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Alternatives to grade retention in a pre-kindergarten to second grade setting: a leadership study

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**ALTERNATIVES TO GRADE RETENTION IN A PRE-KINDERGARTEN TO
SECOND GRADE SETTING: A LEADERSHIP STUDY**

by
Phillip Neff

A Dissertation

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Dissertation Chair: James Coaxum, Ph.D.

Dedication

To My Family

Christina my wife, Dylan and Christopher my sons,

Your love and support helped me continue when I would have otherwise given up. A man without a family is like a ship lost at sea, you have given me direction and we have sailed through the tempest together.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the continued support of my dissertation chairperson, Dr. James Coaxum. Your insight, mentorship, and feedback throughout my journey were paramount. Thank you for the time, effort, and dedication you put into shaping my leadership experience.

I would also like to thank Dr. Robert B. Campbell and Dr. Burton Sisco for their profound impact on my leadership and my action research project.

Abstract

Phillip Neff
ALTERNATIVES TO GRADE RETENTION IN A PRE-KINDERGARTEN TO
SECOND GRADE SETTING: A LEADERSHIP STUDY
2011
James Coaxum, Ph.D.
Doctorate in Educational Leadership

Many primary teachers (grades K-4) believe that retention is useful in maintaining grade level standards in light of high stakes state testing (Witmer, Hoffman, & Nottis, 2004). Despite perceived academic advantages, there is a great deal of research that suggests that retention may cause damage in later years, such as increased drop-out rates, while only temporarily addressing the immediate academic issues (Bonvin, Bless, & Schuepbach, 2008). The purpose of my action research project was to give teachers and ultimately students alternatives to grade retention. Through my action research project, Billingsport Elementary School changed from a culture that endorsed retention to a culture that avoided retention by exploring best practice alternatives to grade retention. Data was collected through a mixed method approach. Initially twenty-two educators were interviewed. The intention of the interviews was to begin to develop a global understanding of the interventions that teachers would develop if they were able to put their ideals into action. In this manner, I shared leadership and offered the teachers an opportunity to feel as though they were part of a community of learners responsible for every student's success. Through this action research project additional educational services that previously did not exist at Billingsport Elementary School were offered. The services offered were a summer school program in 2010, and an afterschool tutoring program which took place during the 2010-2011 school year. Data revealed that the programs were successful in reducing the total number of grade retentions.

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Chapter 1

Introduction/Problem Statement

With a growing emphasis on test scores and accountability, grade retention at all levels has become increasingly controversial in the United States. School systems are under intense scrutiny to produce learners that show academic proficiency on benchmark assessments as early as grade three (Witmer, Hoffman, & Nottis, 2004). Accountability can include state mandates, inspection teams, school restructuring, and state take-over. The stakes are high and the consequences severe. Schools often operate under intense pressure to produce good test takers. Little credit is given to the social - emotional baggage the students come to school with in reference to low-test scores (Bonvin, Bless, & Schuepbach, 2008). The politicians want results and hold the schools accountable for the dollars that come with state and federal aid. As a result of the intense standardized test pressure, the benefits of early retention have been given a closer look. More students are retained now than ever. According to the National Association of School Psychologists, the kindergarten retention rate has risen 40% over 20 years (Dawson, 1998).

Many argue that students would learn more about reading and math by being promoted to the first grade instead of repeating the kindergarten year (Hong & Yu, 2007). Others argue that benefits are short term and that there is no evidence that kindergarten retention benefits student two to three years later. Many researchers instead focus on the measurement of increased benefit on social-emotional development as a result of early

retention (Bonvin, Bless, & Schuepbach, 2008). Past research has been inconclusive with regard to academic benefit as a result of retention.

Many primary teachers (grades K-4) believe that retention is useful in maintaining grade level standards in light of high stakes state testing (Witmer, Hoffman, & Nottis, 2004). Despite perceived academic advantages, there is a great deal of research that suggests that retention may cause damage in later years, such as increased drop-out rates, while only temporarily addressing the immediate academic issues (Bonvin, Bless, & Schuepbach, 2008). As students age they become more aware of the negative connotations of grade retention especially if parents and teachers use the concept of grade retention as a reason to pick up the pace academically (Witmer, Hoffman, & Nottis, 2004). This action research study provided teachers with a voice and a choice when considering grade retention.

Impetus for the Study

The 2009-2010 school year found Paulsboro High School in year five of a school in need of improvement. In addition, the Paulsboro School District has had several New Jersey State Department of Education (NJDOE) investigation teams come to the high school and the middle school to assess programs and give strong advice. As a result, several corrective action plans have been developed. Paulsboro School District has a large population of under-resourced learners; however, it is evident that despite this situation it is expected that all learners achieve or the NJDOE will hold the Paulsboro administration accountable. The district cannot rely on families to create change in the homes of the students; therefore, the required change must come from the schools themselves. The status quo could no longer be allowed to continue, and thinking must

come from outside the box. This sustainable improvement effort was grounded in the

principals that drive second order change, and the flow of ideas must percolate from the

bottom up as years of top-down reasoning have not improved the situation to the extent

required.

Grade retention, as a means to address academic underachievement, had been

embedded in the culture of Billingsport Elementary School. Year after year, teachers

developed lists of students recommended for grade retention, and the administration

supported the decisions. As principal I was charged with student placement and had to

make decisions based on research, best practice, and theories that coincided with my own

leadership theories. I had been undecided on the volumes of research and opinions as to

what exactly was the best course of action for students who do not reach academic

benchmarks at the end of each grade. Consequently, I was on a quest to explore whether

my espoused leadership beliefs really did match my underlying assumptions on the topic

of grade retention. My action research project revolved around the development of

alternatives to grade retention. Teachers at Billingsport Elementary School, like teachers

in most places, had much to do and little time to do it. Time management was essential;

ideologies and paradigms were handed down from experienced teachers or gained

through practical personal experience. Unfortunately classroom teachers do not have the

time to conduct their own action research projects; instead they rely on what has come

before them or what they can develop through their practical experiences.

The prevailing school culture at Billingsport Elementary School was one that

readily accepted retention as a viable solution for