness is defined as the conscious or unconscious unwillingness to identify differences in race that work to the detriment of marginalized racial groups and further enables systems of oppression to continue to operate. It is a means of ignoring racial inequality in education, employment, and other means of social and economic mobility.

White privilege refers to the benefits of access to resources and social rewards based on conscious and unconscious racist ideas of White superiority. Further, it is the ability to shape the norms and values of a society by virtue of skin color. White privilege places White racial identity as the standard of beauty, divinity, intelligence, and morality.

Identity refers to the set of characteristics that one recognizes as belonging uniquely to his or her individual self and racial group. For example, a Black student may have a sense of who he or she is as an individual in relation to a favorite subject in school but also have a sense of who he or she is as a member of the Black community in relation to shared historical experiences and cultural norms like foods commonly eaten within Black homes or music commonly heard and performed by Black artists.

Chapter 2: Relevant Literature

This study was dependent upon three areas of research and theory. The first area reviews literature that supports suggested causes of achievement gaps. Because this study was concerned with how central office administrators understand the causes of the problem, this section focuses on a clear understanding of what both research and theory demonstrate. A secondary area of focus within this section addresses the significance of perceptions regarding achievement gaps. In this section, specific attention is focused on studies that demonstrate how educators perceive achievement gaps. The second area of research and theory addresses the culture of central offices. This section identifies key elements of central office culture and how it impacts a sense of agency on the part of workers within this sphere. The final section explores research and theory in the area of solutions for closing achievement gaps. Because a major part of the research focuses on the outcomes of the decision making process of central office administrators, special attention is paid to the types of tangible outcomes, including programs and policies, developed to address achievement gaps.

Suggested Causes of Achievement Gaps

This section provides an overview of some of the major considerations for causes of achievement gaps. Included in this section are considerations of economic disparities and its impact on access to quality education. Institutionalized racism and its impact on

the structure of education in American culture are also discussed. Finally, the way in which students from historically marginalized populations navigate the educational system will also be explored in this section. The success or lack of success in navigating institutions of education contributes to what is referred to as an achievement gap.

The pursuit of academic excellence can be thwarted by a lack of academic, social, and economic equity (Kozol, 1991, 2005; Noguera, 2003, 2008; Scanlan & Palmer, 2009). The achievement gap is a phenomenon that is driven by individual and systemic forces that result in the underachievement of historically marginalized groups. Wiggan (2007) noted, for example, that early standardized tests were used to support beliefs in the superiority of Europeans above other racial groups (p. 312). The achievement gap is fueled by issues of home life, child rearing, and even individual motivation. However, there are also forces that are historically at work to both disenfranchise and frustrate the efforts of specific groups of historically marginalized people who, due to their race, socioeconomic class, or lack of social and cultural capital, are unable to access opportunities for educational advancement. Further, policy that is unresponsive to these needs and concerns results in efforts that do not speak directly to the needs of students who are struggling to succeed. Freire (2006) noted that education is a tool of those in power to maintain power.   Additionally, Bourdieu (2003) suggested that educational systems commonly work to "devalue" (p. 49) the language and modes of expression of marginalized groups.

Jencks and Phillips (1998, p. V), who addressed the publication of *The Bell Curve* by Herrnstein and Murray (1994), represent the most common approach in scholarly

literature to understanding the achievement gap. Herrnstein and Murray saw the

achievement gap as a byproduct of genetic inferiority. Jencks and Phillips noted that

successful theories that look at the Black-White gap will pay attention to family

interaction and its role in cognitive development, student reactions to classroom

experiences, and psychological and cultural differences.

Wilson's commentary (1998) in Jencks and Phillips called for an analysis of the

structure of inequality. Interview questions under the first research question provide

interviewees an opportunity to share their perceptions of this concept of the achievement

gap being caused, at least in part, by a larger system of inequity. Later in this

dissertation, a discussion of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) is shared as one

means by which to address this issue. Ladson-Billings (2006) not only called for a

system approach but also deconstructed the term achievement gap and provided another

term with which to discuss the matter of educational disparities—the educational debt.

The educational debt has four contributing factors: historical, economic, sociopolitical,

and moral. An advocate of Critical Race Theory (CRT), Ladson-Billings (1998) also

noted "… race continues to be a powerful social construct and signifier" (p. 8). Because

of this, the stories of people of color are an important factor in understanding the state of

the system of education. Interview questions related to the first research question are

greatly informed by this interpretation of the achievement gap being influenced by

societal factors.

The work of Lee and Burkam (2002) illustrated the economic disparities that

create gaps in opportunity and access before students begin school. Their work is based

on analysis of the U.S. Department of Education's Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K). The ECLS-K began in 1998 and included 1,000 public and private schools in the U.S. that offer kindergarten. Approximately 25 kindergartners were randomly selected from each school. One of each child's parents completed a survey (regarding race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status), as did the child's teacher and an administrator from the child's school. The ECLS-K included test data on reading (including recognizing print words, identifying sounds, vocabulary, word reading, and reading comprehension) and math (including understanding of the properties of numbers, mathematical operations, and problem solving) (p. 12). The analysis strategy used by Lee and Burkam focused on the differences by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status in children's cognitive achievement in reading and math at their entry into kindergarten. They found that inequalities of children's cognitive ability are substantial before students begin formal education. Disadvantaged children start kindergarten with significantly lower cognitive skills than their more advantaged counterparts. These same disadvantaged children are then placed in low-resource schools, magnifying the initial inequality (Lee & Burkam). According to the executive summary of the book, "Race and ethnicity are associated with SES. For example, 34% of black children and 29% of Hispanic children are in the lowest quintile of SES compared with only 9% of white children." (p. 3). This study's use is advantageous in that it is representative of the national population of kindergartners in 1998.

Fairchild's (2007) work on education policy pointed to a failing on the part of lawmakers to address the need for school funded summer and after-school enrichment

that can help to develop students' skills who, because of limited financial resources, cannot afford to pay for enrichment during traditional school summer break. Effective policies not only address education, but health and safety issues as well. The analysis framework for this study included an examination of over 80 sources of research on summer program policy, an analysis of nearly 40 policies, a review of nearly 50 summer program models, and interviews with staff from four organizations that received Excellence in Summer Learning Awards (pp. 4-5). The study found that there is a need for better policy coordination through strong intermediary organizations, comprehensive programming to meet the diverse needs of children and families, and greater emphasis on enrichment programming for disadvantaged children.

Howard (2006) contributed to understanding the moral factors that give rise to educational disparities. He noted the persistence of White dominance as a contributing factor to the gap. According to Howard, "The race-based achievement gap in public education today *is* the demographic embodiment of our history of White social, political, and economic dominance." (p. 118) Howard theorizes that the dynamics of this dominance include the following:

- The assumption of rightness: the claiming of truth as the private domain of the dominant group
- The luxury of ignorance: knowing very little about those defined as "other" and hence making sense of the myths created by the dominant group

- The legacy of privilege: including the privilege of color, identity as "the real Americans", and the privilege to control "voice" or public discourse (pp. 53-66)

Howard also suggests that the paradigm of dominance can be dismantled among White teachers if they exhibit the following:

- Honesty: acknowledgement of the dynamics of dominance

- Empathy: learning to see life from other perspectives

- Advocacy: commitment to the inclusion of others into the circle of power

- Action: taking direct steps to challenge White privilege (pp. 73-86)

Carter (2005) noted the existence of cultural dissonance as a contributing factor to the achievement gap. Drawing on survey fieldwork and interview data from 68 students from Yonkers, New York, her study was conducted in the late 1990s and published five years later. Ethnic groups included in the study were African American, including Liberian and Antiguan, and Hispanic, including Cuban, Dominican, and Puerto Rican. Fifty-six percent of the participants were female. All families included in the study qualified for government-subsidized housing assistance; more than half lived in homes with an annual income of less than ten thousand dollars; the majority of homes were headed by single females. By identifying and documenting different ways in which minority students navigate their cultural experience and their school culture, Carter addressed the difficult decisions students make in reconciling their identity as a member of a cultural group and their identity in the school culture which can develop a double-consciousness that leads to success in navigation of the two (cultural straddlers) or a

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resistance of one cultural option for the acceptance of the other (noncompliant believers and cultural mainstreamers). Carter's work addressed how the systemic impact of economics, policy, and institutionalized racism affect students' perceptions of the American educational system. Thus giving a response to the individual analysis of Jencks and Phillips in light of systemic contributors, Carter helps to point out how we might understand the individual student experience through the lens of system thinking.

The literature in this section serves to provide a context for understanding the complexity of both the definition and the solutions to the achievement gap. Particular focus on the aforementioned studies includes the disparities between White families and families of color in access to economic opportunities. These disparities result in a number of psychological, physical, and cognitive disadvantages that result in what is identified as persistent gaps in academic achievement when students are compared based on racial factors. How educators understand the factors that create this phenomenon is significant in that how factors are understood may very well demonstrate how school district administrators create solutions to the problem. If the rationale exists solely within the realm of biological determinism, or solely consequent to income disparities, there may be little purposeful effort to change district practice. If the gap is seen as a phenomenon that exists because of political will and a lack of purposeful dismantling of White privilege, the efforts may appear to be much different and the goal of closing achievement gaps much more attainable.

The aforementioned literature is significant to the proposed study because it may reveal the intellectual frame of reference that some central office administrators use to

make decisions about the causes of achievement gaps in their districts. A previous pilot

study (Baskin, 2009) suggested that many respondents may refer back to the ideas

discussed in this section as a means of making sense of the problem. These

considerations for understanding the achievement gap may also greatly influence the

philosophical underpinnings of many of the solutions that central office administrators

rationalize and support. In effect, the above literature may influence the personal

narrative individuals in these positions carry with them to rationalize the existing problem

and to imagine what is possible in regards to solving existing gaps in achievement. For

some, the narrative may end on a very solemn note; the gaps are inevitable and cannot be

closed. For others, the narrative may be much more hopeful in that gaps can be changed

if the context (e.g., classrooms, neighborhoods) is improved in some way.

Figure 1 demonstrates a range of possibilities related to how causes of the

achievement gap can be understood. This is a conceptual representation based on the

review of literature and interview data gathered. Some interviewees communicated the

problem from a perspective that primarily rests the responsibility on those groups who

underachieve. This way of understanding the problem is identified by the circles labeled

child factors and parent factors. The circle labeled school system factors identifies those

responses that are focused primarily on the role that school districts play in exacerbating

the problem of the achievement gap. The circle labeled external factors represents those

responses that relate to an understanding of the achievement gap that incorporates factors

related to issues beyond the school including community housing, economic factors, and

political climate. Although these factors may be beyond the school, some administrators

may see them as essential to understanding how best to understand the problem and potential solutions. The circles overlap to demonstrate points at which respondents may see a combination of these factors working to create achievement gaps.

Child Factors

External Factors

School System Factors

Parent Factors
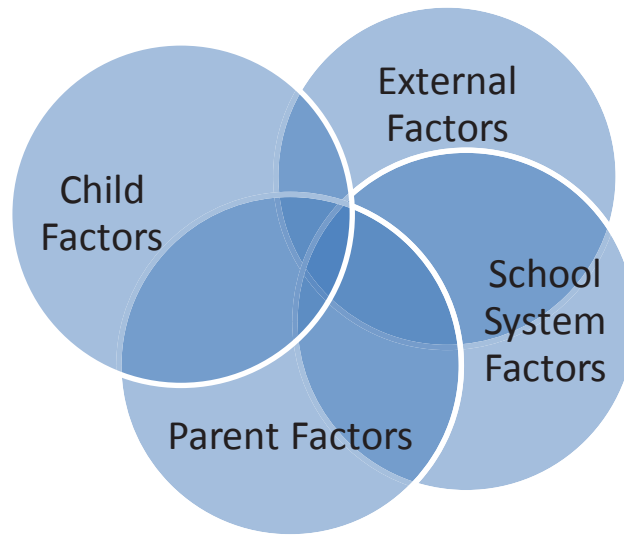
Figure 1. A visual representation of the major contributors to the achievement gap.

The categories provided by the literature were useful in framing interview questions and analytical categories. With this in mind, the questions for the interviewees matched many of the issues raised by the aforementioned research. Interview questions included, but were not limited to the following: When do you recall first hearing the term achievement gap? If you could use a metaphor or simile to describe achievement gaps in your district, what would it be? Why do you see it that way? What do you think are the

primary reasons for achievement gaps in your district?

Achievement Gap Perception Literature

This section focuses on the perceptions of educators regarding the achievement gap. The studies in this section tend to have three elements in common. First, they identify a difference in perception of the causes of the achievement gap based on the ethnic background of the educator. In the studies reviewed, a majority indicated that White educators tend to have a perception of the causes of the achievement gap situated primarily in the realm of student causes (for example, the student does not work hard enough or the student does not come from a home environment that is supportive of academic achievement). Black educators tend to identify systemic issues regarding the causes of achievement gaps. For example, they are more likely to believe that there needs to be more professional development for educators or more support from the district level. Second, the studies show that perceived solutions to the problems also fall along racial lines. White participants tend to identify solutions that primarily focus on the need for minority students and families to change particular practices in attitude and behavior while Black educators tend to identify solutions that primarily focus on the need for policies that further enhance the school's ability to reach students who are not achieving. Third, there is a distinction between educators who support status quo behaviors and those who identify a need for change in district practice regarding how to deal with achievement gaps. In the studies reviewed, a majority indicated that White educators in these studies tended to see the status quo as the most appropriate course of

action even if it may be considered detrimental to overall efforts to close achievement gaps.

Uhlenberg and Brown (2002) conducted a survey of 53 North Carolina teachers and found differences in the perceptions of Black and White teachers regarding the causes and solutions for achievement gaps. These differences were quantified based on responses to survey questions that were rated on a scale of 1-4 (4 being most important and 1 being least important). The data for this study consisted of survey responses from teachers in 14 different schools in the Raleigh-Durham area. The survey had four sections which corresponded to four commonly cited causes of achievement gaps—the home environment, the child, the teacher, and the school system. The survey was designed to force teachers to determine the most important factors in understanding the achievement gap. In so doing, a pattern was interpreted based on consistent responses to repeated questions on the four areas. Purposive sampling was done to create a near equal participation rate of Black (26 participants) and White (25 participants) teachers (2 were multiracial). Of the teachers who participated, 43 were female and 10 were male. Twenty-seven participants were elementary teachers and 18 were high school teachers. According to the study, White teachers tended to see the achievement gap as a result of student characteristics (including motivation and behavior), parent involvement, and home environment. Black teachers, on the other hand, tended to see the problem as a result of systemic issues such as teacher behaviors and attitudes and school policy. For example, the study found that the mean for Black teacher responses for the student lacking potential as a reason for the existence of achievement gaps was 1.89 while for

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White teachers, the mean was 2.25. Regarding parent involvement, Black teachers had a mean of 1.92 regarding parent level of education as a cause of achievement gaps. White teachers had a mean of 2.75 in response to the same question. Regarding the role of teachers in contributing to the achievement gap, Black teachers responded with a mean of 3.31 to teacher low expectation as a problem. White teachers responded with a mean of 2.58. According to the researchers, the aforementioned numbers indicate a perceptual disparity when interpreting causes of achievement gaps related to racial distinction of students and family.

Bol and Berry (2005) conducted a perception study among mathematics teachers. The survey had 623 respondents. Three hundred seventy-nine respondents, who served as the focus of the study, were middle or high school teachers; most attributed the achievement gap to student characteristics including motivation, work ethic, and family support. Bol and Berry's work was part of a larger study conducted by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM); the data for the study were collected online and sent to a random sample of 5,000 non-student NCTM members. This study focused on responses from middle and high school teachers. Eighty-nine percent of the respondents were White and 69% were female. These demographics are also characteristic of NCTM (2005). Seventy-three percent had 4 or more years of experience in their current position. Twenty-five percent of the sample designated their school as urban and 29% as rural. Results of the study were not disaggregated by race of educator, but the vast majority of the respondents were White females.

The questionnaire for the study was developed by Bol and Berry (2005). The first section requested demographic information and employment characteristics. The next section consisted of 23 items which rated factors contributing to the achievement gap (including background and societal influences, student characteristics, curriculum and instruction, politics and policy, and language) on a 5-point Likert-type scale. The next section consisted of open-ended questions regarding participants' definition of the achievement gap in mathematics, identifying major causes, and suggestions for solutions to the problem. The final section consisted of questions about characteristics of the school and students in the educators' work context.

Four themes emerged from the qualitative data when analyzing teacher perceptions of causes of the achievement gap—family background, societal influences, curriculum and instruction, and student characteristics. Suggestions for addressing achievement gaps included the following themes—policies, professional development and teacher characteristics, curricular changes, and societal influences and community building. Funding was a consistent theme throughout all of the solutions. Researchers also found that teachers from schools that had a higher percentage of White students tended to point to student characteristics more than teachers from schools with higher percentages of students of color. Supervisors and university faculty, on the other hand, tended to attribute achievement gaps to curriculum and instruction. According to the researchers,

> The results showed a significant multivariate effect for position ($F_{(4, 1422)}= 7.54$, $p<.05$) and significant univariate effects on the Student Characteristic (F

(3,475= 12.21), Politics and Policy ($F(3,475)= 6.15$, $p<.05$), and Curriculum and

Instruction ($F(3,475)= 11.68$, $p<.05$) scales. (p. 39)

For example, the study demonstrated a difference in mean score between teachers and

supervisors and university faculty. The mean for teachers related to student factors as the

cause of the achievement gap was 4.18 while it was 3.79 for supervisors and 3.96 for

university faculty. This means that teachers saw student factors as more of a reason for

the achievement gap's existence than did supervisors and university faculty. Seeing

curriculum and instruction as a cause of the achievement gap, teachers had a mean of

3.65 for grades 6-8, and a mean of 3.49 for grades 9-12. For supervisors, the mean was

4.01, and university faculty had a mean of 4.04. Recommendations from the study

included professional development for teachers, greater equity in school financing,

curricular changes, and smaller class size.

Taliaferro and DeCuir-Gunby (2007) studied the perceptions of African American

educators regarding access to advanced academics for African American students. The

study, which consisted of interview data, had a population of 11 African-American

female educators from 10 different high schools in North Carolina. Participants were

purposively selected because of their role as high school advisors in the American

Excellence Association (AEA), an organization designed to recognize and support

academic achievement of students of color. The methods for the study included 1-2 hour

personal in-depth interviews with participants during their planning periods. The

interview questions were open-ended and focused on the role AEA played in encouraging

achievement among students of color and in increasing enrollment in advanced academic

courses. Thematic content analysis was used to analyze the interviews. Inductive coding

was used to determine the initial themes. Coding was used to formulate layers of

interpretation by identifying, organizing, and interrelating themes (Taliaferro & DeCuir-

Gunby).

They found that there was a concern on the part of African American educators

regarding access to advanced classes. Several noted that one barrier was lack of

recommendations from teachers. Additionally, students who entered classes felt

alienated because of their realization that they were often the only African American in

the advanced class. The study notes that there is a greater need for institutional will and

strategies that ensure greater numbers of African American students in advanced

academic classes. The concept of institutional will was significant in understanding an

important aspect of this study in that it points to collective perceptions of what is needed

to close gaps in access as well as achievement. Institutional will is a matter of leadership

and speaks to the vision of leadership both at the school and district levels.

McMahon (2007) interviewed 10 White Canadian school administrators on their

perceptions of whiteness and sense of agency toward changing institutionalized racism.

Participants were from three school districts in the Toronto area. Participants were

selected because of their race, work location, and because of their willingness to be

interviewed on issues related to social justice, whiteness, and equality. They all worked

within schools and districts with predominantly Black and South Asian student

populations. These populations were identified by the researcher as marginalized within

the Canadian context because of historic perceptions of inferiority by the larger Canadian

culture. For example, Black students were considered by educators within this context as "less capable and more violent" (McMahon, p. 689). Most administrators in the study demonstrated a perspective that was supportive of status quo practice and did not seek to challenge existing structures that perpetuated racial achievement gaps. Like previous perception studies, the McMahon study demonstrated consistency with previous demonstrations of racial differences. Although participants, all of whom were White administrators, decried individual instances of racism, very few were critical of hegemonic practices that led to consistent gaps in access and achievement. What the study did not do was identify whether this pattern was perpetuated from the classroom to the principal's office to the central office.

Findings from the above studies informed this study by demonstrating an ongoing conversation about links between perception and action among educators on the topic of achievement gaps. The interview questions were designed to glean information about both perceptions and actions taken to create a clear picture of how the two are linked. There are complex outcomes that can arise based on the relationships between perception and action. As noted in the McMahon study, although the perception of racism was seen as a negative practice on the part of administrators, the actions of those administrators were inconsistent on a system level and demonstrated a contradiction in their perceptions of what was ethical and right practice. Citing concerns that future promotions would be in jeopardy if they questioned the current structure, administrators in the McMahon study opted for status quo practices. Because of the complexity of the route from perception to action, my interview questions also pursued the issue of agency and whether or not

administrators in the central office context believe they can act on what they believe to be the appropriate course of action to close achievement gaps. The responses of interviewees in my study also helped to provide a picture of central office culture and reflect the kind of reasoning demonstrated in the McMahon study.

Central Office Culture Literature

This section presents and analyzes literature on the significance of central office administrators regarding their impact on student achievement. Additionally, this section considers the culture of central office administrators. Included in the discussion of culture is how race is discussed within the central office context and how policies about closing racial gaps in achievement are impacted by decisions to either openly discuss race or to make race a nonissue. According to respondents in a previous pilot study (Baskin, 2009), sharing perceptions of institutional racism connected to achievement gaps was met with hostility.

While searching *Education Research Complete*, *Educational Administration Abstracts*, and *ERIC* (using search terms achievement gap perceptions, central office administrators, school district administrators, and education (al) leaders), I found little prior research focused specifically on the topic of central office administrator perceptions of the achievement gap and how best to address the achievement gap from their perspective. Because central office administrators impact student achievement in a variety of ways, it is important to understand their perceptions of this phenomenon and the degree to which they act on their beliefs. Engels, Hotton, Devos, Bouckenooghe, and Aelterman (2008) and Bryk and Schneider (2002) identified the role of school

administrators in developing a climate of trust which is related to increased student

achievement. Mascall, Leithwood, Straus, and Sacks (2008) identified a relationship

between four forms of distributed leadership and teacher optimism. This optimism

results in greater collaboration among staff, greater willingness to support students in

need of alternative approaches to instruction, and a greater sense of belief (on the part of

educators) that their efforts will result in higher student achievement. Chhuon, Gilkey,

Gonzalez, Daly, and Chrispeels (2008) demonstrated the importance of central office

staff in establishing trust with school administrators to enhance student achievement.

Chrispeels, Burke, Johnson, and Daly (2008) demonstrated the importance of school

administrators and central office administrators working collaboratively to enhance

school improvement. According to Sheppard, Brown, and Dibbon (2009), "There is

growing evidence that school districts can provide the needed support to schools in order

for them to overcome the challenges of hierarchy that typically inhibit meaningful

reform." (p. 36)

The above quote exhibits the significance of workers within the central office

context in both addressing longstanding concerns regarding achievement gaps and

supporting schools in achieving this goal. It is clear that districts cannot address the

problem without district leaders initiating the change and supporting the change at the

local school level. Additionally, Fullan (2010) noted that district administrators can

impact student achievement through contributing to a collective sense of efficacy among

school principals. This is accomplished through establishing clear purposes that are

widely shared, unambiguously giving priority to the improvement of instruction,

providing meaningful professional development, and assisting schools in the collective interpretation and use of data for decision making.

A significant aspect of central office culture is how race is understood and communicated when solving a problem like achievement gaps. One example is the study by Evans (2007) on the sense making of school leaders, including three superintendents, around increasingly diverse demographics. Developed through the lens of Critical Race Theory (which focuses on the ideological and structural manifestations of racial inequality in institutions), the Evans study has implications regarding the way administrators plan around potential achievement gaps in that it focused on how administrators understood the changing demographics of their school district (e.g., increased African American and Latino population) and how they planned to address potential academic needs related to this change. In her study, Evans found that administrators used their own mental framework to make sense of the demographic changes. She noted one administrator who used a color-blind ideology to interpret demographic changes which led to decision making that ignored the need for professional development that could prepare staff for the growing demographic shift. Hence, the perception of race being a factor to be ignored led to a decision which lessened the preparation of staff.

Through an analysis of various state and local policies and insights from various school district leaders, Prince (2004) identified three specific policy types that inhibit closing achievement gaps in school districts:

- Policies that aggravate the inequitable distribution of quality teachers and principals

- Policies that restrict student access to challenging coursework

- Policies that reduce academic instruction time

    Larson and Ovando (2001) note:

    When inequity has been institutionalized, teachers and administrators no longer have to be biased to continue biased practices; we merely have to do our jobs and maintain the normal practices of systems we have inherited. The segregated nature of our communities, schools, and classrooms, coupled with our strong discomfort in talking about issues of racial, ethnic, and gender difference in an inherently inequitable society, provides fertile ground for sustained discriminatory practices. (p. 3)

    Clearly, the achievement gap is a complex issue that cannot be understood apart from systemic and individual student context. According to Gay (2000):

    The achievement patterns among ethnic groups in the United States are too persistent to be attributed only to individual limitations. The fault lies as well within the institutional structures, procedures, assumptions, and operational styles of schools, classrooms, and the society at large. (p. xiv)

    Central office administrators are expected to lead the success of school districts toward closing these gaps in achievement. They also deal with both individual and systemic barriers that impact their work to this end. Because of the variety of perspectives associated with understanding the achievement gap, it stands to reason that

there will be internal conflict within school districts among various agents who are expected to address the problem. Questions that were asked of interviewees that emerged from this context included, but were not limited to, the following: In what ways do you feel empowered to impact achievement gaps? Why do you feel that way?

Agency within the central office context. Although used primarily in the realm of economics, agency theory has been used to discuss various aspects of education. In short, agency theory attempts to explain the conflicts of interests that come about when the principal (or hiring party) has an expectation or goal and the agent (the individual hired) has motivations that may be counter to that of the principal. Further, it considers the methods by which organizations can encourage individuals to cooperate with the mission of the organization. According to Eisenhardt,

> Agency theory is concerned with resolving two problems that occur in agency relationships. The first is the agency problem that arises when (a) the desires or goals of the principal and agent conflict and (b) it is difficult or expensive for the principal to verify what the agent is actually doing. The problem here is that the principal cannot verify that the agent has behaved appropriately. The second is the problem of risk sharing that arises when the principal and the agent have different attitudes toward risk. The problem here is that the principal and the agent may prefer different actions because of the different risk preferences. (1989, p. 58)

Herbert (1974) identified six forces and countervailing pressures at work within the environments of minority administrators:

Table 2

Herbert's Forces and Countervailing Pressures

System Demands	Traditional Role Expectations	Colleague Pressure	Community Accountability	Personal Commitment to Community	Personal Ambition
Conform to norms vs. act as change agent	Promote merit vs. promote minority issues	Support stable institutional patterns vs. facilitate change	Act as a minority community buffer vs. facilitate minority participation	Support status quo vs. act as minority representative	Pursue personal development vs. organizational development goals for administration

 (Murray, Terry, Washington, & Keller, 1994, p. 412)

In a replication of Herbert's study (1974), Murray, Terry, Washington, and Keller (1994) found that there was a demonstrated conflict between racial identity and the experience within the workplace of minority administrators. Institutional racism was still a concern and executives still found that they were pressured to support policies of the organization that negatively impacted the ethnic groups with which they identified. Authored by professors from Cleveland State University, the study was concerned with the degree to which the experiences of minorities in top administrative positions are impacted by institutional racism. The purpose was to determine if the findings of Herbert had

changed 20 years later. A survey of 51 items was given to 525 individuals (of whom 160 responded) who were members of the Conference of Minority Public Administrators. Sixty-seven percent of the participants had master's degrees and 16% had doctorates. Forty-seven percent of the participants earned more than $46,000 a year. Additionally, 10 were Hispanic, 134 were African American, 7 were White, 1 was Asian, and 1 was Native American. Nine had no racial identification. Twenty-two percent of the participants were identified as directors and all served in some leadership capacity. Key results of the replicated study were that there was significant progress in terms of the number of minorities in senior executive positions. There was also more diversity among the participants of the study which demonstrated greater access of various ethnic groups to top-level positions. However, there was also a demonstrated conflict between racial identity and the experience within the workplace. Institutional racism was still a concern and executives found that they were pressured to support policies of the organization that negatively impacted the ethnic groups with which they identified. A strength of the study was its ability to relate the frustration of working in a bureaucracy while also struggling to maintain ties to racial identity and values. A weakness of the study, however, was the way in which the data were communicated. Most were filtered through narration without the benefit of a comprehensive table. Additionally, the sample size (n=160) was relatively small. The fact that all participants were from the same organization was also of concern because of the potential for group bias. Constructs of importance to my research include the identification of six pressures that create dissonance in work and identity. This was beneficial in developing a construct for minority central office

administrators and how they see their efforts at closing the achievement gap in relation to these factors.

The same forces identified in the Herbert study can impact central office administrators in their attempts to address issues of minority student achievement. Hunter and Donahoo (2005) note how matters of race can impact the work experience and decision making of school district leaders:

> Administrators who receive adequate support and enjoy sufficient autonomy from the political system experience fewer distractions, which makes it easier for them to devote more time to improving their schools. However, African American superintendents rarely enjoy this degree of support from political officials and often experience very little autonomy while working with state and local politicians. (p. 422)

Hunter and Donahoo (2005) further point out a dilemma among African American superintendents that mirrors the system demand of personal commitment to community:

> In addition to teacher quality and supply issues, parents, community members, and district staff also expect African American superintendents to improve racial equity. Minority constituents and employees often expect African American superintendents to put more effort into improving racial equity than they do from other district leaders. Many of these district personnel assume that the racial status of the superintendent will not only generate interest in addressing these problems but also will make it easier for significant changes to occur. At the same time, African American superintendents

who fail to satisfy the public's demands in this area often may suffer a debilitating backlash from members of the local minority community. (p. 427)

The complexity of the issue of the achievement gap coupled with the ambiguity of what to do about it within the central office context can create a great deal of anxiety for district personnel. Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970) noted that the pressures of role conflict and ambiguity foster greater anxiety among workers in complex organizations. Added to this is the atmosphere of greater accountability structures put in place by No Child Left Behind which forces school districts to look at achievement gaps and to come up with solutions for those gaps within strict time limits. It is within this complexity that decisions are made that can impact or exacerbate the achievement gaps faced by school districts.

Approaches to Addressing Achievement Gaps

There are numerous approaches to addressing achievement gaps. This section focuses on a variety, though not exhaustive, of studies that have identified attempts at addressing the problem of student achievement gaps. Themes that come to the forefront of this section include the organizational resolve to address the problem of student achievement gaps, nonacademic solutions that develop a sense of hope on the part of students who are behind academically, and the connections between curriculum focus and cultural relevance on student achievement.

In a literature review of 31 studies conducted over a 10 year period, Kenneth Leithwood (2010) noted characteristics of school districts that consistently close

achievement gaps among diverse populations. Specific characteristics included the following:

- District-wide focus on student achievement

- Approaches to curriculum and instruction

- Use of evidence for planning, organizational learning and accountability

- District-wide sense of efficacy

- Building and maintaining good communications and relations, learning communities, district culture

- Investing in instructional leadership

- Targeted and phased orientation to school improvement (targeting interventions on low performing schools/students)

- District-wide, job-embedded professional development for leaders and teachers

- Strategic engagement with the government's agenda for change and associated resources

- Infrastructure alignment

In a theoretical review of the philosophical underpinnings of social-psychological interventions in schools, Yeager and Walton (2011) noted that brief, nonacademic interventions that impact student perceptions of their own ability to achieve can influence student performance and close achievement gaps. Searching for research that did not focus on academic interventions, researchers identified studies that included randomly assigned students to intervention and control groups, and observed student academic performance over time, the researchers identified several social-psychological

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interventions that demonstrated increases in student achievement.

A 2007 study by Blackwell, Trzesniewski, and Dweck included in the review, indicated that low-income, urban black and Hispanic seventh graders demonstrated increased mathematics achievement (.30 grade points) after participating in an eight week intervention that taught study skills and brain strengthening techniques. The latter information was designed to increase student motivation when dealing with academic setbacks. The sessions met once a week for eight weeks and differed from a control group that only dealt with study skills and excluded the motivational component.

In a study that focused on developing student motivation by helping students see that achievement is close (not far), consistent with their ethnic identity, and attainable (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006), low-income Black and Hispanic eighth grade students attended 10 workshops. The workshops focused on students writing about how they could achieve academic success, how they could address challenges that are typical to any student striving for academic achievement, and how their success is consistent with their racial identity. Students in the treatment group outperformed the control group in a number of categories. The treatment group students were less likely to get in trouble at school, attendance was better, overall GPA was better, and as a group, these students were 60% less likely to repeat eighth grade. The effects of the program lasted long after the treatment in that, two years later, these students demonstrated a .28 difference in grade points compared to the control group.

In a study that focused on science achievement among ethnically diverse ninth graders (Hulleman & Harackiewicz, 2009), students demonstrated considerable gains by

writing about how their science lessons related to their everyday lives. Students

demonstrated a .80 grade point increase by the end of the semester in comparison to the

control group who summarized lessons instead of connecting them to their lives.

Students in the treatment group were all middle to low income and received the treatment

approximately 3-4 weeks at the start of a new semester.

These interventions were important for several reasons. They document change

in students' attributions toward academic setbacks – how students explain their setbacks.

Interventions in these studies sought to help students learn how to develop new strategies

for addressing setbacks including study skills development. Additionally, the

interventions presented in these studies mitigate stereotype threat – the effect of negative

stereotypes toward groups in schools who are historically labeled as less intelligent and

less capable of succeeding academically and in the community at large. Interventions in

these studies worked to instill strategies for overcoming the negative perceptions of

others toward students from marginalized groups.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

The achievement gap has cultural dimensions that are inherent in the way achievement is

currently reported. Subgroups are determined by racial and linguistic categories as well

as socioeconomic categories. Racial identities, as well as linguistic distinctions,

contribute to a sense of cultural identity. Economic status, as well, can contribute to a

unique perspective on life that informs language, sensemaking, and how intelligence is

defined. As an example, one writer defines culture in this way:

A product of history rather than of nature, culture now became the world to which

we had to adapt and the tool kit for doing so… Our culturally adapted way of life

depends upon shared meanings and shared concepts and depends as well upon

shared modes of discourse for negotiating differences in meaning and

interpretation… meanings are not to his own advantage unless he can get them

shared by others. (Bruner,1990, pp.12-13).

Marginalized populations often create alternative cultures to counteract the experience of

subjection to dominant cultural norms.

Integrating Bourdieu's and Ogbu's arguments, we might conclude that social,

economic, and political conditions compel African American students to develop

alternative cultural responses to opportunity that prevent them from gathering the

requisite cultural capital for academic, and ultimately socioeconomic, success.

(Carter, 2003, p.137).

At times, the perspectives of school culture and student identity can come into

conflict. One writer sums it up this way, "The language of my education was no longer

the language of my culture" (Thiong'o, 1981, p. 265). What a teacher determines to be of

little value may hold great significance to a student's culture beyond the classroom and

conversely what a teacher considers valuable may be contrary to a student's cultural

understandings. An example of how the misinterpretation or devaluing of cultural norms

from students can impact educational outcomes is in the documented overrepresentation

of Black males in special education (Ford, 1996; Ford & Harris, 1998; Gay, 2002; Harris-

Murri, King & Rostenberg, 2006; Weinstein, Curran & Tomlinson-Clarke, 2003).

"Misreading cultural communication cues can result in behavior issues and incorrect feedback about learning." (Davis, 2006).

A sensitivity to these perspectives can impact student experience in the classroom which can also impact student achievement. Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) attempts to take into account the factors that make for students' unique perspectives that are shared by a given culture in an attempt to bridge the cultural gaps that can lead to achievement gaps (Baskin, 2010). CRP is also an attempt to address historical power imbalances that silence the norms of cultures that have been marginalized in American society as a whole (vandenWyngaard, 2007). CRP also attempts to make acceptance of cultural differences the norm in the classroom (Richards, Brown, & Forde, 2007).

Reading and CRP. The arena of literacy is often researched among CRP scholars. A study by Conrad, Gong, Sipp, and Wright (2004) explored the incorporation of CRP in early literacy instruction. Three second grade classes participated in this study. One class was categorized as urban, one class was categorized as rural, and one was a university-affiliated lab school. One week before the intervention, the teacher of each class conducted an exercise to access prior knowledge of Booker T. Washington. The activity used is called K-W-L. The *K* stands for what the student already knows about the topic (which in this case would be Booker T. Washington). The *W* stands for what the student wants to know. The *L* stands for what the student learned after reading. The teacher in each class recorded student responses as a part of a whole-class discussion.

During the intervention, teachers incorporated the strategy of Text Talk and CRP. Teachers first asked students the following question: "How would you feel if you really

wanted to go to school or learn to read and weren't permitted to do so?" (p. 189). The teachers then encouraged responses while the discussion was audio recorded. The teachers then made the following statement: "There was a time in this country when some children weren't allowed to go to school or to learn to read." (p.189) The teachers then read the book *More Than Anything Else* (Bradby, 1995). As a part of the Text Talk method, the teacher read the story aloud without showing the pictures in the book. Pictures were shown at the conclusion of the oral reading and discussion. This was designed to encourage the construction of meaning through asking inferential questions. Teachers asked a total of six questions, stopping as they read aloud, to encourage student discussion. Teachers then discussed three vocabulary words from the story and asked questions using the vocabulary words. They encouraged students to give responses to those questions that demonstrated accurate pronunciation and use of the words.

According to the researchers, the intervention of CRP and Text Talk provided a gateway for successful reading for students who find reading challenging. Students demonstrated "extended in-depth responses and insightful thinking" (p. 189). According to the researchers, the CRP is best demonstrated in the teachers' willingness to allow students to share their personal perspective and insights in discussion. This study is important in that it demonstrates an approach that has potential to close existing achievement gaps in reading. This study is also of consequence in that it demonstrated the adaptability of CRP to existing pedagogical practices like Text Talk.

Another study (Modla & Wake, 2007) demonstrated various strategies that can be used through literature to promote cultural sensitivity. This study, like others in this field

of research, focused on how educating pre-service teachers in literacy strategies can help

them to be more effective teachers and help their students to be stronger in their own

literacy and cultural acceptance. The researchers noted that CRP is important in the

teaching of literature because most of the teachers are increasingly homogenous (White

and female) while classrooms are becoming more heterogeneous. There are four

aspirations that the researchers sought to develop in pre-service teachers through this

study:

- To distinguish cultural differences and misbehavior

- To identify the mismatch between school and home literacy practices

- To identify when a disparity exists between the language students use at home and the language expectations of the school environment

- How a transmission model of instruction can be problematic for minority students (p. 298)

Four strategies were used in this study to develop teachers who exhibit the above

characteristics and who can in turn develop greater cultural sensitivity and literacy skills

in students (pp. 301-305):

- Establishing empathy through discussion and performance

- Learning about cultures from memoirs

- Reading from different perspectives

- Responding to Blues music

In their conclusion the researchers noted that results were mixed and that some pre-

service teachers were resistant to the activities. Others took a color-blind approach and

commented that there are no meaningful differences between people. It is this very disposition that can hinder open discussion in literature courses and create less engagement in the classroom according to the researchers. Pre-service teachers did note a positive response to the empathy exercise. The usefulness of this study lies in its sharing of methods that can be used in the classroom to encourage discussion and thinking about texts.

Learning preferences. Another important topic in CRP research is learning preferences. A 2005 study by Ellison, Boykin, Tyler and Dillihunt demonstrated the idea of cultural influences that impact learning styles. Participants in their study were 138 fifth and sixth graders. There were 72 White participants (39 female and 33 male) and 66 Black participants (33 male and 33 female). Students were drawn from four different classrooms in one elementary school in a city in the southeastern part of the United States. Over ninety-five percent of the students at the school were considered economically disadvantaged due to being identified as receiving free or reduced meals.

Students were given The Social Interdependence Scales, an assessment written at a fifth grade reading level. Students were sent from their homeroom to a classroom designated for the evaluation. Students took the inventory in groups of 12 with 10 minutes to answer the questions. No assistance was given to students as they took the inventory. The instrument has three sections, one for cooperative preferences, one for competitive preferences, and one for individual preferences. Each section had seven statements placed on a Likert scale designed to determine the degree to which students agreed with a given statement.   Examples of questions from each category are below:

- Cooperative: I like to work with other students.

- Competitive: I'm happiest when I am competing with other students.

- Individualistic: I like work better when I do it all by myself. (p. 702)

Results indicated that overall students preferred cooperative learning, when given an option, over competitive or individualistic learning. Black students (mean of 6.63 for cooperative learning), however, demonstrated significantly higher preferences for cooperative learning than their White counterparts (mean of 5.02 cooperative learning) who preferred competitive (mean 4.65 compared to 3.32 for Blacks) or individualistic (mean 3.76 compared to 2.29 for Blacks) learning environments. This study was of use due to its potential for unlocking greater engagement among minority students.

Proposed strategies for leaders. CRP has implications for education leaders (Baskin, 2010). The role of central office leaders in creating a climate that is supportive of diversity is essential to addressing the cultural dimensions of achievement gaps. According to Frank E. Andrews, Director of Undergraduate Programs at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell:

The foremost challenge in education today is to create learning environments that maintain and embrace the cultural integrity of all students and raise achievement levels. . . . For an educational leader the major challenge is to identify effective ways to change the perception of teachers so that they are willing to deviate from their long-held traditional beliefs with respect to pedagogy, culture, and learning.

For both academic and moral reasons schools should embrace and celebrate cultural diversity within the classroom and close the unacceptable achievement

gap. Incorporating diverse students' cultural experiences into the curriculum and

getting teachers to buy-in to a new pedagogical approach [are] positive steps

toward effecting change and increasing learning opportunities. (2007, par. 12-13)

Richards, Brown and Forde (2007) noted a number of activities that can be

encouraged by district leaders in both central office meetings and at the school level for

administrators and teachers:

1. Engage in reflective thinking and writing.

2. Explore personal and family histories.

3. Acknowledge membership in different groups.

4. Learn about the history and experiences of different groups.

5. Visit students' families and communities.

6. Visit or read about successful teachers in diverse settings.

7. Develop an appreciation for diversity.

8. Participate in reforming the institution. (pp. 65-66)

School district leaders can also use inventories designed to evaluate the degree of

cultural responsiveness in a district. For example, a five-page inventory developed by

scholars at the University of Washington (Banks et al., 2001) is based on twelve

underlying principles (p. 3) that are categorized under the following headings:

1. teacher learning

2. student learning

3. intergroup relations

4. school governance, organization and equity

5. assessment

Conclusions. Studies conducted by proponents of CRP demonstrate several strategies that may be considered by central office administrators in their attempts at closing achievement gaps. Creating a classroom environment that is accepting for all students is considered to be a best practice by many educators. This is a central tenet of CRP. Additionally, studies that deal with teacher education and professional development can also support system-wide efforts at supporting a culture of empathy and mutual respect. One question that emerges from this chapter is "How does your district approach closing achievement gaps? Why?"

Chapter 3: Methods

Both culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) and critical race theory (CRT) perspectives serves as the philosophical underpinnings of this dissertation. Like many who adhere to CRT, I believe that "race continues to be a powerful social construct and signifier" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 8). Because of this, it is critical to hear the stories of people of color to awaken people to unconscious and unacknowledged experiences with racism (p. 14). Like others in the CRP school of thought (Gay, 2000), I believe that culture makes a difference in educational efforts. I support the belief postulated by Geneva Gay:

> . . . deliberately incorporating *specific* aspects of the cultural systems of different ethnic groups into instructional processes has positive impacts on student achievement. . . . Compelling research demonstrates that school achievement improves when protocols and procedures of teaching are synchronized with the mental schemata, participation styles, work habits, thinking styles, and experiential frames of reference of diverse ethnic groups. (Gay, 2000, p. xvi)

Additionally, I believe that test scores are a symptom of forces that cause achievement gaps. The forces of poverty, political disenfranchisement, and exclusion from social capital are a few examples of how students can come to school with disadvantages when competing with other students who have these advantages. I agree

with Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) when she said, ". . . the cumulative effect of poor education, poor housing, poor health care, and poor government services create a bifurcated society that leaves more than its children behind." (p. 10) I agree with the statement made in Lee and Burkam's work (2002):

> Much of the deficit in cognitive performance with which Hispanic and black children arrive at the schoolhouse door is due to a simple social phenomenon: black and Hispanic children's families are often poor and their parents less well educated. This simple but striking phenomenon virtually defines social stratification in achievement. (p. 57)

I also concur with Gay's statement:

> The achievement patterns among ethnic groups in the United States are too persistent to be attributed only to individual limitations. The fault lies as well within the institutional structures, procedures, assumptions, and operational styles of schools, classrooms, and the society at large. (Gay, 2000, p. xiv)

Finally, I believe that conventional reform efforts that are deficit-based are ineffective in closing achievement gaps. Leaders of school districts must have more than good intentions; they must have creative action connected to those good intentions for positive change to occur. Cultural diversity is a very valuable strength and should be celebrated and encouraged in our efforts to close gaps in achievement. This cultural diversity should be seen in the classroom and at the decision making table. Diversity of ideas is just as significant to closing achievement gaps as is what we teach. This study

seeks to further investigate the central office culture to understand how central office administrators understand and plan to act to address achievement gaps.

Because of this critical lens, I have made specific decisions regarding the methods used for this study. The influence of culture is not ignored in the study regarding the interview questions and the background of participants in the study. I intentionally identified administrators from both African-American and White cultural groups because their perceptions are believed to be influenced by their cultural backgrounds. Additionally, special attention is paid to perspectives on both the systemic and individual causes of achievement gaps because these perceptions can be very culturally based regarding both experiences with school systems and personal perceptions of how groups relate and navigate those systems.

The Pilot Study

A small-scale pilot study inspired me to focus on perceptions of achievement gaps among central office administrators in the Mid-Atlantic region (Baskin, 2009). The pilot study included three central office administrators from two school districts. The study consisted of one-hour interviews. All participants for the pilot study were White. One participant was male. The main research question of this study was "How do central office administrators understand the causes of the achievement gap." An additional question was "How do central office administrators perceive their ability to address achievement gaps in their current role." Findings from the study included the following:

1. All of the central office educators had a different definition of achievement gap and none felt that the use of the term was adequate in explaining the cause of the phenomenon.

2. All of the central office educators expressed some resistance from other central office educators regarding their view of the phenomenon known as the achievement gap.

3. Actualization of their beliefs about the achievement gap was difficult without allies or supporters.

4. All expressed a personal interest in the phenomenon that led them to reading on their own. This was not, however, supplemented by district efforts to educate them (with the exception of one).

The pilot study was very helpful in developing a method for the dissertation study. My decision to focus on the central office context in multiple locations was also influenced by the pilot study because the study was limited in that it only focused on administrators from two school districts. Additionally, the pilot study had participants who worked primarily in instruction. I thought it would be good to expand the study to include people who also supervise principals. The literature review for this study was influenced by the responses of participants in the study. The rationale for the specific causes mentioned as well as the solutions mentioned was suggested in the dialogue of the interviewees.

The issue of color-blindness also became very prominent in the pilot study. One participant discussed a particularly volatile encounter when discussing the color-blind aspects of decision making around achievement gaps:

> It's been really challenging to promote this perspective because it is so emotional. The more you start talking about class, race, gender, ethnicity, and heritage language—all these things—it becomes uncomfortable for many people. So often when this topic is broached at all the reaction is anger or outrage. As an example, in a math team meeting we were talking about the achievement gap as mapped onto race because we were looking at some standards of learning data broken up by race and so I raised the point that from a mathematics team look around our table it's all white people. The three people at the top are white men, and the next layer is all white women. And people were horrified (and in a few examples enraged) that I had raised that issue of race based on who's making the decisions. So interestingly, these angry interactions that sometimes result in yelling and door slamming—things like that, things that you would think wouldn't happen in a professional workplace—these serve as catalyzing situations. So in some cases, it made people shut down and never want to speak about it ever again; but in other examples it really opened the conversation. Once the steam had kind of risen and people had collected themselves, there came an opportunity to start talking about these things. (Baskin, p. 20)

The above quote also points to the significance of creating a climate in which interviewees feel safe enough to be transparent and to share, what may be, very difficult

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topics to discuss. Additionally, my use of open-ended questions in the study was very much influenced by the kind of responses shared above.

Participants

The study consisted of interviews with a total of 15 current and former central office administrators. The interviews lastedbetween 21 minutes and an hour and 15 minutesand included people from instructional services departments, offices of diversity, and supervisors of principals. Seven of the respondents were Black and eight were White. They were from seven different school districts. Table 3 shows participants. There were seven participants in the study who are either retired or are former central office administrators. Former central office administrators were helpful in providing a range of experiences that, when compared to current central office workers, helped to identify issues that are consistent throughout the culture of central office workers. Additionally, some of these participants, although not in the central office context, still work within the context of education in some meaningful ways. Two, for example, are consultants for schools who struggle to close achievement gaps. Three are college professors. One works in a state-level position supporting districts who struggle to close achievement gaps. There are also seven current and retired superintendents. The number of participants from this particular position was beneficial to this study in that it provided a perspective from the primary decision maker in a school district.

Table 3

List of Participants

Code Name	Code District	Job	Self Identified Race/Ethnicity	Gender
Adam	District 1	Retired Superintendent	Caucasian	Male
Bea	District 2	Retired Assistant Superintendent	Black	Female
Carrie	District 2	Retired Director	African American	Female
David	District 3	Program Coordinator	African American	Male
Eric	District 4	Retired Superintendent	Caucasian	Male
Frank	District 3	Supervisor for Science Education	African American	Male
Greg	District 1	Superintendent	White	Male
Helen	District 2	Retired Assistant Superintendent	Caucasian	Female
Ivan	District 1	Diversity Director	Hispanic/African American	Male
Jack	District 5	Minority Achievement Specialist	African American	Male
Ken	District 6	Superintendent	White	Male
Luke	District 4	Retired Superintendent	White	Male
Mark	District 5	Superintendent	White	Male
Neal	District 7	Superintendent	White	Male
Olga	District	Former	Puerto	Female

2	Minority Achievement Coordinator	Rican/African American

Although the population of the pilot study (Baskin, 2009) included central office administrators from two school districts in the Middle Atlantic region, the population for this study was selected to capture the diversity of positions within the central office context and to ensure a variety of districts participated in the study. Similar to the study conducted by McMahon (2007), purposive sampling techniques (Merriam, 1998) were used in the selection of participants for this study. Participants from the aforementioned pilot study (Baskin, 2009) were not used in this study. Purposive sampling was used in this study to "adequately capture the heterogeneity in the population" of central office administrators (Maxwell, 2005, pp. 89-91).

Maxwell also notes the significance of a close and collegial relationship as a possible rationale for conducting a purposive sample (p. 91). As an experienced central office employee, I find purposive sampling to be particularly useful because of my familiarity with the central office environment. I understand the responsibilities associated with people within this context. Understanding the cultural norms also helped me to create questions that are relevant to the work of central office administrators and essential to answering the research questions I posed. Additionally, this method also served the purpose of developing heterogeneity by intentionally identifying participants from diverse backgrounds.

I identified participants based on work title by looking on district web sites for individuals who were in the following categories: instructional services departments, offices of diversity, and supervisors of principals. I made individual contact by phone or email and requested an interview. At the end of the interview, I asked the interviewee if they know of others who would be interested in participating in the project and have a point of view that would be important to include.

Participants came from a variety of school districts. The school districts included seven school districts within the Mid-Atlantic region which demonstrated a history of acknowledged gaps in achievement between White students and Black students. This was demonstrated by standardized test results as disaggregated by subgroups and by public acknowledgement of gaps in literature published by the school district in (for example) reports on strategic goals.

All districts in the study are part of a large metropolitan area surrounding a major city. Although the school districts represented in the study are part of a metropolis, they vary in size. All school district populations in the study are majority-minority which means a majority of the students in the district are not White. The location of the study is significant in that these districts all confront the challenge of growing minority populations while also dealing with gaps in achievement between White and nonwhite students. Table 4 displays the approximate size of each district in the study. District 2 is, by far, the largest district in the study. As Table 3 points out, it also has the largest number of participants in the study (4).

Table 4

Approximate Size of School Districts in the Study

District	Approximate Number of Schools
1	10-20
2	100+
3	80-90
4	Fewer than 10
5	30-40
6	Fewer than 10
7	30-40

Participants were selected based on their role in central office (which is identified through their work title) within their school district. They were contacted by e-mail, telephone, or letter. I intentionally sought to have a pool of participants who were diverse in gender, race, and experience in central office. Although smaller, my demographic representation was similar to that found in the Uhlenberg and Brown study (2002) to determine if perceptions at the central office level differ by race. In that study, approximately half the respondents were people of color and half were White. Like the McMahon study pseudonyms were used throughout the paper to protect the identities of the participants. Information below outlines the participant selection process:

1. I used Table 5 to organize selection of interviewees to ensure racial balance.

2. I worked with the dissertation chair to identify central office administrators in the Middle Atlantic region who met the criteria in Table 5.

3. Once a list of potential interviewees was assembled based on the above criteria, I

   sent a letter to each participant by e-mail requesting an interview.

Table 5

Identification of Interviewees by Role and Ethnicity

Self-Identified Race/Ethnicity	Instructional Services	Offices of Diversity	Supervisors of Principals	Total Interviewees
Total Black Participants	2	3	2	7
Total White Participants			8	8

Procedures

The following statement was used to ask permission to interview for the

Achievement Gap Perception Project. My primary means of communication for requests

was e-mail. The following statement was read or delivered to the participants:

Hello, my name is Roger Baskin, and I am a doctoral student at George Mason

University. I am conducting a series of interviews with central office educators

like yourself regarding your perspectives on student achievement gaps through the

lens of your work as a central office administrator. This is a significant study in

that it affords central office administrators an opportunity to express their insight

on the topic of student achievement, something rarely discussed in the literature I

have read. Because of your experience in the community you serve, I thought that

you would make an ideal candidate for the project.

The project consists of a one hour interview that will be recorded for reasons of

accuracy. Your identity and place of employment will not be revealed and you

can discontinue your participation at any time.

Is it possible to schedule a time to meet?

As in the pilot study, I explained the study to them and answered any questions they had

about the purpose of the study.   My communication explained the purpose and method of

the study, the amount of time the interview would take, and the degree of confidentiality

involved.

Once the person agreed to participate, I then scheduled a time to meet individually

with her or him for an hour-long interview. I offered each participant a letter of informed

consent for recording the interview and using the transcripts of the interview in the

dissertation. The location of the interviews depended greatly on what was agreed upon

between the interviewee and me. In a previous pilot study, I interviewed some

respondents in their office while others preferred to be interviewed offsite (Baskin, 2009).

My main goal was to create an atmosphere where the interviewee was assured of

confidentiality and was able to develop a sense of trust that the interview process would

be both professional and nonthreatening. The relationships I hoped to establish were of

mutual respect. For my part, allowing the interviewee to recommend a location was one

way that I demonstrated my appreciation for their willingness to be interviewed. Seven

of the interviews were conducted over the telephone. With two participants currently

living outside of the Mid-Atlantic region and others with very busy schedules, telephone

interviews seemed to be the only option. The other eight met with me in a variety of

locations including their place of work (5), a local university (1), and a local church near

their place of work (2). The telephone interviews did not seem to be any different from

the in-person interviews in terms of the information shared by participants in the study.

Telephone interviews tended to range in length from 29 minutes to 58 minutes. While,

interviews in places of work were among the shortest interviews (between 21-29

minutes), interviews at the local church were by far the longest (one hour and one minute

to one hour and 15 minutes). In both the telephone and in-person interviews, participants

shared rich experiences about their work in central office.

Data Collection

Sources of data consist of semi-structured interviews held with participants. The

data afforded me the opportunity to analyze richly descriptive information about the lived

experiences of the participants (Merriam, 1998, p. 8). Further, the study of the way

participants construct their reality is essential to understanding policy decisions.

According to Heck (2004) "It is important … to understand the cognitive processes of

participants as they interact within policy arenas to produce policy actions." (p. 215).

This was a qualitative study using interviews as the source of data. The interviews

primarily consisted of open-ended questions "so that participants can best voice their

experiences unconstrained by any perspectives of the researcher or past research

findings." (Creswell, 2008, p. 225).

The interview questions for the study can be found in the Appendix B. They are

open-ended questions designed to give interviewees an opportunity to share their

experiences and perceptions. The initial questions were informed by the pilot study

(Baskin, 2009) and follow up prompts are those numbered below the research questions.

Additional questions were asked depending on interviewee responses and some prompts

were not asked if answered in response to other questions. Because interviewee

responses varied, there was also an effort to establish a fluid conversation that allowed

for discovery of participant expression of perception and ideas that may have gone

beyond the research questions.

Data Analysis

My analysis of data was ultimately geared toward discovery of the perceptions of

central office administrators regarding achievement gaps and sought to provide a

perspective in their own words of how they both understood the problem and solutions to

the problem of the achievement gap. Additionally, the analysis sought to capture the

interviewees' understanding of their own sense of agency in being able to actively

participate in solving achievement gap concerns. I followed the coding, categorizing, and

theme-searching method discussed by Glesne (2006, p. 154). While collecting data, I

wrote memos which allowed me to capture analytic thoughts about interviews as the

thoughts occurred to me. These memos were kept in an analytic file which was designed

to organize useful information and thoughts.

After each interview, I used Dragon Naturally Speaking for transcribing the

interviews. I first used Dragon Naturally Speaking while conducting the data analysis for

the aforementioned pilot study. I found that it saves a great deal of time when transcribing interviews. When transcribing, I listened to the entire tape and transcribed each interview. After the initial transcription, I went back to edit any misspellings. One of the downsides to Dragon Naturally Speaking is that it does not always get what I am saying accurately. The result is that some words are misspelled and others are replaced with completely different words. For example, *washing dishes* may be transcribed in place of *Washington, DC*. Following the transcription editing, I then created a matrix that listed each interviewee and categorical information. I included categories that related to the themes identified across the interviewees.

I developed categories from the interviews and literature discussed earlier in this proposal. I reflected on interviews to identify important ideas. Then I played the tape to hear the interview again immediately.   I then saved a copy of the interview on the computer and listened to it again. Again, I wrote down any significant ideas that arose in the interview. As new codes were identified, they were highlighted and identified based on authentic language used by the participants. This was done by first identifying responses that were similar in wording and meaning based on my experience with respondents at the individual interviews. Once the responses were coded by similar wording and meaning, they were then categorized by a word or phrasesthatwere derived from the respondents but consistent with intended meaning. Finally, themes that emerged from the responses were identified and used to make sense of individual responses as part of a potentially unified phenomenon. This evolved into theoretical categorization which placed concepts interviewees shared into an understanding of the philosophy and thinking

of the interviewees. The following list for initial coding categories was derived from

research questions I addressed and questions and topics from the interview schedule:

1. Initial achievement gap perceptions

2. Causes of achievement gaps

3. Central office culture

4. Solutions to achievement gaps

Later comparative categories included differences and similarities by ethnicity (Black and

White). Substantive categories that grew from the initial organizational categories

include the following:

- Economic condition as a cause

- Socioeconomic condition as a cause

- Health as a cause

- Community attitudes

- Attendance and motivation

- Lack of preparation

- Black students not identifying with advanced academics

- Parent difficulty navigating the system

- Lack of parent engagement

- Parent inability to support learning

- Ineffective use of resources

- Lack of innovation

- Not focusing attention on the problem

- District culture

- The test is the problem

- White teachers not wanting to teach Black children

- Not enough funding

- How race is identified

- Identifying resources

- Supporting students

- Meeting with the community

- Making achievement gaps a priority

- Looking at data

- Collaboration among educators

- Identifying resources within the school district

- Strategizing

- Professional development

- Choosing leaders

- Racism

- Motivating students

- Parents as obstacles

- Relationships with central office administrators

- Teachers as obstacles

- Finding data

- The test as an obstacle

- School district culture as an obstacle

- Not enough funding as an obstacle

- Early intervention as a solution

- Instilling pride in the school

- Diversity in advanced classes

- Advocating for students

- Helping parents

- Visiting struggling schools

- Holding people accountable

Limitations

Difficulties in this project included gaining access to people who work within this context. They have very full calendars and are typically running from one meeting to the next. Getting on their calendars was difficult at times, and staying on their calendars was even harder in some instances. Some, for example, rescheduled meetings to talk by telephone as opposed to meeting in person due to schedule changes. Meetings can sometimes come up suddenly, and there is little that can be done to compete with the urgency of the work of handling lawsuits, managing a school shooting, or even preparing for a tough meeting with the local school board.

Also, there are political ramifications regarding their willingness to share freely about their individual perspectives and how they may at times come into conflict with organizational norms. This is a popular topic, but it is also a very controversial one.

People who work within this context tend to be very careful about their conversations because they may be reluctant to cast the organization in a negative light. Consequently, there can sometimes be difficulty in getting beyond the "company line" and gaining access to the true perspective of these leaders. According to Creswell (2008, p. 226), one of the limitations of interviews is that interviews provide only "filtered" information based on the participant's perspective. Further, Creswell notes that the participants may "…be deceptive and provide the perspective the interviewee wants the researcher to hear." (p. 226).

The fact that I am an African-American male discussing matters of racial achievement gaps with Whites could also present some difficulties in transparency for some interviewees. There is the potential for hesitance in being completely honest about responses. Choosing respondents that are from underrepresented populations was important in creating both a diverse group of respondents and a group that is less likely to have talking about matters of race as a major concern. Additionally, identifying Whites who are comfortable with talking about matters of racial achievement gaps was important to the study in that it provided more of an opportunity for transparency. All of the White administrators in the study come from districts that are majority-minority. Because they lead in districts that are racially diverse, they are used to interacting with stakeholders from various ethnic backgrounds. Also, because they all come from environments that have gaps in achievement that have been long-lasting, they are used to having conversations about racial disparities in academic achievement. Additionally, I was very upfront, in my letter of invitation to participate, that the topic had to do with the Black-

White achievement gap. Therefore, those who were willing to participate knew that the topic would include issues about racial disparities in achievement. Finally, my dissertation chair was helpful in identifying individuals who would be willing to participate and who were knowledgeable about the issues related to the Black-White achievement gap.

Because I have worked within this context, I was able to identify who would be most willing to talk and who was in the position to discuss the topic at length (because of involvement in projects or because of work with advisory boards that deal with the topic). This was helpful in choosing respondents and also in understanding the day to day work of the central office administrators chosen for the study. I spoke to individuals from different departments so as not to create a sense of suspicion within any single department. I was also clear about communicating the confidentiality of the interview.

Validity

The integrity of my research is of vital importance to me. Like all researchers, it was important to acknowledge and plan for my own personal biases that can interfere with the integrity of my work. There were two potential threats to the validity of my interpretation of the interview data. One is my own bias as an individual coming from a particular cultural context—African American male. The other has to do with reactivity—my potential to influence the interview by my presence. The subsequent sections will discuss how I ensured these threats to validity would not lessen the quality of my research.

My own bias. My own convictions, attitudes, and perspectives have the potential to influence my data collection and interpretation. In order to ensure my interpretation of the interviews was valid, I had to guard against interpretations that were more a creation of my perceptions than actual unbiased interpretation. An approach that I teach my English students is based on de Bono's Thinking Hats (www.debonogroup.com). Each hat has a color that represents a different way of thinking. The white hat, for example, focuses solely on the facts. By focusing on the facts, I narrowed the likelihood of placing my biases into the interpretation of the interviews. By using direct quotes, writing detailed notes about the context of the interviews, and reporting those notes, I lessenedthe likelihood of researcher bias. Additionally, talking with my dissertation chair about the interviews helped me to get an additional perspective on how to interpret the statements of participants.

Reactivity. My presence in the interviews had the potential of being a validity threat that could influence the interview process. What I said or did during the interviews could impact the interviewees. To lessen my influence on the interviews, I tried to avoid any words or actions that would predispose the interviewee to respond in a way that might be perceived as acceptable to me. Additionally, I reflected on interviewee responses, the context in which they occurred, and my own feelings and thoughts at the moment to minimize reactivity. I kept the threat of reactivity in mind during interviews and made notes in the interview transcripts of instances of possible reactivity that may have influenced interviewee responses. For example, the fact that the longest interviews were African American males who met with me in a local church may have something to

do with their reaction to me being an African American male and their sense of my identification with their experiences. Additionally, the fact that White privilege was mentioned primarily by White male participants that I interviewed in person may have been a reaction to my identity as an African American male. Finally, my presence as an African-American male may have influenced the responses of interviewees. This may be due to their concern that nothing is said that may offend me. The achievement gap is, after all, a topic that includes discussion of racial differences in achievement and the reasons behind it. There was little I could do about that; however, this was a matter that was understood as I both conducted the interviews and interpreted data.

Overall, the respondents seemed very open about their views. For those who met with me face to face, there was very open dialogue. The body language was quite enthusiastic including hand gestures, smiles, and direct eye contact. Jack and Ivan, who met at the church, for example, actually talked for more than the allotted hour without being in a hurry to stop the conversation. They shared very intimate details about their challenges and insights into their work at closing achievement gaps. The fact that we were off-site made them much more willing to share. Additionally, the fact that neither their names nor the names of their districts were used put all participants at ease. They felt free to talk without fear of what others might say. Several of the Black participants commented that they were glad the study was being conducted and that it was needed.

White participants who met in person, and over the telephone, also demonstrated great enthusiasm at talking about the issues related to the Black-White achievement gap. Neal, for example, was very animated in his dialogue and seemed very comfortable

talking about his perceptions. Adam, who interviewed over the telephone, was very

detailed in his discussion—particularly regarding the causes of the achievement gap. The

fact that the questions in the interview were open-ended helped a great deal in that

participants were encouraged to share what they perceived. There were no answers that

were right or wrong answers. There was only their perception. Most participants would

comment how passionate they were about the topic and it showed in their responses.

Chapter 4: Perceptions of Central Office Administrators

This chapter shares the results of interviews conducted with 15 current and former

central office administrators from seven different school districts in the Middle Atlantic

region. The chapter has four major sections that correspond to the research questions that

drove the study. The first section focuses on how central office administrators perceive

the causes of the Black-White achievement gap. The second section shares responses of

participants on how they perceive their role in impacting achievement gaps. The third

section focuses on how central office administrators worked to solve achievement gaps.

The fourth section deals with differences between Black and White administrators

regarding responses to the first three sections.

Perceptions of Causes of the Black-White Achievement Gap

This section of chapter 4 describes major findings relevant to the first research

question: How do central office administrators understand the causes of the achievement

gap? This section is divided into four general areas based on the responses of the

interviewees: external factors, child factors, parent factors, and school system factors.

An interesting point to consider before reading this section is that of the 15 participants in

the study, all but three mentioned that their first interaction with the term achievement

gap was at work as either a teacher or administrator. The three who did fit into that

category learned about the achievement gap while in college. All three, Frank, David,

and Olga, are people of color. Additionally, when asked if their initial perception of

achievement gaps and their causes had evolved at all over the years since their initial

introduction, ten said yes while five (Adam, David, Jack, Luke, and Neal) said no. The

majority of the central office administrators are still evolving in their understanding of

what achievement gaps mean and how best to understand their causes. This comes

through in their discussion of factors that cause achievement gaps in their districts. Some

focused on singular factors while others mentioned multiple factors.

External Factors

   Economics. Adam and Neal both mentioned economics as the most important

factor in the creation of achievement gaps. Adam put it this way:

   It is a family income issue that drives this achievement issue. If you are poor, no

   matter where you are from or what language you speak, you are going to struggle

   in the school system.   So it really is not a race thing at all, it is a social and

   economic issue.

   Neal said, "It's an economic issue for God's sake; the parents don't have the

resources."

   Adam discussed Ruby Payne as an influence in his understanding of the role of

poverty in achievement gaps. According to Adam:

   Well, I have been terribly [influenced] by a woman from Texas by the name of

   Ruby Payne. Ten or 12 years ago, I came across her work and read a great deal

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about poverty. There are other people that have done it too, but she was the first.

So, I kind of followed her and what she had to say.   If you are poor and White

you are going to have issues with learning in school. If you are poor and Black you

are going to have learning issues in school. Poverty is the real thing that separates

all of this learning business.

Socioeconomics. Frank and Olga both used the term socioeconomics as one of

their explanations for achievement gaps. Frank noted:

It's not an issue of just race or gender but socioeconomics.In our district we have

a huge transient population. Students are being moved around not because they

want to.They have family obligations whether it's financial, military, or whatever

the case.

Olga said a contributing factor in achievement gaps in District 2 was:

… socioeconomic class difference. Schools in higher income areas of the school

district had a much lower achievement gap than those schools in lower income

areas of the district. Education is not just what happens in the classroom.Even

though what happens in the classroom is extremely significant, what also impacts

young people in their learning is what happens in their homes [and] what happens

within their communities.

Health. Ken mentioned health as one of several factors that he believed was

beyond the control of a school district. He said:

We as school administrators are in control of somethings, and there are some

things that we aren't in control of. I think some of the things that we are not in

control of that relate to an achievement gap are early childhood education, our three and four year olds getting some sort of educational training. I think about things we don't control like nutrition, childhood health, immunizations, and things that go along with health.

Community attitudes. Eric talked about the role of the community in contributing to achievement gaps. Eric said, "To be honest with you, I think the community felt like some kids, due to their backgrounds, would never achieve. So, why do we have to spend all this money?"

Child Factors

Attendance and motivation. David said:

Another main issue I would say is school attendance. School attendance is major. If we can get the child there consistently, I feel like we can address the issues and work with them academically. I would say definitely school attendance is an issue as well, and that points to home life.

David also pointed to student motivation as a contributing factor to achievement gaps:

Motivation is huge because if a student is not motivated academically, the best teaching, bringing in all the expertise, and all the support systems, will only go so far. The child does have to be motivated. But I think that connects to the parent involvement, making sure that learning and the love of learning is not just left up to the school. I think there needs to be a culture of learning at home that helps feed and boost that motivation.

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Carrie used the term "not valuing education" to make a similar point. According to Carrie:

> … kids themselves [not] valuing the education that they get. There are so many things that distract the kids. They are not as focused as maybe they need to be when they come to school. They do not understanding that connection between their success in life and the education they get.

Eric used the term "expectation" to discuss a similar issue of motivation. He said, "I've seen it happen where the expectations, of both student and teacher, are so limiting that it affects the gap."

Lack of preparation. Bea, Frank, Jack, and Ken all mentioned lack of student preparation as a factor in achievement gaps. Ken mentioned earlier in his list of things beyond the control of school administrators, that early childhood education was a factor. Beasaid:

> There is a gap in achievement because [some children] come to school lacking certain basic skills; and I noticed from years of experience, the kids that come to school really excited to learn. And when they get there, they are in kindergarten and first grade with children who can read and do other things, and they become disillusioned. By the time they are in thirdgrade, they are falling behind and the gap really starts widening.

Frank said, "I think in general the achievement gap comes from [lack of] early access and early exposure to quality education where students are [not] given the

opportunity, and the resources, and instructors, and those strategies that best suit the kids'

needs."

Jack said:

When we talk about them, particularly with educators, one thing that comes up is

the kids' preparation before they get to school. When I looked at the causes of the

achievement gap, one has to do with how the kids are prepared when they first

walk in the door.

Identity. Enrollment in advanced academic classes has become, for many school

districts, part of the effort to close achievement gaps and access gaps simultaneously.

Jack spoke about the difficulty in getting students into advanced academic classes as a

part of this effort. Jack said:

You also have students who do not see themselves, or people who look like them,

in upper-level classes, on the student government, and as valedictorians. If I can

walk through a school and see majority White students in the class and guess that

that is an upper-level class and be rightand see a class that has mostly Black and

Hispanic males and guess that that is a special-education class and be right, then

just visually you see where you fit in and where you don't. So, we've had students

who did not want to go into more challenging courses because they didn't see a

lot of people who look like them, and then it becomes a thing of identity and

where do I belong.

Parent Factors

Parents can't navigate the system. Jack and Mark both discussed the inability of parents to understand the school system. They see this as a factor in the emergence of achievement gaps. Jack said, "The other factor I believe is parents understanding their rights and responsibilities and knowing how to navigate the system."

Mark said:

I always think first of all that communication is a key element here, and it's not that people aren't well intended or they make bad decisions. I think one part of it is "I don't know what I don't know." So, if you give me information and I don't know what to do with it, it's somewhat worthless.

Parents not able to support learning. Bea and Adam both talked about the culture at home that does not support learning. Bea said:

If you talk to [students] and ask them "Well, who helps you at home? Is there a certain place that's designated at home to do your homework?" Many of them do not. Now, these are the[responses of the younger children]. When you talk to the older children, they are saying "When I get home, I got to work." There's nobody really monitoring what's going on in the home.

Adam said:

You're trying to overcome generational poverty in some cases. Not every mother or father, or whoever and however the family is arranged, thinks that education is a priority.You're trying to help a five or six year old kid do something in the schoolhouse that is not very well reinforced in the home.

Lack of engagement. Carrie, David, and Olga talked about lack of parent engagement as a factor in achievement gaps. Carrie said, "And I can't blame parents, but I wish we would do a little bit more or have a little bit more support at the home. It's important to read to your kids. It's important to set time for homework."

David pointed out, in discussions about student factors like attendance and motivation, that the root cause comes from a lack of parent engagement. David said, "The fact of the matter is we can talk about parent involvement, but we have very little control over that."

Olga said, "If there is very little engagement in student learning because of socioeconomics, or because the parents fear not feeling confident that they can support their children for whatever reason, that also has an impact."

School system factors

Ineffective use of resources. Greg and Ivan, both from District 1, pointed to the ineffective use of resources as a factor in achievement gaps. Greg said:

It's not that we pour money into it; it's that we use our resources differently. Reading teachers are a good example of that. Even though they are some really good people, wouldn't it be better if we trade reading teachers and drive class size lower by getting more English teachers? So it's about using resources.

Ivan said:

The systems that you have in place will never allow [closing achievement gaps] to happen here. [District 1] has done a very good job of ensuring that there is an underclass of children that will come out of this school division. Historically,

there has been an allocation of resources going in the wrong direction. For example, when we sat down with the budget this year in [a different district], we pay [about $10,000] for each student in [District 1] the allocation per student is [over $17,000]. That is unheard of. There is noone spending that kind of money … but what you had in the budget was an allocation for stipends that was almost $600,000. I wondered what the stipends were used for and was told, "mentoring and afterschool tutoring". I asked, "How do those programs work, what is the name of the mentoring program?"And everyone looked around the room. I said "I'm not trying to call anybody out, but here we are in these tough budget times and you allocated this much money to this thing to help close the achievement gap, and you don't even know what is going on; and you have mentoring programs that have someone coming in once a month." That is not a mentoring program; that is a he comes in once a month program. You've got these programs afterschool in which teachers are able to work with students, but they may or may not know what their strengths and weaknesses are or anything like that. I said "It is a poor use of money and time.You are saying that you are trying to close the achievement gap, but you are wrong in that area."

No innovation. Greg, Helen, and Luke mentioned lack of innovation as a factor in achievement gaps. Greg said:

How come we are not being more innovative, more adaptable in the work we do to make sure our kids achieve? We are still trying to fit our kids into the

curriculum, rather than recognize a phrase I heard the other day that, "The kids are the curriculum."

Helen, who mentioned the significance of incorporating the arts in instruction, said, "Appreciate the influence of the arts and what that does to students' emotions."

Luke said:

I think it was a lack of sophistication as well, at that time. And then getting more into the problem-solving stage and the problem identification stage, I'm not so sure we had a really good understanding of ideas relating to social justice and cultural competence; some of the things that we now hopefully have a better understanding of.

Not focusing attention. Helen, Luke, and David pointed to the lack of attention to the achievement gap as an issue. Helen said, "[There was] not enough emphasis on kids who just weren't making it and not enough emphasis on helping kids learn to read and get basic math."

Luke said:

… the idea that somehow things will go away by themselves by ignoring the problem and not dealing with it because it is hard to deal with was an issue. In some cases, I think it is a minor issue, but in other cases, I think we were very unsophisticated at that time in terms of disaggregating the data and getting a sense of it.

David said, "I would also put close to the top [lack of] early identification, identifying those students early on that are not performing well academically and trying to address the issue as quickly as possible."

District culture. Greg, Ivan, and Luke all point to a general culture of ineffectiveness within the school district that leads to achievement gaps. Ivan said, "The reason why you have these achievement gaps is because there is a lack of ownership around the table. There is a 'Well, I don't deal with that or that is not my thing' or this and that."

Luke said:

I think there are systemic issues here. The term that is used is institutional racism. I started by saying people are well-meaning. I am a glass half-full type of person so I think most people are well-meaning. They want to do the right thing, but I think systemically we had issues in the system, which then contributed to us not doing the right thing.

Greg said:

One is a belief system. It may sound a little harsh, but I have bumped into it so often. I don't know if it is quite racism or cultural competency, but the whole idea of not believing in the efficacy of all kids. We just discount [certain students]. Teachers in the classroom, principals in the building, superintendents, andschool board are all part of that [lack of belief in some students].

Teachers. Jack, Bea, Carrie, David, Greg, Ken, Eric, and Helen all determined teachers to be a factor in existing achievement gaps in their districts. Speaking about teacher attitudes and advanced academics, Jack said:

Then you have some pushback at times because there are some teachers who don't want that. There are some teachers who want to recommend a child and they don't want their judgment second-guessed, in a sense, by parents who want their kids placed in higher-level classes.

Bea mentioned two major issues regarding teachers and achievement gaps. First, she noted that a lack of collaboration led to achievement gaps. This might also be seen as a lack of innovation specific to teachers. Bea also spent a great deal of discussion on the racial issues between Black students and White teachers. Bea said, "When we analyzed the test scores, children that had Black teachers scored higheroverall,thanBlack kids that had White teachers."

When asked why that was, Bea said:

I think low expectations of some teachers, and I hate to say that because there were some excellent White teachers that were diligent in providing proper [education] and were able to do for all children. But sometimes there is a tendency [to lower expectations].

Carrie, echoing many of the same points Bea made, said:

I'm finding that [student-teacher relationships] is an issue. You have some teachers who, number one, they don't think the kids can learn. They don't think all kids can learn at the same level. Then they don't treat them the same, so you

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get some teachers that haven't built the relationship, and have different

perspectives that they bring to the table. Therefore, what they do with the kids

when they get to them is different, so you've got that going on. And some folks

just don't think the kids can learn. It is sad, but that's what I find and some of

them don't want to teach [Blacks]. They want to teach kids who are like them,

and they treat kids who are not like them a little different than they ought to.

David said:

Teachers are the engine in many ways. There are some teachers who know how

to motivate you, that know how to hold you accountable. He or she might have to

come outside of the box in order to get you engaged, to get you going.

Eric made a similar point in talking about teacher ability to motivate as a contributing

factor in achievement gaps.

Greg said:

Even if you have the will and means to[motivate], a lot of our teachers don't have

the skill. [District 1] is a great example. We are about 28% White, 34% African-

American, 32% Latino, and I would venture that most of our teachers are White.

In fact, I bet you they're mostly White. They were not trained all of a sudden to

have high levels of poverty that we have. We are about 60% free and reduced

lunch as a school division and one of every four of our kids is ELL. So, even if

they have the belief system, the skill is lacking.

According to Ken, how teachers are prepared and the lack of knowledge in

creating relationships with students contributes to achievement gaps. Ken said:

I think that a contributing factor is that many of our teachers have historically

been trained in one model, and that model didn't necessarily mean that you had to

modify, adapt, and overcome for all kids. So I think that creates a wider gap in

many cases. I also think there are some cultural reasons that there is a gap. As

much as we want to say we don't see color or we teach all kids, I think there are

some assumptions about kids that teachers make or school systems make when

students arrive depending on what they look like. That is sort of an unfortunate

and sad side of why there may be some gaps; in my mind anyway.

Ken also noted:

One other thing I think is that the relationship piece is not there. Not all teachers

know how to build relationships with kids, and I think it's an extraordinarily

important piece of the work that we do to make sure that we can meet the needs of

all kids.

Helen said, "… the importance of relationships. I think all of those things became

far more prominent than they ever were before, and it helped tremendously in at least

beginning to bridge that gap."

How race is identified. Bea mentioned how race is identified as a contributing

factor in how achievement gaps appear and the size of gaps between Black and White

students. She said:

On the standardized test forms you don't have just Black or African-American,

you also have multiracial or other.   And more and more of our children are

biracial, and if they are biracial they are not [selecting]Black . And many of those

kids are high achieving, whereas before they were put into the category of Black,

so that helped the Black scores. Butwhen they became *other* or *biracial,* that pool

was pulled out.

The test. Carrie mentioned the test as a factor in achievement gaps. She said:

I'm going to be real honest with you.   Number one, I have to say something about

the test and the way the tests are constructed to assess kids' learning. The

language that is used is not familiar with the way the questions are asked of the

kids. It is so different from their everyday [language]. Even their school life is

different, so you've got that as one difference that is causing the gap.

Funding. Carrie and Eric mentioned funding as a contributor to achievement

gaps. Speaking in reference to her work at the state level, Carrie said, "One of the

reasons is funding. They don't have the resources needed to hire good people and retain

them."

Eric said:

We have a [poor] record of putting money into research and development so you

look at any school systems' budget and you'll see that professional development

and staff development activitiesare sometimes the first to go, which are the most

important particularly when you are trying to do significant things with students.

You're trying to increase the toolbox that teachers have to make a difference with

the kids in the classrooms.

Summary of Perceived Causes

Table 6 demonstrates where central office administrators in the study identified causes of achievement gaps. In some instances, as mentioned in the previous discussion, participants in the study saw multiple causes across the domains of parent, child, external, and school system factors. Also, in some instances, participants spoke about multiple reasons within one factor. Each letter in the final column stands for one of the four factors: e for external factors, p for parent factors, c for child factors, and s for school system factors.

Table 6

Perceptions of Categories of Achievement Gap Causes by Administrator

Code Name	Code District	Job	Self Identified Race/Ethnicity	Factors Mentioned
Adam	District 1	Retired Superintendent	Caucasian	E, P
Bea	District 2	Retired Assistant Superintendent	Black	C, S, P
Carrie	District 2	Retired Director	African American	P, C, S
David	District 3	Program Coordinator	African American	E, P, C, S
Eric	District 4	Retired Superintendent	Caucasian	S, C
Frank	District 3	Supervisor for Science Education	African American	E, C
Greg	District 1	Superintendent	White	S
Helen	District 2	Retired Assistant Superintendent	Caucasian	S

Ivan	District 1	Diversity Director	Hispanic/African American	S
Jack	District 5	Minority Achievement Specialist	African American	C, P, S
Ken	District 6	Superintendent	White	E, C, S
Luke	District 4	Retired Superintendent	White	S
Mark	District 5	Superintendent	White	P
Neal	District 7	Superintendent	White	E
Olga	District 2	Former Minority Achievement Coordinator	Puerto Rican/African American	E, P

Figure 2 provides a visual depiction of the number of interviewees who mentioned a particular cause as a factor in achievement gaps in their district. Ten of the participants (66%) mentioned school system factors as a cause of achievement gaps.
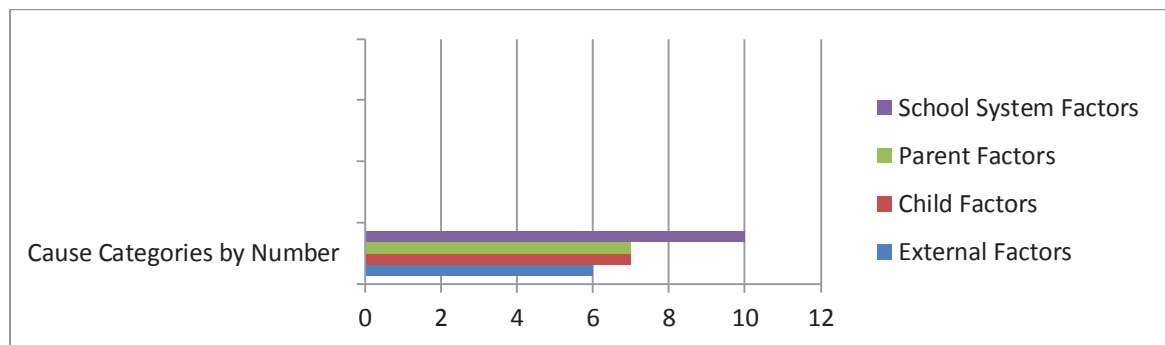
Figure 2. Summary of perceived causes by number

Figures3-6 provide a summary by category and show that the factors most often discussed by participants in the study are school system factors. Fifty-three percent of participants in the study mentioned teachers as a factor in achievement gaps.
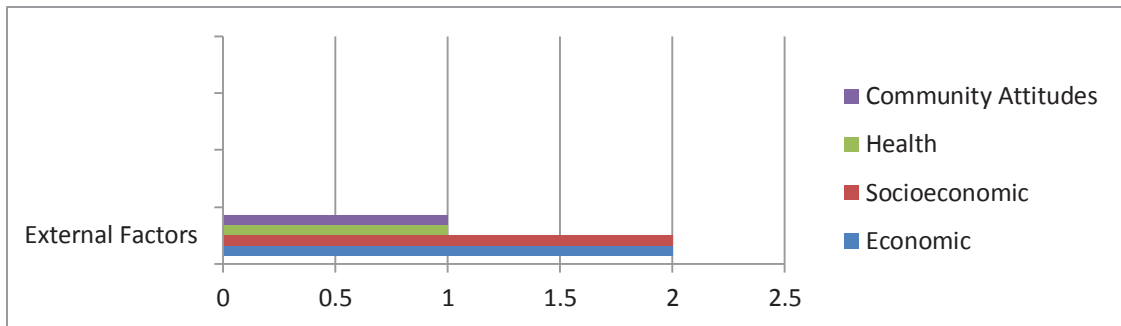
Figure 3. Summary of perceived external factors by category
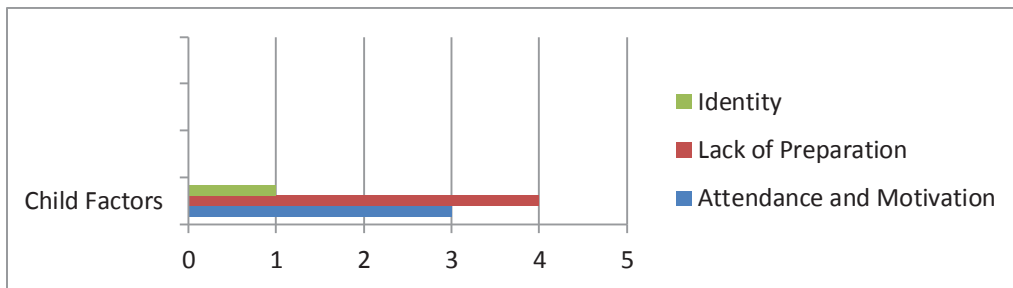
Figure 4. Summary of perceived child factors by category
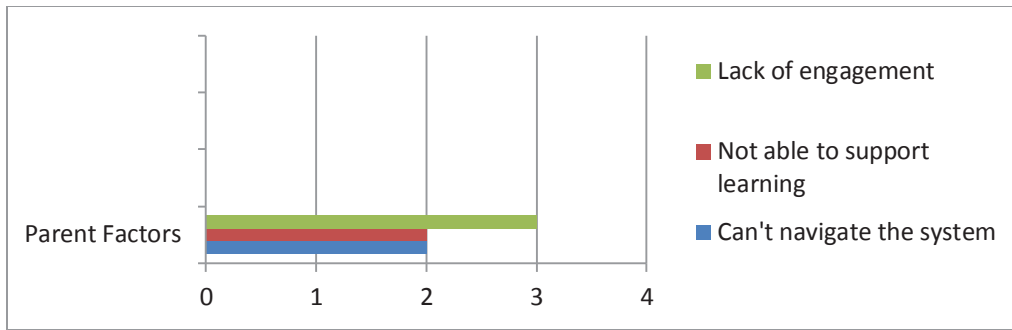
Figure 5. Summary of perceived parent factors by category
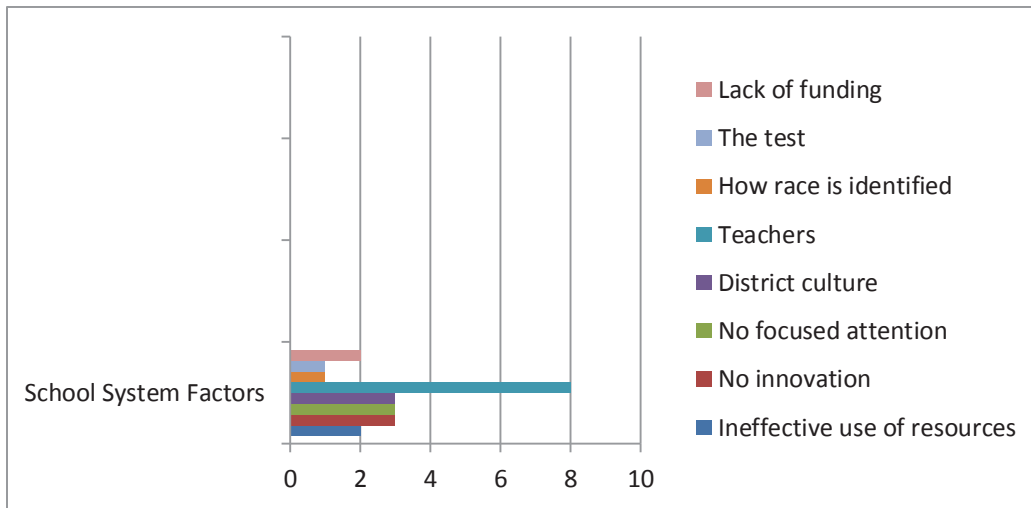
Figure 6. Summary of perceived school system factors by category

Perceptions of Role in Addressing Achievement Gaps

This section of chapter 4 describes major findings relevant to the second research question: How do central office administrators understand their role in addressing achievement gaps? This chapter is broken into two major sections: (a) role perceptions and (b) obstacles encountered in the central office context. Consistent with the previous section on the four causes of achievement gaps noted (external factors, child factors,

parent factors, and school system factors), each major section is then separated by the aforementioned causes in terms of how participants viewed their impact. Additionally, obstacles are also organized within the same areas. Respondents see their role in a variety of ways including working with other educators and making the problem of the achievement gap a matter of urgency. Regarding obstacles they encounter in their efforts to close achievement gaps, many central office administrators point to other educators and their opposing views as an obstacle to achieving their goals of closing existing gaps.

Role Perceptions

Drawing on the findings of chapter 2 and interviewee responses, *Figure 7* demonstrates the varied perceptions of central office administrators regarding their role in impacting achievement gaps. All participants in the study demonstrated a desire to impact achievement gaps. *Figure 7* alsodemonstrates both the areas mentioned by central office administrators as causes of achievement gaps and how central office administrators see their role in impacting these specific areas. For example, some see their role exclusively as impacting school system factors, while others see their role as impacting both school system and student factors.
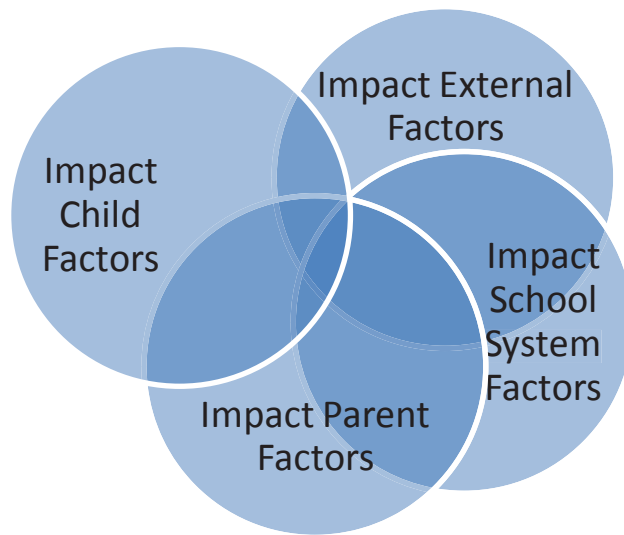
Figure 7. A visual of perceived impact on achievement gap factors

Impacting External Factors

   Identifying resources beyond the school district. Frank mentioned that a major

cause of achievement gaps had to do with access to opportunity. He also sees his role as

identifying resources to improve access to opportunity. Frank said:

   I'm always looking for resources to access for all students and educators;

   therefore, [I develop] interesting partnerships with higher

   educationinstitutionsand the state department of education, where [there are]

   larger federal grants whichafford us the ability to bring in resources to build

   content knowledge and access [to opportunity] for those who may not have

   access. In the area that we are in, we have a large business population that is very

   interested in diversifying the work group and work force, and we are fortunate in

that sense. This is a field that is important to society as a whole. It is viewed as critical to the financial and technological security of the country. The need for scientists, technicians, mathematicians, and engineers is not going away.

Impacting Child Factors

Supporting students. Four respondents (Ivan, Jack, David and Olga) mentioned supporting or interacting with students as a part of their role. Ivan directs efforts associated with equity among minority students. As a part of Jack's role in cultural competence training, he works with students of color to provide leadership development. David manages a district-wide program that encourages students to go to college. Olga, a former coordinator in District 2, managed programs for students that encouraged college access and engaging in advanced academics.

Ivan said:

I remember doing a workshop at a school and asking students what was the culture here and a Black male raised his hand and said,"Yale or jail" and the 23 boys that were there all went,"He is right."

Jack said, "I cosponsor a group at school that a colleague of mine started for [Latino youth]. It is a leadership program for Latinas."

David said:

What [the program] does is play a supportive role along with schools … We deal with the afterschool tutoring piece.We make sure that is in place. That is key for those students who may be moving at a different pace or don't get it all in the classroom setting.

Olga said:

If there was anything I was able to do in my last position as a district

administrator, it was about having the ability to have some programs that would

support activities, practices, pedagogy, mentoring, and relationships that

motivated young people to reach higher.

Impacting Parent Factors

Meeting with the community. Six respondents (Jack, Olga, David, Bea, Carrie,

and Mark) mentioned meeting with the community as part of their role in addressing

achievement gaps. This typically means meeting with parents. But it can also mean, in

the case of Carrie, meeting with members of the business community.

Bea said:

Okay a couple of things. Let's start with the community. I held several meetings

with the community when we started the [state test] test trying to explain the test.

We really targeted a lot of the poor communities and provided transportation and

food for them to come, and we talked about the [state test] and the importance of

it, the components of the [state test], how they could be of assistance to their

children, and doing well on the [state test].

Carrie said:

We provided interventions when parents and principals didn't agree. Also, we

worked with parents in understanding the data of the school where their children

attended and understanding the needs and also getting them to participate in the

school to help their children to succeed. We also encouraged the schools to seek

support from the community in that, business partners were encouraged to build a relationship with the community.

Mark said:

I get my hands involved. We are having elementary parent meetings and going out to those meetings with staff, and I'm sharing many of the things I share with you with the parents. So, I speak to a lot of those things really directly because of how strongly I feel about [parent involvement].

Olga and David both talk about interacting with parents as a part of their work managing district-wide programs. Olga used the term "engaging parents". In reference to supporting students in his role as a program manager, David mentions parents as a part of his strategy to help students succeed. "There is no silver bullet. You just roll up your sleeves and do what you have to do to get to the next level. Do we need to talk to your teacher? Do we need to have a parent-teacher conference?"

Jack talked about working with parents as well. He participated in "the superintendent's parent advisory committee on the elimination of the achievement gap. Parents of color would come and they would share experiences they had where staff members would not have high expectations for the kids."

Impacting School System Factors

Making achievement gaps a priority. Six out of fifteen of the respondents saw their role as making the achievement gap a priority. Four of them are current superintendents (Greg, Ken, Mark, and Neal). Two are retired superintendents (Adam and Luke).

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Adam said it in these words:

Part of it has to do with focus, vision, time, and attention: how much you talk about it as the chief executive of the school district, how you make it a priority … what the superintendent does, and you have tons of things on your agenda, but you've got to make this one of them.

Greg put it this way:

I'm sure you've heard this trite saying before, that as a supervisor, you provide that word vision in it. I think my primary responsibility is to help create a sense of direction, a sense of focus and vision, and a belief system about where we are going.

Ken said:

I think there are a number of ways that I can impact student achievement in my role as superintendent. I think one is, first and foremost, setting a priority that closing achievement gaps is a priority for us and that when we talk about all kids being successful we mean all kids, each individual child being successful in the process.

Luke said:

The superintendent has a platform, so at least the idea of raising issues and being forthright [is an important part of the job]. If you do nothing else put the issues on the table, make them public because you do have a voice as the superintendent in most places. I think that as a starting point, the idea of developing a culture that supports whatever changes that are going to come about is important.

Later in this section, we will learn from Luke that the second part (developing a culture that supports change) presents major obstacles for him.

Mark said:

I am pretty pointed about it. I say we want to eliminate the achievement gap, but let me focus your attention specifically. I want your energy on that and I want you to specifically look at Black and Hispanic students. I just call it out. I say there it is; it's right there. That's where I need to see the change, and I need you to look at what that looks like. Eliminating all achievement gaps, well, that is kind of broad and I mean it's effective, but our problem or our issue is really narrowed down to Black and Hispanic kids. Stretch kids is another [idea] that's really broad. I'm not going to affect change when it's really broad like that. I have said all kids should be stretched, whoever they are. I have also said that about special education kids and ESOL kids. I have said right here we've got flatness. Black and Hispanic [students] have got to do better. What are we doing for Black and Hispanic kids? Let's look at that. I've probably done that in the last 6 to 8 months. It has been that specific. What is setting up is, if I have another conversation with you and I bring data to the table and say Roger, I am looking at your enrollments here in these courses because we are going to go out and look at enrollment in courses now coming up for next yea, and it doesn't seem to be any change. You still have the same number of kids here as you had before. We are not increasing. And then you might say "I didn't know what you wanted." This doesn't give you any margin for saying [that]. I've been saying it for the last 6 to

8 months: you know where I stand. Now the conversation becomes much narrower and it is specific where you say well look at these kids over here and I say that's super, but I am talking about these two groups of kids. That is what I am talking about and you may have done a great job with Hispanic kids, but what are we doing with the other kids? The message isn't to beat you up. The message is to say what is your plan? If I come back here next year and I say the numbers look the same, then you don't have a plan and I need you to get a plan.

Neal said the key to his success in closing achievement gaps as a superintendent was "staying consistent, not creating a Band-Aid approach, identifying the problems and having the guts to work on them, hounding the county commissioners and the Board of Education, staying consistent. That's my belief."

Data. Four respondents (Bea, Ivan, Mark, and Carrie) mentioned data as a part of their role. Bea talked about her partnership with Pearl, a central office administrator who was skilled in disaggregating data. Ivan and Mark talked about using data in conversations with principals about achievement gaps. Carrie talked about collecting data.

Bea talked about data as significant in her work but it was actually another administrator she credits with actually presenting the data to schools under her supervision:

[Pearl's] piece of it was working with the schools, working with me [and] going in together as a team. She was able to really break down the number of skills to the last degree, and she was able to get that out there.

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Ivan explained, "When I bring data, I say I'm just presenting it. You draw the conclusions from it that you like." He provided, as an example, a conversation with a high school principal in his district:

Ms. [Z] the principal at [one of the high schools] can you explain something to me? When I look at the students that graduated last year, am I correct in understanding that 40% had a 2.0 or below GPA? And she said, "But they graduated." Do you want your kids graduating with Cs? I have two little girls right now. If that was the best they could do that would be one thing, but don't tell me 40% of the school, that is the best they could do. Plus, there weren't many demographically with 2.0's, some had a 1.3. She said, "Well some of those kids would have never graduated." What are you going to do with a 1.3? What skills do you have? I hope someone at some point instilled a love of education in you because you will have to keep learning. That is acceptable? We are doing the best we can? No we ain't!

Mark said, "Well, I think one of the ways that I model it and speak to it is behind you." The wall of his office is covered with charts and graphs of various, data-driven, targets for the school district. "You see the wall of data? Here is one example of how I model that," he said with a cool confidence. "I think data is very important and you have to look at it. I think it informs you of your decisions, and I think as a system we constantly look at it and how you make decisions."

Carrie said, "Well as a [director] I think I did a lot of collecting data and analyzing the data and then in analyzing the data, helping the schools to identify where their areas of weakness were and strengths."

Collaboration. Collaboration is another theme that emerges among central office administrators. Four administrators mentioned collaboration of some kind. One (Bea) talked about encouraging collaboration among the schools she supervised as an assistant superintendent. Other respondents (Adam, Carrie, and Ivan) talked about collaboration with another central office administrator to address achievement gaps. Each collaborative effort was somewhat different. As mentioned earlier in the discussion on data, Bea collaborated with Pearl because of Pearl's ability to disaggregate data. Adam talked about his friendship with an African-American administrator who shared ideas with him about how to approach closing achievement gaps. In the case of Carrie, there is a very mixed response from collaboration with her peers. Some were more willing to work with her than others. In the case of Ivan, the collaboration included pointing out what was going wrong and bringing about change.

In regards to encouraging collaboration among the schools she supervised, Bea said:

In working with the principals, what I did with them, I said, "We here in [this group of schools] are struggling. Wewant all of our children to exceed. If school A has found some strategies, math strategies, school A would be willing to share with schools B, C, and D [let's work together]." We started working as a team and so the principals were meeting; we had teachers meeting from various schools

and they were saying "This worked, but that didn't work."Eventually within the [group of schools] that gap was closing. Those schools that were at the bottom were now being recognized as becoming high achieving. But we all had to work together.

In discussing his partnership with another administrator, Quincy, Adam said:

One day we sat down together and just sort of shot the breeze, basically two guys talking about, okay here's the problem what do we do? He really was a nice guy. [Quincy] said "[Adam] I just come out of Harvard. I've got all this stuff they told us worked. You can do all you want, but a lot of stuff that people are selling doesn't work; there are just some simple things you can do.   We can do them together. We can actually make headway on this thing and over time maybe do something really great in [District 1]." I said okay [Quincy] tell me what it is. I am open to what you know. He sat down and gave me probably ten things. He said, "We can't do one of them, we've got to do them all. We've got to full court press this deal. Do every single one of them as best we can and get everyone believing that we can do this to make a difference."

According to Adam, "I'm kind of more the visionary talker guy. [Quincy] was more of the behind the scenes doer."

Ivan, whose collaboration with the superintendent revolves around the perceived need for change in the culture of District 1, said:

I actually participate in something called an attendance panel which is with the court system through court services.When I first heard of it I went,"Wow that is

wonderful!" It is a joke.It is an absolute joke because there are children that come in with seventeen absences.How did it get to 17 absences? So I say to [the superintendent] you are trying to eliminate an achievement gap, but you've got kids missing one-tenth of the school year before anybody does anything.That is a problem … So I said to the superintendent: Did they not address it because they don't know how, or did they not address it because they don't care?Ifthey don't care, then you got a bigger issue. If they don't know how, that is something we can solve.And he said, "Well what do you think we need to do because we have done our own root cause analysis … we determined that the curriculum didn't relate to the students."And I went, that is not your issue: your issue is not the curriculum.

Carrie said:

[Directors] were not the [assistant superintendents] we supported them. So there were limitations to [what I could do]. If you could work with your superintendent and you share the same vision and understood the mission, then you were more effective, I think. But if you didn't have that kind of partnership with the superintendent, then you kind of did what you could in your own way, if you read me. But the other directors generally agreed and pretty much did some of the same things. We focused on the school plans and how we were going to present the plans to the schools, how we could get the schools to share ideas amongst themselves to learn from each other. We had meetings so that we could keep

abreast of all of the programs and initiatives that were going on in the county, and so, we were kind of at the same place.

Identifying resources within the school district. Two respondents (Ken and Mark) mentioned identifying resources as a part of their role. Ken also mentioned providing time for intervention as a part of his role. In this way, time becomes the important resource provided to schools.

Ken said:

I think there are financial resources that have to be utilized and leveraged in a way that provides opportunities for teachers to be able to get the professional development. But also have class sizes that are manageable so you can build those relationships with kids and create an environment and circumstance that makes it okay to learn more about kids and to know that you're not there just to stand and deliver.

Concerning time as a resource, Ken said:

I think one other place to go in terms of leadership from the superintendent's perspective: time is a resource as well. When we talk about high expectations for all kids, I believe strongly that we don't show what our high expectations for kids are until we are observed dealing with a student that has not been successful. In other words, it's okay to say I have high expectations, but if you do nothing for a kid that has not been successful, you have to dig in and find a timely and tailored way to meet the needs of that child. I think you do that through the resource of time and providing opportunities for intervention during the school day. I think

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providing intervention after school is great, but then it becomes invitational rather

than directional. But how do you afford schools time to build into the day that

timely tailored intervention?

Mark said:

I also think the other critical element is how resources are allocated and deployed

and so I see how resources can be influenced in making sure the resources are

placed with the priority whether it is a program, an initiative, or supporting the

principal. The priority may be year-round enrichment classes, dance classes,

jumpstart classes where kids may be looking to take a higher-level class. That

may also be providing kids an opportunity to start in the summer. So, there is just

a whole host of ways that money can be pushed … to get something off the

ground.

Strategizing. Three respondents talked about strategizing as part of their role.

Two (Carrie and Greg) talked about action plans. One (Eric) talked about school

improvement plans.

Carrie said:

I did a lot of collecting data and analyzing the data and then in analyzing the data,

helping the schools to identify where their areas of weakness were and strengths;

and having them to hone in on those areas and take some actions by creating

action plans based on their areas of weakness.

Greg said, "I think my primary responsibility is to help create a sense of direction

and a sense of focus, a vision, a belief system about where we are going." He

continued,"Then the second is the strategic planning, the thinking deliberately about how we get to that point."

Eric said:

 The other thing I liked to do as superintendent was go to school improvement

 meetings. I would go to the reviews of school improvement teams when they

 would do their midyear reviews, and I would do that a little bit differently because

 I really hated just going through a report just looking at data. That is boring to

 me. What I asked my principals to do is take a student from each of the

 subgroups; I wanted a name, I wanted a face, and I wanted a profile of that

 student; and I wanted to see what was happening for a particular student in each

 of the subgroups for the last six months.

Professional development. Five respondents (Carrie, Eric, Jack, Olga, and Ken) talked about professional development. Carrie and Eric talked specifically about providing professional development for principals. Jack and Olga talked specifically about providing cultural competence training. Ken talked about providing professional development for teachers.

Carrie said, "We also were able to take a look at the leadership that was being provided at the schools, realizing that principalsprovided instructional leadership, but also need to be professionally developed."

Eric said:

 I could coach that principal and also know what my principals needed in terms of

 staff development.   That was huge because part of the building principal is to be

the instructional leader, but I needed to know as the superintendent what they knew about instruction. Yes, they had gone through coursework, but I didn't know what they knew and could they coach their teachers to disaggregate data, to do all the things that were expected? That was very, very important to me.

Eric also mentioned hearing "Rudy Stories" as a part of his role in developing a culture of optimism for his central office staff. According to Eric:

When I had administrative meetings with the principals in central office, I started this process. I showed them a clip from the movie *Rudy* and everybody kept telling Rudy 'You can't! You can't! You can't!' But there is something in him that drove him. 'I can do this! I can do this!' So at the beginning of all of my staff meetings I ask principals 'Do you have any Rudy stories to share with us this month?' Then they would stand up and talk about Rudy in their building, and this may be a student who has overcome exceptional odds in achievement or whatever, but it grounded us as a central office staff. A principal during an administrative meeting said we are here to talk about kids making a difference.

Jack said:

I was teaching a class of teachers where one of the questions came up "What do Black parents want for their kids?" We focused on a different group each week. We talked about how to work effectively with Hispanic families, Black families …

Olga said:

The activities and services that came out of that office were specifically targeted to minority student achievement.The intent and purpose of the office was to help put activities and strategies together and send people to field, to help close that gap[not only] through professional development; but also to begin to influence the minds of other educational practitioners in our environment that have contact with students on a daily basis.

Ken said:

When we talk about all kids being successful, we mean all kids: each individual child being successful in the process.Now what that means is once you make a statement like that, you are ready to support it with professional development for teachers; making sure our teachers have a broad and deep understanding of not only the content of their teaching, but also best practices in instruction-- how to teach and how to differentiate to meet the needs of kids. I think helping teachers understand first, the value of relationships with kids through that professional development, but also teaching them how to build relationships so it goes beyond the value of it tohowyou build relationships.

Choosing leaders. Two respondents (Greg and Helen) mentioned choosing leaders as part of their role. Helen also mentioned supporting leaders as part of her role.

In reference to his responsibility as a superintendent, Greg said, "making sure you have the right people in those positions" is one of his most important responsibilities.

Helen said:

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The key was getting the right people in there; especially administrative roles. That was the key because I saw those people make changes in the culture of the building, and in one of the two instances we had pretty intense situations of the principal requesting that we administratively move two people. And we did … They just were not able, at that time, or willing to step up to the plate and buy into the culture of success, achievement, and learning for all students that the principal was trying to create. After working with them for two years,it just did not work. I had the authority to do that, although I did not do it often. I met individually with each teacher and explained what was going on, and we are going to move [each of them] to another school and [I told them] where I had a couple of vacancies.

Summary of Perceived Role

Table 7 demonstrates perceptions of role impacting specific factors of the achievement gap. Each letter represents an area the participant says they impact based on their role: e stands for external factors, p stands for parent factors, c stands for child factors, s stands for school system factors. As noted in the discussion, some mention more than one factor impacted in their role. Some also mention several facets within one factor.

Table 7

Perceived Role Impact on Achievement Gaps

Code Name	Code District	Job	Self Identified Race/Ethnicity	Role Impacts
Adam	District 1	Retired Superintendent	Caucasian	S
Bea	District 2	Retired Assistant Superintendent	Black	P, S
Carrie	District 2	Retired Director	African American	P, S
David	District 3	Program Coordinator	African American	P, C
Eric	District 4	Retired Superintendent	Caucasian	S
Frank	District 3	Supervisor for Science Education	African American	E
Greg	District 1	Superintendent	White	S
Helen	District 2	Retired Assistant Superintendent	Caucasian	S
Ivan	District 1	Diversity Director	Hispanic/African American	S, C
Jack	District 5	Minority Achievement Specialist	African American	C, P, S
Ken	District 6	Superintendent	White	S
Luke	District 4	Retired Superintendent	White	S
Mark	District 5	Superintendent	White	P, S
Neal	District 7	Superintendent	White	S

Olga	District 2	Former Minority Achievement Coordinator	Puerto Rican/African American	P, C, S

Figure 8 provides a visual of the number of interviewees who perceive their impact in the four domains of external, child, parent, and school system factors related to achievement gaps. All but two participants (86%) mention impacting the school system in some way. Only one participant (Frank) perceived their work to impact external factors.
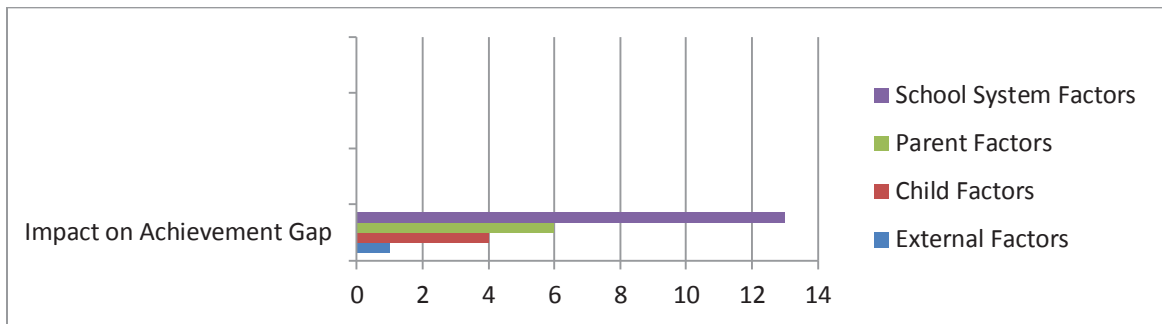
Figure 8. Summary of perceived impact on achievement gap causes by number
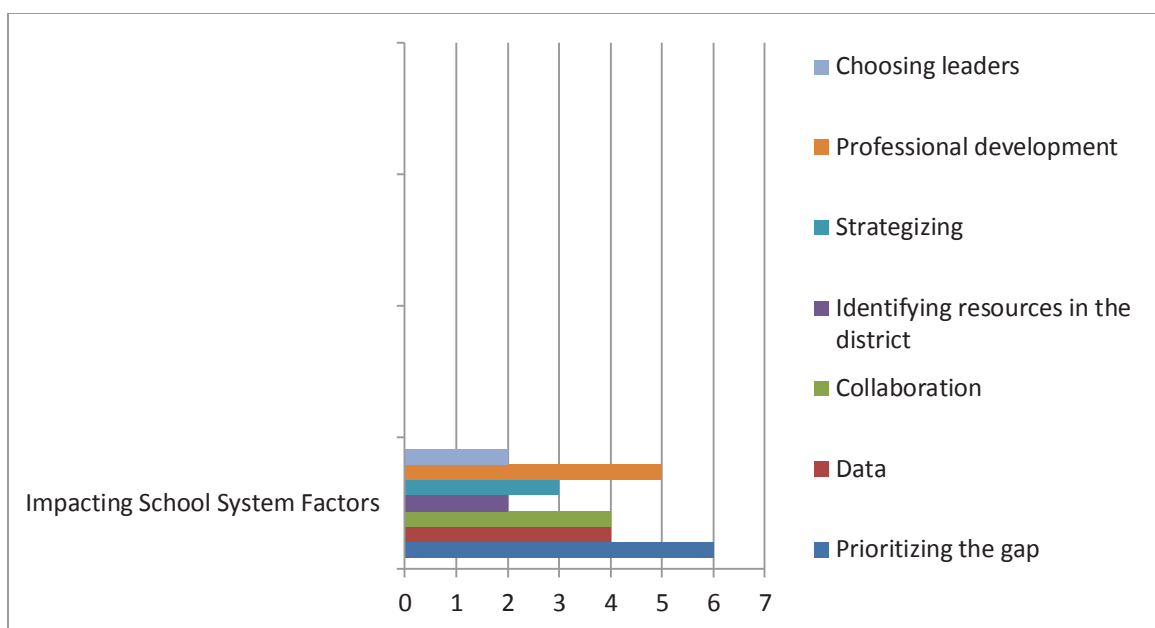
Figure 9. Summary of perceived school system impacts

Figure 9 shows the categories of impact within the school system domain of agency. This was the only domain that had more than one category. This demonstrates where central office administrators in the study express their role in impacting achievement gaps within their districts. Forty percent of the participants (all of whom are current or former superintendents) in the study said making the achievement gap a priority is part of their role.

Obstacles

Central office administrators in the study noted obstacles they encountered in trying to address achievement gaps. Obstacles tend to fall under the four categories of children, parents, external, or school district or beyond the school district. Teachers are viewed as a major obstacle in that they may be unwilling to change practices to

accommodate students from different cultural backgrounds. The issues associated with

the emergence of CRP mentioned in Chapter 2 are particularly relevant to these obstacles.

Additionally, Table 2 and its focus on the dilemmas faced by minority administrators are

also relevant in this section. Institutional racism is a barrier that exists within the central

office context according to some respondents. Beyond the school district, the obstacles

of White privilege are also discussed. As mentioned in Chapter 2 in the discussion of

White hegemony, White parents are viewed as an important barrier to progress in some

districts.

Obstacles from External Factors

    Racism. In discussing his experiences in a previous school district in the northern

part of the United States, Greg said:

> I began getting hate mail saying are you going to give more resources to those
>
> people (Latinos and African Americans). I was surprised at the depth of the
>
> community underground reaction about realigning resources and so the obstacles
>
> have to do historically with a deep embedded sense of White entitlement. There
>
> is a wonderful book called *White Privilege*. It talks about the White community.
>
> We are all liberal. We want to help the Black kids and the Latino kids, but don't
>
> you touch anything that is working for me. I think that is a significant obstacle.

He pointed out that the issue of White entitlement was also an issue in his current

assignment in District 1.

    In reference to a question about whether or not he experienced obstacles in

closing achievement gaps Neal said:

Oh hell yes! Right from the beginning different groups would indicate … I

would get e-mails and I would also get letters anonymously that said "Why are we

focusing on Black kids? We're going to lower the standards." If you talk to

several of my board members they will tell you, particularly [Dr. Champion] who

grew up in [District 7], went to an all segregated school here and is a member of

the board. He is one of the best people I know, and he says "I can't believe what

you've done to think of all the things that have happened." It didn't stop me. It

didn't stop me at all. We just kept going.

Obstacles from Students

Motivating students. David mentioned the difficulty of motivating students as

an obstacle. He also mentioned addressing student learning issues in time as an obstacle.

According to David:

I would say a challenge is trying to motivate the student that you see great

potential in but maybe they don't see it in themselves. Another challenge would

be trying to address maybe some deeper seeded academic issues while the clock is

moving. By the time they come to us they're pretty much in middle school or

high school, and I am an optimist by many stretches but at the same time, again, I

believe the research pans this out that if you don't catch them early, if they don't

have the literacy skills early, it gets tougher the longer you go.

Obstacles from Parents

Parents. Three administrators (Adam, Bea, and Ken) mention parents and

advocacy groups as an obstacle to them doing the work of closing achievement gaps.

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Adam said, "Sometimes advocates for these kids think that you're holding back solutions like 'Hey [Adam] you know how to fix this you just don't want to.' Of course nobody says it that badly. People [in the schools] want it fixed."

Bea said:

Yes I do [recall] some opposition from some Asian parents and opposition from some of the White parents. "Why are you focusing on these children and not on all children?" Yes, there was some opposition expressed … I can give you an example. When a principal would, as I said earlier, in some schools the teachers would kind of team up, and White parents knew the purpose of it. If it was an excellent science teacher [White parents would ask] why was this teacher being pulled away from my kids to give help to those kids?

Ken said:

I think that our community, often times, is an obstacle. I think that our community is not unique in the sense that there are a number of people that I have had experiences with, at least in this community, who think that it's okay to have differences in achievement. "I want my kid to be the best and to be the best there has to be a worst, and I don't care who the worst is. I am going to make sure that my kid is the best and to do that, somebody has to not do well." And so the attitude of all kids can learn doesn't always come to fruition in the way you want it to.

Obstacles from School Districts

Teachers. Within the school district teachers are mentioned as a major obstacle to closing achievement gaps. Six of the fifteen respondents mentioned teachers as an obstacle to closing achievement gaps in their district. Greg and Ken mention teacher skill as an obstacle. Neal, Carrie, Helen, and Jack mention teacher attitude as an obstacle.

Greg said:

I think this second obstacle is skill. How do you have teachers who for years have been going about their work in a certain way change their practices? That is very, very difficult. All the professional development in the world is still really hard to change behaviors because teachers close their doors.

Ken said:

I think another obstacle is teacher practice. I think we have a very traditional methodology: how classrooms are approached sometimes, and I think what we see is teachers saying "This is the way I have done it. This is the way I have always done it. I have had good success with it. I am not going to change." So that is another obstacle.

Neal said, "We took a couple of years working on the attitudes of the AP teachers." He continued, "We met with them at night time and on the weekends for a year at least, listening to first of all them complain, and then okay now that you've complained how to resolve it."

Carrie said:

Yeah I'm going to be real honest with you.One of the things we did not address for whatever reason is this whole piece of teacher attitude. You remember, I

talked to you earlier about the importance of building relationships. Well, some of this comes from what folks bring to the table as individuals. The attitudes and the beliefs and the perspectives that they bring kind of get in the way of them being able to build a relationship with students.

Helen said, "Also at the middle school level and at the high school level an obstacle was teachers who did not want to let students into those higher-level classes."

Regarding the attitudes of teachers in cultural competence training, Jack said:

In some of the comments, there are people who feel this is long overdue to have these discussions. There are some who feel like I am not really sure if it is going to make a difference, and I'm a little uneasy about having these discussions. And there are some who just don't want to have it at all and feel like, from my opinion, if the parents did what they were supposed to do in raising kids and showing them the value of education and having them prepared for school,[their kids would do better in school]. There is a piece of that which goes to they are not doing what they are supposed to do. I am doing my job. You all need to do more and if you did more we wouldn't have this achievement gap.

Relationships among central office administrators. "Relationships among central office administrators" is an obstacle noted by eight out of fifteen administrators (Bea, Helen, Ken, Carrie, Eric, Luke, Ivan, and Jack). Carrie mentions race as a specific barrier to relationships on the job as well as differences in perspective. Bea, Helen, and Ken mention competition for resources. Eric and Luke mention attitudes of central office staff as an obstacle. Ivan and Jack note central office workers and others in the school

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district being offended by their job title (Director of Diversity and Minority Achievement Specialist).

Regarding the three assistant superintendents she supported as director, Carrie said:

I had three of them; each of them was different. Always as an African-American you have to prove yourself, especially when you're working with folks of another race. You always have to make sure that you are excelling at what you do.That hasn't changed. You always have to do better than everybody else. Once you have demonstrated that you know what you're talking about, you are credible and they value what you can contribute. Then you have more say. If they don't value you as a person and your knowledge, whatever, then you're relationship is a little different. Okay, so I've had some who considered me as a partner and we were more on the same page in terms of how to carry the job out and worked basically open and honest, and they encouraged your development as well. I had some to do that. Communication is key, and that was different with each one I worked with. Some of them were open and honest, some of them were a bit more guarded. Of course, because of my personality, I'm going to get along with everybody and I did. We had fairly good relationships; I would say good relationships with all of my folks.

Carrie added:

I think the understanding of the achievement gap … was the thing that was different. Some of our leaders were more theoretical and you know kind of what

the theory says and what weought to be doing and not quite knowing how to get

the people to do what the theory says ought to be done. Okay, so, you've got that.

Then you've got folks who are more practical about it and understand what it is

that needs to be done and actually put things in place for the work to be done …

that's how I am. I'm more, "Okay, this is what we have to do and this is how

we're going to do it", and when I'm with someone who thinks like that, we get

more done than the theoretical piece … because you've got to have a plan and you

could have theory, but you've got to have a plan, and in order to fulfill the

theory.And so I'm more of the practical piece.In other words, this is what we

believe to be the issue and this is how we're going to take care of it. I like steps

and procedures. So when I have someone like that, I'm on board all the way

100%, and we get more done and I believe we work towards closing the gap much

better.

Bea said:

Instructional office had a team of people and what was happening; the team of

people would go to other parts of [District 2] and not put the resources [into the

schools I managed]. I would complain about that. With the Title I money, the

Title I money was going into a central pool and the person in charge of that was

making the determination as to which schools would get the Title I money even

though most of my schools qualify for Title I money, and when I realized that--

one of the principals came to me and said she was no longer getting the Title I

money-- and I went to the Title I director and asked why not, and she got an

attitude and so I had to report her. I said that this is money that belongs to my

particular schools. She was giving it to somebody else that didn't even qualify.

Bea added:

 I think it was a competition. They wanted their schools to always be the top

schools.This is what I observed, because it became evident when my schools with

extra resources and the teachers, principals, and community all working together,

they started coming up in the scores. Then there was jealousy.

Helen said:

 I would say the other piece, when there were disagreements, they had to do with

the approach to the two schools that were not making adequate yearly progress in

the beginning because I remember going in and requesting. I said, "You know we

have to provide support intervention and Saturday services for students." We also

had to provide the opportunity for transfer, because when No Child Left Behind

first came in we had to provide all of that, if you weren't making adequate yearly

progress two years in a row. So there were people who objected to that. It costs

money. It would take additional resources. Why should they put those resources

in those schools? And I said, in the meantime we are looking into finding

additional resources, but we must do these things for the sake of these children.

They get one chance in that grade level for that year:They don't get 20 chances.

So we need to provide it and we'd need a director in there that will maintain

records of whether or not students are being tutored properly, appropriately, and

in line with the state standards, and of course, [District 2] standards, which are

already aligned to the state. So, there was a little push back at the beginning

because it was at the very beginning.Once it was set up though, it became routine.

Ken said:

 I think my colleagues in central office typically are all on the same page. At least

that is my experience.Now, where we put the resources with respect to those big

ideas, not always is there total agreement. Some people think we should put more

money into collaboration and less money into best practices and professional

development. Some people say more on professional development and less in

collaboration: So that's always up for debate.

Eric said he got, "A lot of attitude from central office and in the buildings just

trying to build a culture and environment of being positive for kids."

Eric added:

 I think initially I got lip service that everybody was on the bus, but they were

sitting in different seats. They knew they had to be on the bus and many people

wanted to just sit on the back of the bus so they can look out the back and see

where they had been. And then I had some sitting in the front seat, wanting to see

where we were going and then some sitting in the middle looking out the side

window, seeing where we are. But I saw them change over a period of time as we

kind of worked together in putting together teams of people looking at the gap.

Luke said:

I think we had a lot of well-meaning people, so no problem there. The people

were generally well-meaning. We did have people as an obstacle who were

generally set in their ways, and so if the majority population is doing well then let it be. That type of an attitude [was present], but they were well-meaning people. There was the idea that the external influence [was the cause of achievement gaps]. The problem is what was happening in the home. As long as that is your perspective, then that sort of moves the responsibility from you if you are in the school business. It's all about what is outside the school.

Ivan said:

The other one is this idea of office of equity. When they heard the title of the office, people said "Are you saying we don't treat our kids equitably?" And I went "Are you?" Because the only reason you would ask me that question is because you may not be. It is a brand-new office. I just started in December.

Jack said:

Well the ideas that we have in our training, number one we get flack because it's called [the cultural competence program] and we changed the name this year to [race and equity talks] … the training is mandatory and when our office started doing these workshops, it was all voluntary and you would get people who said you are preaching to the choir. They loved this stuff and we would go back and have a philosophical discussion on it and [the former superintendent] would say, "Make these mandatory." Anytime you make someone do something, you are going to have some resentment. Now you're making people do something, talk about a topic that people generally don't want to talk about, especially across race. We are asking you to come and talk with your colleagues about race, and so there

are times when some people are vocal. You might get a question like "How much

money is going into this? This is a waste of time."

Racism. Bea talked about racism and elitism in regards to the allocation of

resources. Bea said:

 I hate to say it; I think racism was part of it. I can't think of any thing other than

racism and elitism.   Again they are poor kids whether they are Black or White so

we don't have to be concerned about them.   It is sad, but that's the way I saw it.

Finding data. Frank mentions finding data to make the best decision as an

obstacle. Frank said:

Data is always important, to have access to actionable data that you can make

decisions based on the best possible information that you can get. And that is

always the challenge: trying to justify and make the best decision not just for one

child, but for the entire division. That can be substantial when you consider the

number of students we have, that you are trying to create opportunities for all of

them. You have to weigh the pros and the cons as best you can and create those

opportunities and build those bridges where you can.

The test. Greg mentioned the test as an obstacle. Greg said:

The third and maybe the most difficult of all is how we assess. You know, we are

a little test nuts now and data obsessed in our country, and I'm not sure the test

and the data we are using are giving us good insight into what kids are learning,

so an obstacle is having the right tools to assess learning.

The culture. Helen mentioned changing school culture as an obstacle. Helen said:

 If you do not have a staff that is working toward a common goal, a common vision, and that understand how decisions are made and that can be part of those decisions or part of those solutions, it is going to be very hard. And you are going to need someone to lead that, and that includes teacher leaders because the principal cannot do it alone. So, I talk that way in terms of obstacles we ran into. We just did not have that in every building, and so if you did not have it, you either have to develop it or you had to change personnel.

Ivan mentioned a general lack of efficacy within the school district as an obstacle. What complicates things for him is that he is new on the job and has little history of the context because he is new to District 1. Ivan said:

 They talk it, but they don't walk it. There are one or two that I have been able to affiliate myself with that are as passionate about it as I am, but for the most part, what I also find central office people do a very good job of becoming bureaucratic when they need to.

Ivan added, "What I find more and more, the bigger obstacle is when you allow a group of folks to do what they have been doing, they are able to justify it somehow."

He pointed out:

 One of the other issues with [District 1] is it is very small. There was a lot of history that I don't know nor do I much care about, and I know that's wrong to a point, but what you get a lot of times is, "…that school has never achieved." That

is a problem when you talk to someone who says, "I've been here for 22 years and it's been like that for ever."

Ken and Luke noted that an obstacle each faces is success. Ken noted that some people in his district do not accept that there is a gap. Ken said:

I think there are a number of obstacles. I think first and foremost, acceptance that there is an issue can sometimes be an obstacle. My experience has told me that I have been in places where people will say we are a very high performing school district or we are a very high performing school; we don't have any problems; we need to move ahead and build on the great things we are doing. But when you peel it back you find, you know what, there is a subset of kids here that aren't being successful:Black, White, Hispanic, what have you, but truly an over representation often times of Black and Hispanic kids. And so you are not really that successful. How do you stand in front of a community and say we are successful when a significant number of Black and Hispanic students are not very successful. I think that is one obstacle. And I think sometimes success can be the biggest obstacle; perceived success can be the biggest obstacle.

Ken noted that this is primarily the case with the school board. Ken said:

I think that the biggest obstacle to be perfectly frank is the school board; the leadership among school board members who don't all agree that there is an achievement gap. They either don't see that there is an achievement gap or don't believe it will ever close. I think there are people who have seen gaps close and say okay we are there. I don't think the school board has a clear understanding of

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what the achievement gap is and couldn't come together around a common idea of the best way to close it.

Luke said that "blaming home life as the only cause" was an obstacle during his work as a superintendent in District 4. Luke said, "We did have people as an obstacle who were generally set in their ways and so if the majority population is doing well then let it be that type of an attitude."

He also noted that change agents gave up in the face of the status quo. Luke said:

One leader can make a difference but cannot sustain change over time. One person can cause a conversation to occur; one person can make a difference, but one person by himself or herself cannot make sustainable change. I think there was the idea that sometimes even an idea of hopelessness on the part of some people who wanted to make a difference but didn't know how to. It's the idea of even confronting conversations. Some people want to discuss it but can't facilitate the conversation in such a way that people will get involved and stay involved; so I think it was some of those skills that were lacking as well.

Not enough funding. Olga was the only administrator who mentioned not having enough funding as an obstacle. Olga said:

The biggest obstacle was the budget. We don't have enough money to put this program in. We only have enough funding for a handful, even though 600 students might be in need of the support. [This is a problem] not only in this school district but several others [that I have worked in]. What has driven the decision about what strategies, approaches, and what they are going to do to close

this gap has been around the budget. It was clearly pervasive throughout, but to

me, the real obvious [example] was when they dissolved the office.

Summary of Perceived Obstacles

Table 8 demonstrates how central office administrators in the study see obstacles

that impact their ability to close achievement gaps in their school districts. The letter e

stands for external obstacles. The letter p stands for obstacles from parents. The letter c

stands for obstacles from the children. The letter s stands for obstacles from the school

system. The vast majority of participants in the study point to obstacles in the school

system (primarily teachers).

Table 8

Perceived Obstacles in Closing Achievement Gaps

Code Name	Code District	Job	Self Identified Race/Ethnicity	Role Impacts
Adam	District 1	Retired Superintendent	Caucasian	P
Bea	District 2	Retired Assistant Superintendent	Black	S, P
Carrie	District 2	Retired Director	African American	S
David	District 3	Program Coordinator	African American	C
Eric	District 4	Retired Superintendent	Caucasian	S
Frank	District 3	Supervisor for Science Education	African American	S
Greg	District	Superintendent	White	S, E

		1		
Helen	District 2	Retired Assistant Superintendent	Caucasian	S
Ivan	District 1	Diversity Director	Hispanic/African American	S
Jack	District 5	Minority Achievement Specialist	African American	S
Ken	District 6	Superintendent	White	P, S
Luke	District 4	Retired Superintendent	White	S
Mark	District 5	Superintendent	White	S
Neal	District 7	Superintendent	White	E, S
Olga	District 2	Former Minority Achievement Coordinator	Puerto Rican/African American	S

Figure 10 provides a visual for the number of participants who mentioned particular categories of obstacles. Thirteen of the fifteen participants (86%) mentioned school system obstacles. Only one (David) mentioned obstacles coming from students.
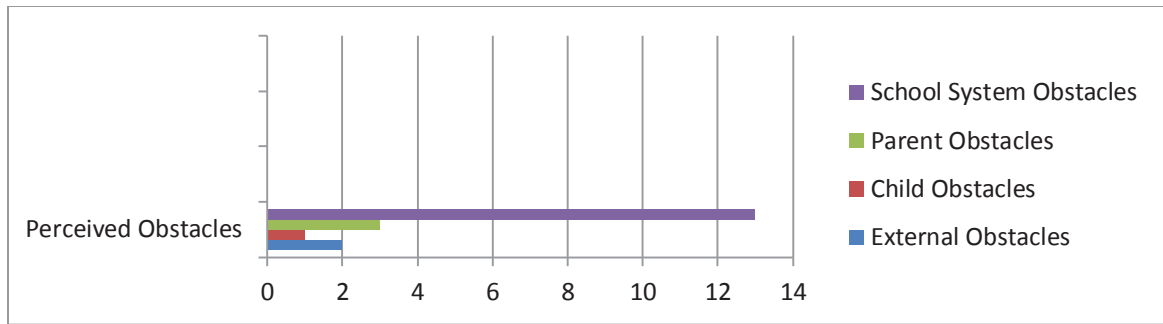
Figure 10. Summary of perceived obstacles by number

Figure 11 demonstrates the categories within the domain of obstacles within the school district. Other district administrators and teachers are high on the list of obstacles. Closely related to both is the concern about district culture. Fifty-three percent of the participants identified relationships with other administrators as a concern in doing the work of closing achievement gaps. Forty percent of participants in the study identified teachers as an obstacle in impacting achievement gaps. No other domain had more than one obstacle mentioned.
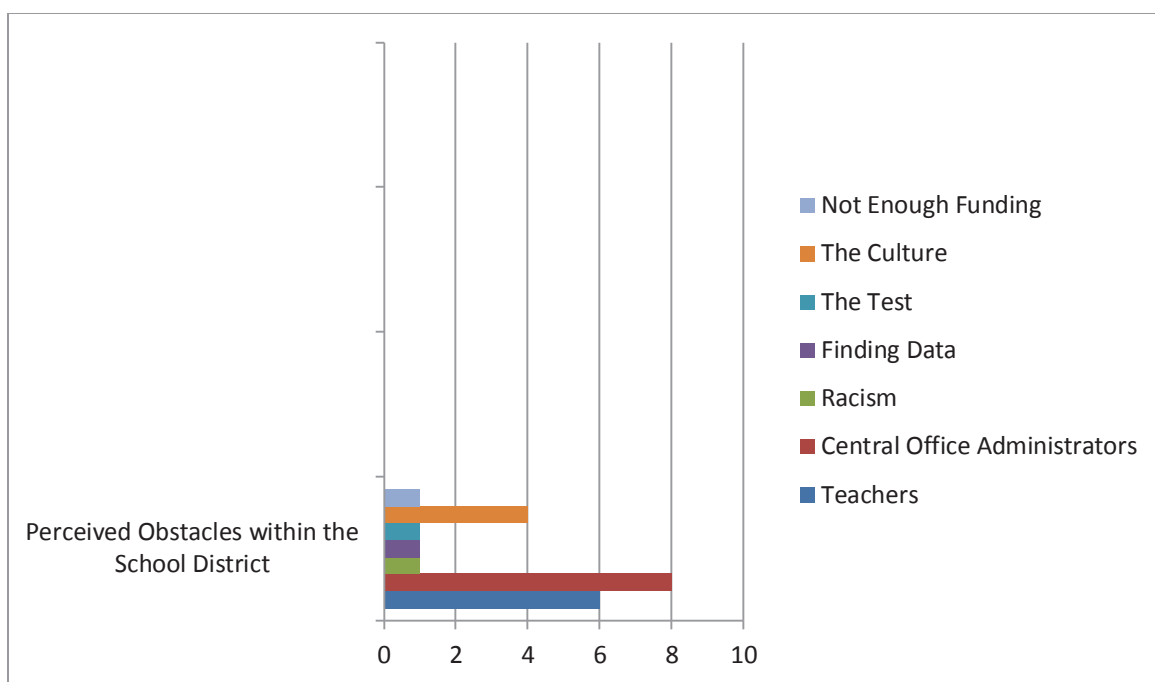
Figure 11. Summary of perceived obstacles within the school district

Perceptions of Solutions for Closing Achievement Gaps

Central office administrators in the study came up with a variety of solutions to impact achievement gaps. These solutions can be divided into four categories: working with children, working with parents, working with school system staff, and organizational changes. Many of the solutions discussed in Chapter 2 are mentioned, including the importance of professional development that broadens the cultural perceptions of teachers.

Working with Children

Early intervention. Adam and Neal both used prekindergarten programs to address gaps at the beginning of schooling. Adam said:

We are responsible when they are five years old … rather than starting school on September 1 we brought them into school on August 15. And so every little five year old who was coming into our kindergarten program had two weeks. We taught them how to clean up. Now, why do I start with that? Because there are a lot of poor kids who don't understand the basic rules. When you're in school you need to be able to line up, and [Quincy] told me we had to somehow [teach them to] line up, how to go to the bathroom under supervision, and how to wash your hands when you go to the bathroom, how to sit with your peers and actually have lunch … What we were trying to do was overcome some of the deficiencies these little kids would have before they were with the rest of their class peers.

Neal said:

We even started a three year-old program. We have five of those now, that we take kids who are disadvantaged for the most part. We don't tell them that, but they are. We have an all day three year-old program in which we tried to catch those kids up, so when they go to kindergarten and first grade they're not a problem from day one. They are having success; they're doing a great job. If you can eliminate the reading problem and reading comprehension for those students, chances are they are going to be successful in school, and we have proven that. In fact we won a national award.

For Neal, focusing on literacy is key to closing achievement gaps. He mentioned a variety of efforts designed to focus on literacy. He said, "We put reading recovery in every elementary school. We hired dedicated reading teachers over three years."

Summer reading is also a part of the approach to closing achievement gaps. Neal continued, "We also have reading teachers in all the high schools and all the middle schools. Reading is the number one priority. We have summer reading camps."

Helen also talked about reading as a key to addressing achievement gaps. Helen said:

> When resources were tight, we said put them in reading programs for first and
> second grade reading recovery, reading buddies, whatever it is, put it there
> because we want students who can come to us who can read and write better.

Instilling pride. Helen also talked about the significance of instilling pride for their school by encouraging students to shift from gang culture to a more positive culture. Helen said:

> We did some other things to address achievement gaps and those things were
> more behavioral and attitudinal toward school. We built pride in the schools that
> they attended and we worked [with feeder schools to the high school] because
> what we learned: we had a big problem, for well, with some students who were
> members of gangs. They used to wear hats in those days. We decided we weren't
> going to fight this battle every day, so we got with the elementary principals and
> they said "Okay, we will start it in kindergarten" and I said at the high school
> level we are going to start it in two years but we are going to start advertising it
> now. In two years all freshmen entering the building will not be allowed to wear
> a hat in the building at all. That is a simple thing, but it changed the culture of the

building a lot. But a lot of it was improving the pride students felt in their own school.

Diversity in advanced courses. Greg, Mark, and Neal all talked about increasing diversity in advanced courses. Mark said, "We are focusing now on how do we get more Black and Hispanic kids into advanced courses." Neal said:

We looked at our data and found that we didn't have many kids in advanced

placement period and 98% of those were Caucasian. So, what we did was we

identified the fact that [Black] students weren't being looked at. They weren't

being coached. They weren't being supported in order to be in [advanced] classes.

Greg said:

Last year we had more kids taking AP courses than ever before with the highest

scores ever, and we had huge increases of African-American and Latino students

taking AP courses. It was a deliberate target and part of our strategic plan where

we have been very clear about we want to close the achievement gap. And our

strategic plan says specifically here are targets; so AP was one of those. [We

wanted] to change who is taking the courses and how well they are doing.

Advocating for students. Ivan talked about advocating for students while working on an attendance panel, disciplinary hearings, and through making placements for students to the reform school in District 1. In each of these roles, Ivan expressedfrustration about how students are treated and how the district demonstrates apathy. Ivan noted:

I had a hearing with a young man 17 years old. He is gang affiliated. He's got

some issues. He is a very angry young man. His family is all gang affiliated.

They warned him about not showing that stuff at school. He got in trouble

mouthing off and cursing and [a school administrator] was sitting across from him

and he said "As sure as I am standing here, and listen very carefully to what I am

about to say, on October 26, 2013 you turn 18 years old and if you are still doing

this stuff at or near that time, I'm going to hand you a piece of paper and it is

going to say here are the numbers to adult education do not return to [District 1]

high school." And I went after the meeting, "You and I need to talk." I'd never

heard that before and I didn't know that you could or would do that to a human

being, because now this kid is a junior and you just said to him I care about you,

but I don't.

Working with Parents

David, Greg, Ken, and Neal all mentioned working with parents as a part of

solving achievement gaps. David said:

Our school has something called touching bases where staff make themselves

available to parents during the day, usually a day when parents are off work, like

a holiday where they can come in and talk to the teacher and find out what is

going on.

Greg said:

The piece we haven't talked about is the connection to the community-- parent

engagement community centers. We now have several that we have put into the

community. We are working directly with families to offer parents [support] at

the elementary level for Latino families. This is a language barrier. In a lot of

these families, parents never went to school and so we want to give them some

idea of what it means to do homework or what it means to sit down and read a

bedtime story. So we visit homes with no books in a lot of these homes.So we

have this initiative to get literature into homes as well. I think that piece is

essential. The schools alone aren't going to achieve this. We need to get the

community involved with it, and I hope what we are doing through those efforts

with the Tripod Model and the community engagement and training parents. I

think that is a model which has some promise in making significant changes.

Neal said:

We have what we call rising ninth graders that are identified by seventh grade.

They are minority students and we're getting ready to do it next month. We have

a dinner next month. We bring in all those kids in the system that have been

identified, and what we do is we bring their parents in and we explain a rigorous

four-year program to them. We provide counseling; we provide peer support; we

provide mentoring; and we give them and their parents a contract so that the child

knows exactly what the four years are going to be.

Ken also mentioned hiring a parent liaison. He said:

[We] purchased resources like parent liaisons. [They] held outreach meetings with

their community. There was a big Latino parent night a few nights ago at

[District 6] high school where there were 500 parents there. Brought into that

meeting were resources from the [district]. Central office staff was there to collect data from the parents. You have to hit it from multiple perspectives because it is not just about curriculum and instruction. [It is] also being invitational to the community, asking parents to be part of the process, giving them the skills and tools necessary to be successful in their home with kids.

Working with School System Staff

Visiting schools. Three administrators mentioned visiting struggling schools (Bea, Carrie, and Eric) as a solution they participated in. Bea said:

Okay, we instituted several programs in which we would have a team going into the struggling schools looking at instruction and not just test data, but also strategies teachers were using in the classroom to improve achievement for all students. And we would sit down with the school and share our results and come up as a school with how we would overcome that in terms of really looking at student A versus student B. Some schools will put up all the testing and that was uncomfortable. They would put the data around the room and everybody knew what kids were doing in every class, and so if a teacher looked up there and saw her classes and it was put down; there you could tell who was a minority and so on. This way they could see why is it that I am teacher A and I got a similar group of kids, but teacher B's students are doing better? That kind of motivated them to work closer together too, because they didn't want to be identified.

Carrie said:

Let's say we have a school in which the data shows they are weak in math for example. So you want to go in and you want to observe some classes. You want to make sure that the principal has done that so that they can know what is actually going on. We can make certain assumptions, but you have to go in to observe. Then go in and provide feedback to principals. And in conferencing with the principals, they already knew some weak teachers and stronger teachers and so the feedback that we provided was basically what we saw: instructional methods that were being used, to what we thought, if they were effective or not, how the children were responding to the instruction that teacher was providing. Eric said:

I measured growth one student at a time and that is how I talked with principals. Let's talk about so-and-so. All the principals had data notebooks, and all I needed to do is look in the data notebook and see where students were and just refer to it and say can we talk about this kid for a minute. I'm not seeing the growth or your teachers are not seeing the growth we once did last nine weeks. What is going on? He might say to me "His mother died." We would have these conversations and remember these are individuals not just numbers, and then I would say so what are we doing to support the kid now. So it is more coach facilitator.

Looking at data. Five administrators discussed looking at data to make decisions (David, Eric, Carrie, Frank, and Mark). As the first step in addressing achievement gaps in schools, Carrie said, "Let's say we have a school in which the data shows they are weak in math for example. So you want to go in and you want to observe some classes."

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David said, "We have the testing that is put in place. We have the year end testing; we have the quarterly tests as far as what we are doing to address the gap tracking each student and their progress."

Eric said:

We started putting the data up for the teachers to see. Then the principal doesn't have to say anything; there is the data. We were doing walk-throughs. I can also look at my Blackberry to see pockets of data that I could disaggregate it in different ways. And I could then redirect resources and staff development to meet those needs.

Frank said, "I think there is serious consideration to what does the data show that our students are having challenges with." He continued, "Is it reading? Is it mathematics? Is it access to advanced classes particularly in high school? Is it participation in honors level classes in middle school or what have you?"

Mark, who said, "I think the real push here with looking at the data" uses data in a similar way to Frank and Carrie. Data are the beginning of inquiry into what gaps exist. Further, data are used to monitor progress. Mark said:

We dissected the problem and found that we had a variety of problems within the dropout rate: 60 to 65% of the students were English language learners over age and under credit. The balance of those students, 35%, had issues with their schedule in our comprehensive high schools. So we said, "If you are failing now in the middle of the year, why do we keep you on the same path? Let's reorient your schedule."

Professional development. Eight of the fifteen administrators in the study discussed professional development as a part of the solution to closing achievement gaps (Carrie, Eric, Ivan, Frank, Ken, Neal, Jack, and Olga). All focus on professional development for teachers. Neal, Ivan, and Jack focused more on professional development that dealt with teacher attitudes and relationships with students, while other administrators focused on academic or curriculum skills.

Neal said:

We took a couple of years working on the attitudes of the AP teachers. We met with them at night time and on the weekends, for a year at least, listening to first of all them complain and then okay now that you've complained how to resolve it.

In a discussion about leading a staff development event about teacher-student relationships Ivan said:

Have people individually, and we ended up doing this, come up with a definition of relationships on your own and then come up with? a definition that is school wide and then be so proud of it that you would hang it in the front of the building and then put the names of all the students on a card. Put the cards on the wall and have teachers initial beside students they have a relationship with. Thirty percent of the kids had no initials beside their name, and what is significant is that teachers could see students who had been at the school since kindergarten to fifth grade and had only two names. How can you close the achievement gap if the people don't even know who they're teaching?

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In regards to orientation for new teachers, Ivan had a conversation with the superintendent who said:

"I need to make sure the people know how to work with these kids. I need you to put together a 2 1/2 hour or three hour program with all our new teachers." And I'm saying this to the superintendent, after we have hired 1200 people; we had to figure it out somehow. And he said "Yes our new teachers get some stuff." And I said,"What do you mean some stuff?" And he looked at me and said, "Well."And I said,"To eliminate the achievement gap?" Mr. Superintendent our new teachers get some stuff.Really?I get some stuff when I go to Marshall's. There is no system. You have no system. It is just kind of we have new teachers, welcome, and a lot of finger crossing and hoping the people stay on and get it.

Jack said:

To be honest with you, I think these conversations lead us to that place [of closing achievement gaps] but I also believe that when we have students come and talk about their experiences, that is one of the most impactful things we can do.

Olga said:

I had mentioned to the director … that there was an approach in a book that I recommend that they read called RTI and began to look at how you can take multiple pathways to teaching students and through differentiated instruction. It started to grow. She still does workshops and has had staff development still encouraging and moving that forward. RTI is response to intervention.

Carrie said:

We feel in our observations teachers needed support in let's say numbers sense, and we saw this in more than one school. Then we would invite a curriculum specialist in to speak to the school or maybe even the cluster about numbers and number sense or just about math strategies, and we would invite teacher leaders from the schools in and principals and have a workshop on theory or on unwrapping the standards. So, we provide the professional development, and we go and see if that professional development has worked or when the teachers were able to apply some of the things that they learned from it. So, we did that as one way to effect change in the schools.

In her current role as a state administrator who monitors school districts struggling to close achievement gaps, Carrie added:

If you find [institutional racism] in your building throughout, you might want to provide some human relations course. That is very much needed in a lot of school systems. Some school systems don't have anything like that at all, but they need to have it. They need to understand how their individual perspective can impact how they perceive other people and can impact how they react to people of a different color or different poverty levels. You have to know who you are and where you're from and why you think the way you think.

Eric said, "I think the role of central office is to be the facilitator and the coaches, looking at Bob Marzano strategies, those sorts of things, giving those tools to teachers."

Frank talked about "professional development specialists being able to go and work with schools whether it's through funding from federal sources or local initiatives. It's really broad. There is no one single answer to what's being done."

Ken said:

As an example, one of their largest growing populations is the Hispanic population. And the Hispanic population has traditionally been underperforming in comparison to the White population. So, what they did was call attention to it, worked with their teachers, provided some professional development on how to differentiate instruction.

Holding people accountable. Two administrators discussed holding people accountable (Mark and Neal). Mark said, "Real close monitoring and holding people accountable and looking at incremental change; trying to do things differently. If things don't work, you stop doing them; if they are working you continue to do them." In discussing the importance of increasing participation of Black students in advanced academics, Neal said, "We also held the principals accountable in the high schools."

Organizational Changes

Schedule and time changes. Three administrators, all superintendents, talked about making adjustments to the schedule as a means of addressing achievement gaps (Adam, Ken, and Mark). Adam said:

One more and that has to do with time. It used to be called time on task in the old days. In those schools that were in poverty, and usually that meant about 50% of the kids were all on free lunch (in [District 1] we get a lot more than that), we

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added to the school day--one hour for four days a week but not on Friday. So, if you are in a poor school with low test scores with a big gap, we gave them four hours a week 16 hours or so a month … We created more time for kids that needed it, and that was a very positive impact. It cost money and we were able to get the city council to approve the plan.

Ken said, "[We] built in … time working with those kids to give timely tailored intervention." Ken emphasized the importance of working this time in during the school day.

Mark said:

[We did] a real analysis of courses looking at master schedules, looking at staffing, budgeting in a more concentrated manner, and how we arranged our day specifically with our master schedule. [Doing this] becomes more of a technician approach, and from that, decisions are made using real close analysis of course enrollment and performance and then also monitoring in between.

Hiring new people. Four administrators talked about hiring people (Adam, Carrie, Neal, and Greg) as a part of the solution. Of the four, Adam and Greg are both from District 1. Adam said, "As the superintendent, of course, I had great ideas, but I also had the good fortune when I went to [District 1], I hired a chief instructional guy.His name is [Quincy]. He is an African-American man." Adam also noted, "Then as we hired over the years, we made sure we wouldn't hire anybody that didn't buy in; for senior people to buy in was a little more complicated."

Carrie said:

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Schools are great if they have great leaders and not just principals, but teachers.

They can get the support of parents and the community. If you can work it so that

all of those things are working together then you will be successful. We first tried

to make sure to select great leaders for the schools, and we tried to make sure that

the principals were doing those things like: selecting great teachers, strong grade

level teams, and strong subject area teams, if it was a middle school or high

school. We also made sure they were appropriately trained and had the adequate

professional development. When they had plans of action to carry out, we

assessed what they did throughout the year to see whether they were achieving

their goals or not. And we did something about it when they did not achieve their

goals.

Neal said:

The first thing I attacked was the achievement gap. In 1996 I hired a director of

minority achievement before it was popular, and I kept her, pretty much the title,

in the closet. And I said, "I want you to meet with every school. I want you to

disaggregate the data, and I want you to tell me what it is that we need to do to

improve minority achievement in all schools." So we came up with a plan.

Greg said:

Two years ago, I hired one of our best teachers to be a cultural competency

trainer, and we have now added a second person to be a director of equity,

looking at the achievement gap specifically in working with the community.

In a way, Greg has hired not one, but two new people who serve in the same role Quincy did for Adam when he was superintendent of District 1.

New to District 1, Ivan discussed a proposal he shared with the superintendent. The proposal had to do with the hiring process of new teachers. In a conversation with the superintendent, Ivan said:

> You want people to become more culturally competent in your classrooms and that is wonderful, but in order to do that you have to seek those folks out, which means in the human resources hiring process there might need to be a question like, "Talk to me about this stuff and how it relates to achievement" not how you get along with your one Black friend. And we brought the human resources guy in and he said, "No, we don't have anything like that." I said, "Strike one."

Summary of Perceived Solutions

Table 9 demonstrates how central office administrators in the study perceive solutions that impact achievement gaps in their school districts. The letter o stands for organizational change. The letter p stands for working with parents. The letter c stands for working with children. The letter s stands for working with school system staff. Luke, the retired superintendent from District 4, discussed no solutions that were demonstrated in his tenure and discussed the difficulty in even talking about the issue because of the racial implications associated with achievement gaps in his district. He instead talked about what should have happened. Those solutions tended toward changing district culture.

Table 9

Perceived Solutions for Closing Achievement Gaps

Code Name	Code District	Job	Self Identified Race/Ethnicity	Solutions
Adam	District 1	Retired Superintendent	Caucasian	C,S, O
Bea	District 2	Retired Assistant Superintendent	Black	S
Carrie	District 2	Retired Director	African American	S, O
David	District 3	Program Coordinator	African American	S, P
Eric	District 4	Retired Superintendent	Caucasian	S
Frank	District 3	Supervisor for Science Education	African American	S
Greg	District 1	Superintendent	White	S, C, P, O
Helen	District 2	Retired Assistant Superintendent	Caucasian	C
Ivan	District 1	Diversity Director	Hispanic/African American	S, C, O
Jack	District 5	Minority Achievement Specialist	African American	S
Ken	District 6	Superintendent	White	P, S, O
Luke	District 4	Retired Superintendent	White	
Mark	District 5	Superintendent	White	S, C, O
Neal	District 7	Superintendent	White	C, S, P, O

Olga	District 2	Former Minority Achievement Coordinator	Puerto Rican/African American	S

Figure 12 provides a visual of perceived solutions by number. Thirteen of the fifteen participants (86%) mention solutions within the school system sphere. Forty-six percent mention solutions in the domain of organizational change.
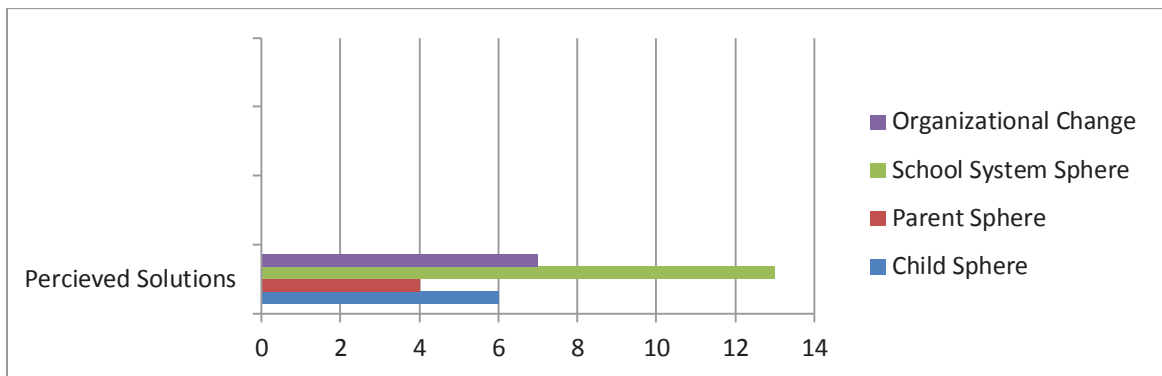
Figure 12. Summary of perceived solutions by number

Figures 13 and 14 provide a summary of perceived solutions to achievement gaps from the domains of child and school system. Early intervention and advanced academic opportunities are high on the list for solutions impacting child factors. Professional development is the top solution for educators.

*Figure 13.*Summary of perceived solutions for children

Figure 14. Summary of perceived solutions for educators

Differences in Perceptions between Black and White Administrators

This section of Chapter 4 deals with research question 4: How do perceptions

about achievement gaps and agency vary between Black and White central office

administrators? In some instances, there is very little difference between Black and

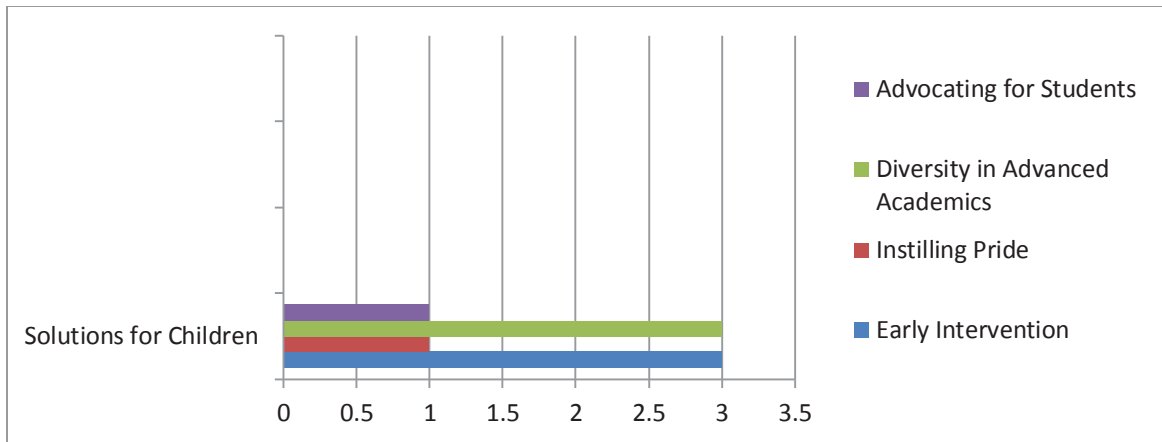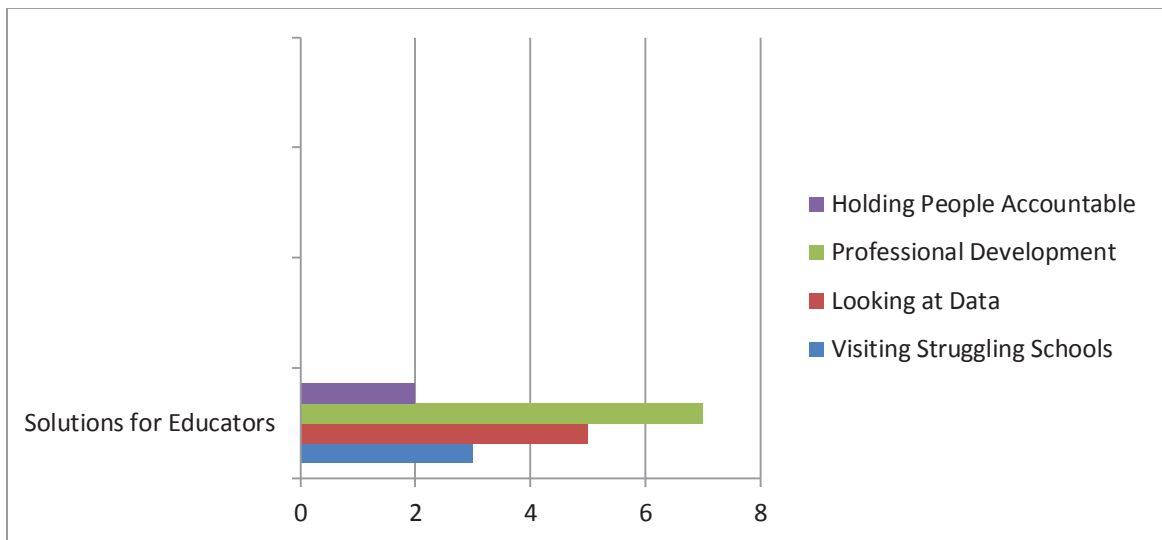White administrators regarding perceptions of the problem. However, there are areas, particularly regarding work experiences, that clearly show a difference.

Differences in Perceptions about Achievement Gaps

      External factors. Of the five administrators who cited external factors contributing to achievement gaps, two were minorities. Although this is a very slight difference, this is consistent with perception studies (Uhlenberg & Brown 2002) mentioned in Chapter 2 regarding how the problem of achievement gaps are understood. More Whites than Blacks tend to focus on issues of poverty as an explanation for why Black students are not doing as well as their White peers. The identification by Ken that this was a factor beyond the scope of his work is also significant in how this factor and possible solutions are viewed. Olga and Frank both mentioned socioeconomics as a factor which is a distinction from economics (the term used by Adam and Neal). Although both are viewed as factors within society, socioeconomics is a term which typically attaches issues of race, language, and power to the discussion of economics. It is the intersection of the social and economic. Hence, Olga and Frank (both of whom are Black) attribute external factors to not just economic, but racial inequality. This may be why Frank uses the term "access" often in his discourse. Hence, even when Black and White administrators talk about external factors that give rise to achievement gaps, the reasons are quite different.

      Child factors. Of the seven administrators who cited child factors contributing to achievement gaps five were minorities. Three of the five minority administrators discuss lack of preparation and the need for early childhood education as a factor in achievement

gaps. One white administrator, Ken, pointed to this factor as well. Ken cited this factor as one that was beyond his control. Bea, a Black administrator, saw the point of early childhood education differently. According to Bea:

> When I was an[assistant] superintendent, one of the elementary principals who did not have a preschool program at her school, over the years she'd notice a certain community, a certain family, the kids were coming to kindergarten lacking basic skills. So she had a kindergarten boot camp in which she invited those families to come before school started, and what we saw in that boot camp comprised of not just Black kids, but other kids whose families were struggling.

Bea went on to say about schools under her supervision:

> It would be interesting to do a comparison in terms of achievement gap between the kids who are in preschool programs versus the ones who are not in preschool programs; and generally the schools that have preschool programs, those kids are coming from economically disadvantaged homes.

> Frank used the following comparison:

> It is about playing catch-up for some students. For some people, if you know you haven't been exposed to some resources and access that others have the question is "Can you catch up?" And you know the rate of what students have to do to catch up just to be on equal footing with someone else is pretty tremendous. Maybe it's a race where one group of students has to run up the hill 60° and another group of students has run up the hill 45° in order to just get to the same place.

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For Frank, Bea, and Jack (all Black administrators), the issue of student preparation is more an issue of inequality of access to resources. In the case of the other Black administrators, David and Carrie, the student issue is a matter of motivation and valuing education. In this way, David and Carrie share a similar point made by Eric (a White administrator) who points to students' belief in their ability to achieve. So, the majority of Blacks in this study who discuss student factors, discuss them in light of economic disparities and discuss the specific factor of early childhood education. At least one of those administrators, Bea, sees it as something that can be addressed through early intervention.

Parent factors. Of the seven administrators who cited parent factors contributing to achievement gaps, five were minorities. Three of the administrators, Adam (who is White), Carrie, and David, talked about the need for parents to change certain practices. The other four administrators Bea, Jack, Mark (who is White), and Olga talked about the factor of parents being unable to navigate the system. In this way, they shared a common theme of a lack of cultural capital and knowledge of the school system on the part of minority parents that leads to achievement gaps. The ability of serving as advocates for their children is something that is then hindered by parents' inability to navigate the system. Bea said:

> Take me for instance. I was an educator and I made sure my kids got the basics and teachers knew. And you know parents not being visible up there letting people know "Yes, I am concerned about my kids." When teachers know that you are going to ask questions and you are going to expect them to provide proper

instruction for your kids, they step up their game.My kids did very well in school

and they are Black; and they did very well on test scores.

So, most Blacks in the study who mention parent factors mention them in light of cultural

capital and the ability to navigate the system.

School system factors. Nine different administrators cited school system factors

contributing to achievement gaps. Five of the nine were minorities. Teachers were

pointed to as a major factor within the school districts in the study. Of the six

administrators who identified teachers as a factor in achievement gaps, four were

minorities. The importance of relationships was a major issue raised by both Black and

White administrators who discussed teacher concerns.

Differences in perceptions of agency. Only White administrators (all of whom

are either current or former superintendents) noted raising the issue of the achievement

gap as part of their role. The fact that they are all superintendents is significant in that

their role as school division leaders may make it easier for them to raise issues without

concern of retaliation by others in the division. This is not to say that superintendents do

not face concerns from the larger community when bringing up issues of racial

disparities. Greg and Neal both note points in their careers when they received hate mail

for helping move additional resources to minority students. But within the school

division, these individuals may be less likely to face overt negative feedback from other

educators within the system because they are the leaders.

Three of the four administrators who mentioned data as a part of their role were

African American. African-American and Hispanic respondents were the only ones to

mention working with students as a part of their role. Both of these examples shed light on how Black administrators in the study differ in terms of work responsibilities. All White administrators in the study were either superintendents or assistant superintendents. There was one Black assistant superintendent in the study. Three of the seven Black administrators in the study (Olga, Jack, and David) were in positions that required them to manage programs for children and so they had more interaction with them.

When discussing competition over resources, Ken and Helen both noted that those tensions subsided over time. Bea discussed it as an ongoing struggle. Bea characterized this as more of an example of racism and elitism within her school district and the larger community. All three worked within the same district (District 2) at the same time at some point. Ken eventually moved to another neighboring district (District 6).

Only Ivan and Jack (both minority males) mentioned their job title as a barrier to interaction with their peers. Both work in positions(Ivan in District 1 and Jack in District 5) where they raise issues of inequity and racial disparities in academic achievement and access to advanced academic programs.

Jack said:

I was in a meeting and we were talking about recruitment of teachers, especially teachers of color. Council members in the meeting shared their own experiences and the difficulty of working in a system where you see institutional racism. And I don't think [District 5] is different from other districts in that respect. But there was a feeling of isolation. There was a feeling of can you be your authentic self.

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We even talked the last few years about having a staff of color affinity group because if there are only a couple of you in the building you end up feeling the way the kids do at times. When I left that meeting, I came away thinking we are trying to make an equitable environment where kids feel like they can be their authentic self, and the staff members don't feel like that.

Ivan said, "There is not a day that goes by where people don't say '[Ivan] did what or what did he do?'"

Olga, who served in District 2 in a similar role, also notes the attitude the district had toward her office. Olga said:

The [office] was a very small office, not to be sarcastic or condescending. The office was created because of the push that the [concerned minority parent group] … would have something that would address the achievement gap. And that was done before I even came to [District 2]. It was part of a community grassroots movement … being a part of the [office of instruction], it did not allow for the office to be as progressive or as strategic as it could have been. It was basically a school board way and a district way, for lack of a better word, of appeasing the [concerned minority parent group] to say "Look what we've done! We started an office."

White superintendents Neal and Adam also mention having people in similar positions and having to hide or protect them from others in the district.

Neal said, "I hired a director of minority achievement before it was popular and I kept her pretty much, the title, in the closet."

Adam said about Quincy, an African-American administrator who helped him with strategies for closing achievement gaps, "I didn't let anybody pick on him."

Helen is the only White administrator to mention teacher attitude as a barrier to her work. Jack and Carrie (both of whom are African American) mention teacher attitude. Only White administrators mention teacher skill as a barrier. Attitude connotes a disposition and an unwillingness to change. Skill tends to connote more of a sense of lack of knowledge which can be remedied through training.

Racism is a word that is used more often by White administrators than African American administrators when discussing obstacles. Only one of the three administrators, who mention racism as a barrier, is African American (Bea). Among the Black participants in the study, Bea holds the highest position, Assistant Superintendent, of any of the other Black administrators in the study. She routinely mentions race as a factor in achievement gap issues in District 2. This does not mean that other Black participants in the study do not recognize racism as an issue. Often times, Black participants refer to racism in other ways. Carrie, for example talks about having to prove herself to her supervisors because she is Black. Jack talks about his own alienation within his school district due to his minority status. He also mentions students being unable to identify with advanced academic courses because of the lack of minority representation in the classrooms. Olga talks about District 2's response to minority parent concerns by giving an appearance of change but not supporting the effort wholeheartedly. Hence, racism is not always mentioned by name, but it is referred to in a variety of manifestations.

Of the three administrators who mention parents as an obstacle in their work, two are White and one is African American. Adam is the only administrator who saw the advocates of students who were underachieving as an obstacle. Bea and Ken both discussed parents who did not want to see resources go to minorities. Bea was the only administrator who mentioned Asian parents as a part of the opposition to reforms.

Differences in solutions. Only White administrators mention working directly with parents in their solutions. Only one minority administrator (Ivan) talked about working directly with students. His work, however, did not focus on what was working, but on what was inherently wrong with the system he currently serves.

Of the eight administrators who discussed professional development as a solution, five were minorities. Of those who mentioned professional development, Ivan and Jack focused their professional development on teacher attitudes and relationships with students. All others focused on curriculum and instruction. Carrie, in her current role as an administrator at the state level, discussed the importance of professional development that focuses on teacher attitudes and relationships with students. She said:

> If you find it in your building throughout, you might want to provide some human relations course. That is very much needed in a lot of school systems. Some school systems don't have anything like that at all, but they need to have it. They need to understand how their individual perspective and how they perceive other people and their presence can impact how they react to people of different color, of different poverty levels. You have to know who you are and where you're from and why you think the way you think.

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For Carrie, even though she did not discuss actively participating in this kind of

professional development when she worked in District 2, she does discuss its significance

at the state level.

Chapter 5: Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

In Chapter 1 of this dissertation, I wrote that exploring the perceptions of central office administrators regarding the Black-White achievement gap was critical to understanding both the problem of achievement gaps and possible solutions. This chapter discusses the major findings, conclusions, and recommendations associated with the results of this study.

Major Findings

Perceptions of the Causes of the Black-White Achievement Gap

Based on the responses of participants in the study, perceptions of the causes of achievement gaps between Black and White students tended to fall within four general categories: external factors, student factors, parent factors, and school district factors. All administrators in the study see the achievement gap as a problem. Analysis of interviewee responses revealed a range of perceptions from a singular issue to multiple issues contributing to gaps in achievement. Neal, for example, communicated the singular issue of economics as the reason for achievement gaps. Mark also communicated one issue, parents' lack of understanding of the system, as the contributing factor to achievement gaps. There are administrators whose views lie within a particular category of causes but may identify multiple factors within a category. Greg, Helen, and Ivan all point to school district factors as a reason for achievement gaps in their districts.

However, they each identify two or more specific problems within the district that lead to the creation of achievement gaps. For example, Greg pointed to four issues within the district: ineffective use of resources, lack of innovation, district culture, and lack of teacher skill.

Sixty percent of the administrators in the study saw the cause of the achievement gap over more than one of the four categories. Four administrators (Adam, Frank, Eric, and Olga) discussed two of the categories in their explanation of achievement gaps. External factors and parent factors were discussed by Olga and Adam. Frank discussed external and student factors and Eric discussed student and district factors. Four participants (Bea, Carrie, Jack, and Ken) discussed the achievement gap over three categories. Student, parent, and district factors were all part of the explanation of achievement gaps in conversations with Bea, Carrie, and Jack. Ken's perception was informed by factors related to external issues, student factors, and district factors. David was the only administrator who identified factors in all four categories. David's position is unique among all administrators in the study (with the exception of Jack who works in a similar situation) in that he works both as a high school guidance counselor and as the administrator of a district program for students who will be the first in their families to attend college. Both positions require David to work with parents and students on a regular basis. This is not the case with other central office administrators (with the exception of Jack) who work mainly with other central office administrators.

Sixty-six percent of administrators in the study identified district factors as a reason for achievement gaps. Fifty-three percent of those who identified district factors

pointed to teachers as a cause for achievement gaps. Administrators pointed to an inability to develop positive relationships with students of color as a primary factor in achievement gaps in their districts. With the exception of Olga, all administrators in District 2 (75%) pointed to teacher-student relationships as a factor in achievement gaps in their district. Forty-six percent of participants in the study identified student factors and forty-six percent identified parent factors as contributors to achievement gaps in their districts.

Forty percent of administrators in the study discussed external factors (including poverty and health care) related to growth of achievement gaps. A point of interest in this portion of the results is that most administrators in the study do not discuss poverty or factors beyond the school district as a contributing factor in achievement gaps in their districts. Based on the analysis of the data, central office administrators in the study generally looked to teachers as a major factor in achievement gaps.

What I learned from central office administrators regarding their understanding of the Black-White achievement gap is that there was a much greater emphasis on the part of central office administrators in the study to discuss the problem with the school district (particularly teachers) as opposed to talking about the role of poverty and the challenges of Black parent engagement. Ken said it clearly when he noted that there were things he could address in his role and things he could not address. He chose to focus only on those things he felt were within his sphere of influence. Carrie also said that she could not blame parents but wished that they could do more. Here again, the participants in the study seemed resigned to the idea that some factors in achievement gaps were beyond

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their control. Additionally, since the majority of central office administrators in this study learned about the achievement gap within the context of their work, their frame of reference was shaped by what they could do within their work context. Outside factors like economic condition and parent engagement, though relevant, are rarely discussed because those who work within this context do not see these issues as changeable. They seemed to reserve their focus and energies in making the system work more efficiently.

Perceptions of Central Office Role

Respondents demonstrated a range of perceived roles in addressing achievement gaps in their districts. Forty percent of participants in the study talked about the importance of making the achievement gap a primary focus and bringing attention to it. This role was raised by current and former superintendents and demonstrated the significant role of division leaders in leading by example and developing a culture in which there can be open discussion about the factors that lead to achievement gaps within a given district. Acknowledging that achievement gaps exist was an important way superintendents addressed the problem. Additionally, making the closing of achievement gaps a part of the strategic plan of the district was also determined to be a significant part of the role of central office administrators. What I learned from the participants was that the problem cannot be addressed if it is not first acknowledged and then secondly discussed openly both among educators and parents.

Forty percent of administrators mentioned their role as being, at least in part, to meet with the community.   Participants in the study talked a great deal about the need for parent engagement and for parents to learn how to navigate very complex school districts.

Coming to the community to explain new initiatives, the rationale behind new tests, and what parents can do at home to support their children were all important topics raised in the community. Additionally, listening to parent concerns was an important part of the role of some central office administrators. Learning from parent experiences with school employees helps central office administrators to gauge the culture and climate within the division.

Thirty-three percent of the administrators in the study discussed providing professional development as a part of their role. Equipping teachers with both pedagogical tools and soft skills, including developing positive relationships with students, was seen as an important step in providing students a quality education. Further, central office administrators saw professional development as a means of developing a culture that is geared toward high expectations for student achievement. An attempt to minimize deficit thinking within the school division, administrators seemed to see their work in professional development as a very important part of turning around schools that struggled to close achievement gaps.

Twenty-six percent of the participants in the study mentioned working with and disseminating data. Data was seen as a key role in acknowledging the problem. It helped administrators to pinpoint areas that needed to improve and created a climate in which it was expected that achievement gaps were not only discussed but dealt with. Data was also seen as a means of holding school administrators and their staffs accountable. Collecting data and disseminating it to educators was seen as an essential means of being systematic in the work of closing achievement gaps. The numbers helped to tell a story

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of which skills needed to be developed among teachers for the advancement of student achievement. The numbers also told a story of how administrators followed up on problems raised in previous years. The data was seen as the concrete evidence of the success, or failure, of efforts designed to close gaps.

The numbers could also lead to some uncomfortable conversations about race. Bea, for example, discussed how the data collected among the schools she supervised pointed to a very clear racial distinction between Black students taught by White teachers and Black students taught by Black teachers. The latter group did better on tests, according to Bea, a retired assistant superintendent in District 2. The result was that more collaboration was encouraged to support not only what was taught but how it was taught. As a result, all of the schools under her leadership met state standards.

Twenty–six percent mentioned collaboration with other educators as a part of their role. Adam and Ivan, for example, talked a great deal about problem-solving with a colleague to address achievement gaps. Conversations with Adam and Ivan, both from District 1, helped reveal a side of central office not many get to see. Adam, a retired superintendent, talked at length about his friendship with a Black administrator who helped him design an approach to closing achievement gaps that included early intervention and additional instruction time.

Ivan talked about his role in supporting the superintendent in his district by providing insight into how to turn a deficit thinking culture into one of high expectations for all students. His frustration with the superintendent's knowledge base revealed the varying degrees of knowledge that central office administrators have, even when they

hold the top position. Both Adam and Ivan show the level of trust and dependence superintendents can have on their staff. This is something not often discussed beyond the central office community. Ivan was also in a unique role in that he was one of the few Black administrators in the study to have a direct influence on the thinking of the superintendent. This is rare. And it shows the significance of encouraging diversity within the central office context.

As Greg, a superintendent, pointed out his job is to provide vision, but he needed the help of other competent professionals to get the work done. This factor points to the significance of having a variety of viewpoints at the table of decision making. Division leaders do not enter into positions as omniscient sages, but as individuals with a need to know more.   In order to lead successfully, these leaders need input from a variety of perspectives that help them to reach the needs of increasingly diverse student populations. District leaders that rely on cronyism and White privilege to fill staff positions do themselves and the communities they serve a great disservice. They have automatic blind spots that make it difficult to see the problem of the achievement gap clearly.

Twenty-six percent mentioned working with students as part of their role. Working directly with students is not something most central office administrators do. Those who do work with students on a regular basis have a real sense of how students experience the curriculum and the overall climate and culture of the school they attend. Jack, for example, noted a number of instances where Black students shared their feelings of alienation in the school. These experiences emboldened Jack to continue the work of

educating teachers about the importance cultural competence. Ivan also shared instances where interacting with Black male students gave him a wake-up call to the state of the racial climate in the school.

What I learned from this is that directly working with students provided some central office administrators a sense of perspective and a sense of passion to their work. All of the central office administrators who mentioned this role are Black, and they primarily support minority students. The voices and faces of the students provided a story that the data alone could not tell. Students were the evidence of the need for improvement and the motivation to continue working in the face of deficit thinkers. Although all administrators in the study shared their genuine concern for students, those who worked directly with them demonstrated a distinct zeal when talking about their experiences with students.

Regarding obstacles that impact their role, central office administrators in the study mentioned a range of concerns. Fifty-three percent mentioned other administrators as an obstacle. Relationships between central office administrators tend to become strained when there are different views regarding how to use resources. Disagreements also occur regarding differences in approaches to solving achievement gaps. Luke and Ivan both talked a great deal about the difficulty in changing district culture when individuals did not want to challenge status quo ways of thinking. Color-blindness and deficit thinking were a part of both of their districts. Luke shared how well-intended people who wanted to change the culture of the district got frustrated and stopped trying

to change things. Ivan tried to address stagnation in his district through direct confrontation with other central office administrators and school administrators.

What I learned from this is that there are ideological struggles that take place within the central office context. Administrators come to the decision making table with varied backgrounds and varied understandings of why achievement gaps exist and how best to address them. Additionally, there are other factors like individual recognition. Bea shared how competition for resources and public acclaim among central office administrators made it seem as if she had no central office colleagues. Instead, everyone was a competitor vying for the lion's share of resources that could then be used to make schools under their leadership shine above all other schools in the district. This level of competition can, in some ways, be attributed to the growing value of test scores over everything else. Everyone wanted to look good first, even at the expense of others in the district. Instead of creating a climate of collaboration, competition over test scores, in some districts, created an arena of resentment, lack of trust, and of competition which did not serve the students well.

Forty percent of administrators in the study mentioned teachers as an obstacle. White teachers were primarily viewed as unwilling to change deficit thinking and resistant to Black students who were not of the same cultural background as the teacher. The result of this resistance to change included strong opposition toward Black student enrollment in advanced academic classes and lack of commitment to school expectations that all students achieve at a standard level. In the instances of resistance to advanced academic inclusion, central office administrators spoke openly about White privilege and

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the very blatant perceptions of some White teachers about Black intelligence and the very

subjective attributes of what it means to be worthy of gifted education. Twenty-six

percent of respondents noted the district culture as an obstacle to be overcome.   The

culture of these districts cannot be understood apart from the teachers, administrators, and

school board members that are a part of them. Greg said that all are accountable for the

deficit thinking that pervaded his district. Twenty percent mentioned racism as an

obstacle. Both institutional racism and the pressures of White privilege within the

community were very present in the work of central office administrators. What this

demonstrates is that the achievement gap between Black and White students is not a point

at which all in the community rally to eradicate. Ken said that some members of the

White community actually want winners and losers so that their children can be

perceived as better. This is an important consideration in understanding what central

office administrators are up against. It is not as easy as identifying the problem and

addressing it. There are political pressures that work to either consciously or

unconsciously ignore gaps to the detriment of Black students. The fact that the racism is

directed not only at Black administrators but White administrators, including

superintendents, demonstrates the level of White privilege activism at work in several of

the school districts in this study.

What the data demonstrate is a very complex work environment for central office

administrators. There are challenges both within the district and in the community.

There is frequent competition over limited resources. There are ideological wars where

ideas do not always meld into a unified voice for what is best for students. There is the

undeniable perceived presence of institutional racism which both impacts how they do their job but also the ideas that emerge from the center of leadership within some districts. Bea's account of how she had to fight for funding that rightfully belonged to schools under her leadership is an example of the negative barriers that exist. Neal's discussion of hate mail over sharing resources with poor minority students and families is another example of how the work of central office administrators can be impacted. Jack also mentioned the alienation of being African–American in the work place.

Perceptions of Solutions

There were four general categories used to identify central office administrator perceptions of solutions they were involved in to help close achievement gaps in their districts: students, parents, educators, organizational change. Seventy-three percent of the administrators in the study discussed participating in solutions that directly impacted educators. This included professional development events and talking to teachers about data to address achievement gaps. Forty-six percent of administrators in the study discussed organizational changes. Organizational changes included changing schedules and time to provide for more classroom time in the day or intervention during the school day. Included in organizational change was the introduction of new offices and hiring new personnel. Forty percent of administrators mentioned solutions that immediately impacted students. Examples of this included increasing the numbers of minority students in advanced classes. Twenty-six percent noted working with parents as a part of their solution to addressing achievement gaps.

Central office administrators in the study identified multiple approaches to address the achievement gaps in their districts. Their solutions demonstrate their understanding of the problem of achievement gaps as complex and multifaceted. Eight of the 15 participants in the study discussed providing professional development to educators as a solution they participated in to address achievement gaps. At 53%, this was the solution that most in the study participated in to support closing achievement gaps in their districts.

Many of the solutions tended to focus on the perceived sphere of influence of the administrators. Many worked with other educators through professional development. This met with mixed results depending on the district and the nature of the professional development. Overall, the professional development that seemed to meet the most resistance was that which focused on cultural competence. It was often seen as unwelcome and unnecessary among White educators. Jack said that he knew that his training did not necessarily result in a measurable, proven way to close gaps. It did, however, challenge White educators to think beyond the lens of White privilege and to think about how their instructional practices may impact students who value a different cultural capital than their own.

The most effective professional development focused on collaboration between teachers based on data that showed what was working and what was not working. School walk-throughs were seen by central office administrators as another effective means of closing achievement gaps. Creating a sense of support from the central office level to the school was how Bea managed to get the schools under her leadership to meet state

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standards. Collaboration was her mantra, and it proved to create a culture of support that paid dividends for all students in her district. My take away from administrators was that there can be no effective means of closing achievement gaps through singular effort. Only through collective effort from the central office level to the school level can the work of closing achievement gaps be accomplished. This must be a multifaceted approach that includes educating parents of how best to support their children, providing effective, culturally relevant instruction, and providing support for teachers that encourages a sense of efficacy.

Differences between Black and White Administrators

Both Black and White central office administrators in the study have very complex and evolving understandings of the causes of achievement gaps. Both Black and White administrators see the achievement gap between Black and White students as a problem that needs to be addressed. They also have different perceptions in regards to some aspects of the causes of achievement gaps. An example of this is in discussing economic factors. White administrators who raised this issue discussed it in terms of poverty and lack of resources while Black administrators used the term *socioeconomics* to discuss both poverty and the culture of inequality in resources that gives rise to achievement gaps. Of the seven administrators who raised student factors that contributed to achievement gap, only two were White. Similarly, Blacks were more likely than Whites to discuss parent factors in discussing the cause of achievement gaps. Seventy-one percent (5 of 7) of those who mentioned parent factors that contributed to achievement gaps were Black. Sixty percent of the Black administrators who mentioned

parent factors were from District 2. Regarding student factors, seventy-one percent (5 of 7) of those who mentioned student factors that contributed to achievement gaps were Black. Only White administrators (Greg, Helen, and Luke) talked about a lack of innovation as a cause of achievement gaps.

Regarding their roles within central office, only Black administrators talked about working directly with students. This is due to the fact that their work requires them to oversee programs designed to impact minority student access to college and advanced academics. Jack and David, for example, work within schools as counselors while still maintaining central office responsibilities. Olga oversaw a program designed to provide academic enrichment for minority students. Ivan's work includes interacting with students at a reform school in District 1. He also takes part in hearings for students who are being considered for expulsion. Only White administrators (Greg, Ken, Mark, Neal, Adam and Luke), all of whom are current or former superintendents, saw making the achievement gap a priority as a part of their role. Only White administrators (Greg and Helen) talked about choosing leaders as part of their role.

Regarding solutions, very few Black administrators discussed changing the school schedule or either hiring new people or changing the process of hiring. Whites on the other hand did mention this. This may also be due to the fact that Whites in the study tended to have higher positions where this solution was possible within their administrative roles.

Probably the most interesting finding between Black and White administrators is the experience in the work place. There are clearly barriers faced by Black

administrators that are a result of institutional racism. From Bea's inability to get funds that were allotted to her schools to Ivan and Jack's inability to be recognized by their peers as valuable contributors to the organization to Carrie's realization that she has to prove herself because of her race, these all point to cultures of inequality that exist at the central office level and that hinder the work of closing achievement gaps for central office administrators of color.

Only Black administrators mentioned their job title as a barrier to productive interaction among their peers in central office. Black administrators who specifically work in positions that require them to point out and address achievement gaps and racial inequities are often alienated; their worth to the district is questioned; and their work is frequently rejected by their peers as counter to the prevailing culture. The fact that no White participants did the same work (jobs dealing with minority achievement and equity issues) is significant in that for some districts it may be understood that these are jobs for minorities. The stress and alienation that goes along with those jobs may also be specific for the culture of the district, which may reserve such positions only for minority administrators. Olga mentioned earlier that her position was a result of pressure from minority parents. The result was an office that was, from her perception, for show not for meaningful change.

Greg and Neal (both White superintendents) talked about experiencing racism when attempting to reallocate resources to close achievement gaps. This is unique among the participants in that they pointed to racism as an obstacle within the community. Bea,

who is Black, also talked about racism within the school district in the form of competition for resources.

Where Black and White central office administrators tended to agree was in their identification of teachers as a major factor causing achievement gaps. More specifically, both Black and White administrators talked about the inability of teachers to develop positive relationships between themselves and students as a factor in the creation and widening of gaps. Both Black and White administrators also saw other central office administrators as obstacles in their work to close achievement gaps. Both talked about a culture of apathy and resistance to change as a struggle within their work environment.

Conclusions and Implications

Regarding the first research question, the perceptions of central office administrators regarding the causes of achievement gaps are complex and evolving. Administrators pointed to four main factors in the creation of achievement gaps: external factors, child factors, parent factors, and school district factors. More than any other category, administrators pointed to district factors as a cause for achievement gaps. Within district factors, the one factor most often cited was the poor relationships between teachers and students.

School system leaders tended to agree that the relationship between White teachers and Black students is a major factor in the existence and exacerbation of achievement gaps. The lack of cultural competence on the part of White teachers is a major issue according to many administrators in this study. The implication of this perception among central office administrators is that there is a need for CRP. White

teachers who interact with Black students will need to assess what they bring culturally to

their teaching. There will also have to be greater effort in attributing value to the cultural

norms (e.g., language, interests, and views) of Black students and an avoidance of deficit

thinking which leads to lowered expectations, lower teacher efficacy, and lower student

performance. An issue on which participants disagreed is whether or not a predominantly

White female workforce of teachers can make the perceptual shift to fully embrace

students who come from a different cultural background—one rooted in a history of

racism and injustice. There is, according to many administrators in the study, a need for

teachers with a willingness to engage in transformative teaching which is characterized

by honesty, empathy, advocacy, and action (Howard, 2006).

Black administrators, like Carrie and Bea, seemed to have their doubts about the

willingness of White teachers to teach Black students with as much effort as they do

White students. The concerns of Carrie and Bea are reminiscent of the Taliaferro and

DeCuir-Gunby (2007) study in which Black teachers saw barriers to advanced academics

for Black students. They talked in the study about the lack of institutional will as a major

culprit in the existence of racial differences in access to opportunities for educational

rigor. Carter (2005) also noted the cultural gaps that existed between Black students and

the cultural norms of schools.

Regarding the second research question, the perceptions of central office

administrators regarding their role in impacting achievement gaps are complex and

evolving. Responses by participants fell into four categories: impact on external factors,

impact on parent factors, impact on child factors, and impact on school factors.

Obstacles encountered by central office administrators fell into four categories: external, child, parent, and school system.

Administrators discussed a variety of activities they engaged in to impact student achievement including making achievement gaps a priority, meeting with the community, and providing professional development for educators. Administrators also cited obstacles both within the school district and beyond the school district as factors in their ability to do the work of closing achievement gaps. Internal obstacles included racism, teachers, and other administrators. Another factor that was raised was the views of White parents. In most cases, participants reported that many Whiteparents do not want to share resources with students who traditionally underperform.

School system leaders tended to agree on two major roles in impacting achievement gaps. One had to do with making achievement gaps a priority. This is a role that wasexclusively discussed by superintendents. By serving in this role, they sawthemselves as providing the leadership and resources needed to address gaps in achievement. The obstacles identifiedby most who mentioned this role were White parent dissatisfaction and a culture of resistance to change within the school division.

Some of the obstacles can be seen as examples of Heifetz and Linsky's (2002) reactions to change agents. According to Heifetz and Linsky:

> When exercising leadership, you risk getting marginalized, diverted, attacked, or seduced. Regardless of the form, however, the point is the same. When people resist adaptive work, their goal is to shut down those who exercise leadership in order to preserve what they have. (p. 31)

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The external obstacle of racism was discussed by two White superintendents (Greg and Neal) who experienced receiving hate mail when providing additional resources to minority students. The issue of White privilege noted by Howard in Chapter 2 of this document provides an interesting connection to the experience of these two district leaders. The experiences of the two administrators also shows the pervasive nature of the issue of White resistance to sharing resources in that they are from different districts in different states.

An implication here is that part of the struggle in closing achievement gaps has to do with a competition for limited resources. The achievement gap can be seen as a byproduct of the ongoing struggle for power between the dominant culture and those with less cultural and economic capital (Freire, 2007). School division leaders may be seen by some in the dominant culture as a means to the end of continuing status quo practices. This creates what Ladson-Billings (2006) calls a moral debt when the problem is not resources but a lack of desire to change. Resisting such power imbalances requires courage on the part of school district leaders.

The other role that administrators tended to agree upon was meeting with the community. The need for parent engagement was a factor discussed by several administrators. Meeting with parents as a role in closing achievement gaps is significant in that it bridges the divide between home culture and school culture and increases the likelihood that Black parents can begin to secure a degree of knowledge of how the system works and how best to navigate their children through the system. This lessens the chance of a sustained inequality (Larson & Ovando, 2001).

Regarding the third research question, administrators viewed solutions to impacting achievement gaps in a variety of ways. Most expressed the belief that there must be a multifaceted approach to solving this problem. These solutions can be divided into four categories: working with students, working with parents, working with educators, and organizational change (including restructuring the school day and creating new positions). Providing professional development to teachers was a popular solution.

Most agreed that professional development was an important solution to addressing achievement gaps in schools. The distinction comes in what kind of professional development educators should get. Most talked about professional development that focuses on curriculum and subject matter. Very little conversation concerned professional development that addresses the issue of CRP. Those who do discuss this type of professional development find that they encounter alienation and resentment from many educators who tend to blame the gap on students and their home life. The implication here is that although there are administrators who saw a need for CRP, there are few who participated in the implementation of such professional development. Those who didwere not seeing the change they had hoped.

Regarding the fourth research question, Black and White central office administrators in the study do differ in some significant ways. Regarding the causes of the achievement gap, Black administrators raised issues of inequality when discussing parent and student factors. White administrators almost never discussed issues regarding what students or parents need to do differently. This is in sharp contrast to the Uhlenberg and Brown (2002) study in which Black teachers tended to identify system and teacher

factors more than White teachers who focused more on student and parent factors.

Further, the Bol and Berry (2005) study, which was a study with predominantly White

participants, also contrasts with the results of this study in that among White educators,

parents and students were seen as the primary cause of achievement gaps. In this study

46% of the participants mentioned factors that were child factors and 46% mentioned

factors that were parent factors. In each case 71% of the central office administrators

who discussed these issues were Black. The implication is that Black central office

administrators (unlike the teachers referenced in the studies cited above) perceived the

causes of the achievement gap in some very different ways from their White counterparts.

Blacks attributed more of the cause of the gap to Black children and their families.

Regarding perceived roles, both Black and White administrators expressed a

variety of actions they can take to impact achievement gaps in their districts. White

administrators talked most often about making the issue of the achievement gap a

priority. Black administrators talked more about providing professional development and

meeting with the community. Meeting with parents was the way in which six of the

participants impacted parent factors of engagement. Only one of the administrators who

mentioned this as a part of their role was White. All others were Black. This may be

due, in part, to factors addressed in the study by Herbert (1974) noted in Chapter 2 of this

document. One of the forces was community accountability and the countervailing

pressures were act as a minority community buffer vs. facilitate minority participation.

In many instances, the Black administrators in the study seemed to want to serve as

facilitators of minority participation. Bea demonstrated this through her efforts at

educating parents about the state test. An implication here is that even though Blacks talked more about the role of parents as a cause of achievement gaps, they also saw their role as empowering these parents to become more involved in advocating for their children.

Regarding perceived obstacles, Black administrators identified institutional racism as a factor in their work. The implication of this is that there are still issues of inequality that carry over into the central office context. These issues result in stifling the work of administrators who are given the charge of impacting achievement gaps. Hence, Black administrators perceived a major factor in the inability to close achievement gaps as the lack of support from White central office administrators. White administrators who talk about the resistance to change in school districts are reminiscent of the McMahon (2007) study in which there is recognition of the negative aspect of racial injustice but little change regarding status quo behavior for fear of retribution from school board members, parents, and other stakeholders perceived to be more influential than Black constituents. Luke, a former White superintendent, is an example of this in that he was the only participant in the study to have no solutions to closing gaps because of his avoidance of challenging the status quo.

Regarding solutions, there are a variety of solutions that both Black and White administrators agree upon. White administrators spoke most often about changing the school schedule to create opportunities for intervention during the school day and either creating new positions or hiring new people to address the achievement gap. This may be due in large part to the fact that almost all White administrators in the study were

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superintendents while there was only one Black assistant superintendent in the study. Black administrators talked most often about providing professional development for educators as a way of closing achievement gaps. An implication here is that Black administrators in the study have fewer options when it comes to impacting the structure of school districts because, at least in this study, they do not have the positional authority to make these changes. They work within their sphere of influence.

Recommendations

There are three recommendations that I would like to offer as a result of this study. First, there must be greater support for efforts associated with closing achievement gaps. Much has been said by participants in this study of the importance of raising the issue. Following that, however, must be resources and support for those who do the work. One of the unfortunate findings of the study is that those who are often tasked with the day to day work of monitoring achievement gaps are underfunded (as in the case of Olga) or ostracized (as in the case of Ivan and Jack). A consideration may also be to provide more authority in these positions. None of the people who serve in roles of equity or minority student achievement are superintendents or assistant superintendents. They are not at the decision making table. This means that their words and actions have little influence. At best, they can have meaningful conversations that may or may not be received by other educators.

In a sense, the placement of these positions within these school districts may be an indication of the school board's lack of desire to go through the political backlash from voters who prefer the status quo even if that means lessening the likelihood of

lasting change regarding gaps between Black and White students. As Olga noted in her work in District 2, the office she managed came about because of pressure on the school board to do something. But little was done to support the day to day work because the pressure was off after the creation of the office. As noted by Ken (the superintendent from District 6) the school board may not always understand the issues in the same way central office administrators understand the issues. Another way of looking at the matter, however, is that among both school boards and central office administrators who enjoy the status quo, there is little desire to fund efforts that are focused on concerns that are specific to minority populations. This may be seen as political suicide within many districts. What is left is a matter of courage and moral conscience. Making the achievement gap not merely a matter of dollars and cents but of moral right is what will eventually change some districts. Until that time, the problems will persist.

Secondly, impacting institutional racism is a matter that needs to be addressed. Professional development that helps to facilitate cultural competence among teachers is a need. This should also be a part of professional development for administrators both at the school and central office levels. Carrie, who works at the state level, also mentioned the significance of such training as an important solution to closing achievement gaps. Additionally, hiring practices that include questions about cultural competence and commitment to closing achievement gaps should be added to districts to facilitate organizational transformation. Further, teacher preparation and administrator preparation courses that are within school districts can also include these issues as a part of the training.

Regarding the hiring of central office administrators and educators, more should also be done to encourage diversity throughout school districts. The challenge of making decisions for minority students with few minorities at the decision making table creates dilemmas. Leaders like Greg and Ivan (both from District 1) seemed to see hiring new people as an important part of changing the culture from deficit thinking to transformational thinking. They expressed the idea that the culture changes when new people with new ideas and experiences come to the place of decision making. In the pilot study (Baskin, 2009), I mentioned one interviewee who raised this very issue. She talked about how only White administrators (including her) made decisions regarding the Black-White achievement gap in mathematics within her district. She was met with great anger by her White peers when she raised this issue which included yelling and slamming doors. Ivan raised the issue of the need for bringing in people with perspectives that support the desired change in culture. Jack also mentioned the experience of being one of few African American administrators in his district and the need for an affinity group to support each other against institutional racism. All of these factors point to the need for a more diverse group of decision makers within the central office context.

Finally, I recommend further research in the area of central office administrator decision making regarding allocation of resources and support for programs designated specifically to impact achievement gaps. The results of this study raise questions about the extent to which some districts are organized to impact the problem at a meaningful level. District 1 provides an example of a district that has a great deal of resources but has very little to show for effectively addressing achievement gaps. Greg and Ivan,

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administrators from District 1 talked a great deal about the culture of waste and

dysfunction that lead to little progress in closing gaps in achievement. As Ivan put it, the

district is organized to have a permanent group of students who will not succeed. Luke,

from District 4, also noted the lack of sophistication his district had which hindered

efforts to close achievement gaps or to even discuss the issue. Ken mentioned the

problem of perceived success that impacts decision making among central office

administrators and the school board. District 2's decision to minimally fund and then

eliminate Olga's office also raised questions about how this district organized itself to

close gaps. Further studies of this nature should be conducted throughout other regions

of the country to determine if central office administrators have the same experiences

throughout the nation. Do other regions experience racial differences in how the causes

of achievement gaps are perceived? Are there other administrators who experience the

alienation that some Black administrators in this study express? Are there communities

that actually support efforts that are thwarted within some of the districts in this study?

Further questions for research include the following: What programs are most essential

to closing achievement gaps in school districts? How do school districts determine

funding for programs specifically designed to impact achievement gaps?

Appendix A: Letter of Consent

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

George Mason University

*TITLE OF PROJECT: Achievement Gap Perceptions Project

*RESEARCHER'S NAME(S) AND TELEPHONE NUMBER(S):
I have been asked to participate in a research study conducted by Roger Baskin (703) 508-1661.

*INTRODUCTION:
Below is a description of the research procedures and an explanation of my rights as a research participant. In accordance with the policies of George Mason University, I have been asked to read this information carefully. If I agree to participate, I will sign in the space provided to indicate that I have read and understand the information furnished on this consent form. I am entitled to and will receive a signed copy of the form.

*PURPOSE:
The purpose of this study is to determine how central office educators perceive the Black-White achievement gap, how they understand their impact on the problem, and what actions they take to address it.

*DURATION AND LOCATION OF STUDY:
My participation in this study will last for approximately one hour.

*PROCEDURES:
During this study, the following will happen:

1. I will be interviewed for approximately one hour regarding my perceptions of the achievement gap, my role in impacting it, and what actions I take to address it.

2. The interview will be recorded to insure the accuracy of my perspectives.

3. The interviewer may wish to contact me (if the need arises) to clarify statements made during the interview to insure accuracy.

 *POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:

I understand there are no known or anticipated risks associated with participation in this study.

*BENEFITS:

I will receive no direct benefit from my participation in this study; however, the possible benefits to others include understanding the way central office educators understand both the causes and possible solutions of the achievement gap.

*CONFIDENTIALITY/ANONYMITY:

Confidentiality means that the researcher (or perhaps the instructor) will have a record of who participated but the data will be kept private.

I understand the data collected in this study will be kept confidential unless disclosure is required by law. Specifically, the researcher will keep all research materials in a secure area in the Graduate School of Education and Human Development at George Mason University that can only be accessed by Roger Baskin or Robert Smith, Ph. D. Consent forms will be destroyed 3 years after the study has been completed. Names of all participants will be replaced with numbers so that there can be no means of connecting individuals to the data.

NO COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION:

I will not receive compensation for my participation in this study.

*RIGHT TO REFUSE OR WITHDRAW:

Participation is voluntary and I may refuse to participate without penalty. I may discontinue my participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. I also understand that the researcher has the right to withdraw me from participation in the study at any time.

*AUDIO TAPING:

Research involves audio recording of interviews. Tapes will be kept secure in a locked file cabinet in the office of Dr. Robert Smith. Only Roger Baskin and Dr. Robert Smith will have access to the tapes. The tapes will be destroyed after three years.   Please check one of the statements below:

_____ I agree to audio taping.

_____ I do not agree to audio taping.

*OFFER TO ANSWER QUESTIONS:

If I have any questions about this study, I may call Robert Smith, Ph. D. at (703) 993-5079 .   If I have questions about my rights as a participant, I may contact the Chair of the George Mason University Institutional Review Board, Greg Guagnano, at (703) 993-1445.

*I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT AND I WILL RECEIVE A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM.

_____

PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE   *DATE*

*PERSON OBTAINING CONSENT:
I have explained to the above named individual the nature and purpose, the potential benefits and possible risks associated with participation in this research. I have answered any questions that have been raised and I will provide the participant with a copy of this consent form.

_____

RESEARCHER'S SIGNATURE   *DATE*

Appendix B: Interview Guide

Interviewee Name (Pseudonym): _____

Gender: _____

Self-Identified Ethnicity: _____

Position: _____

School District (Pseudonym):   _____

Perceptions of Achievement Gaps

1.   When do you recall first hearing the term achievement gap?

   Prompt (a): How did you understand the term initially? Why?

   Prompt (b): How has your understanding of the term changed since that

time?

2.   If you could use a metaphor or simile to describe achievement gaps in your

   district what would it be? Why do you see it that way?

3.   What do you think are the primary reasons for achievement gaps in your district?

   Prompt (a): How do student characteristics (e.g., motivation, learning

style)contribute to achievement gaps in your district?

   Prompt (b): How does the environment from which the students come

contribute to achievement gaps in your district?

Prompt (c): What role do you think the school system plays in creating, increasing or perpetuating achievement gaps?

Prompt (d): How important are the factors we have talked about in relation to one another?

Perceptions of Agency in Addressing Achievement Gaps

4. In what ways do you feel you can impact achievement gaps? Why do you feel that way?

Prompt (a): What obstacles do you experience in addressing achievement gaps?

Prompt (b): How do others in your work environment respond to your beliefs about achievement gaps?

Perceptions of Solutions to Achievement Gaps

5. How does your district approach closing achievement gaps? Why?

Prompt (a): What is the central office role in carrying out this approach?

Prompt (b): What specific things do you do to impact student achievement gaps?

Prompt (c): How effective have these efforts been in closing achievement gaps in your district?

Appendix C: Cover Letter

       Hello, my name is Roger Baskin, and I am a doctoral candidate at George Mason University. I am conducting a series of interviews with central office educators like yourself regarding your perspectives on Black-White student achievement gaps through the lens of your work as a central office administrator. The purpose of this study is to determine how central office educators perceive the Black-White achievement gap, how they understand their impact on the problem, and what actions they take to address it. The project consists of a one hour interview that will be audio recorded for reasons of accuracy.

       This is a significant study in that it affords central office administrators an opportunity to express their insight on the topic of student achievement, something rarely discussed in the literature I have read. Further, the study is significant in that it addresses a topic of major consequence to American education—how to close gaps in student achievement. Because of your experience in the community you serve, I thought that you would make an ideal candidate for the project.

       Your participation in the study will be confidential and pseudonyms will be used to conceal your name and school district. You can discontinue your participation at any time. The implications of this study may be relevant to procedural, policy, and professional development changes in how districts address achievement gaps.

Respectfully,

Roger S. Baskin

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Curriculum Vitae

Roger S. Baskin, Sr. graduated from Calvin Coolidge High School in Washington, DC in 1986. He earned a Bachelor of Arts in Journalism from George Washington University in 1990. In 1993, he earned a Master of Divinity from Wesley Theological Seminary. In 2001, he earned a Master of Education from George Washington University. He has worked as an English teacher at the middle school and high school levels since 2000. He also served as an Educational Specialist for Minority Student Achievement for Fairfax County Public Schools.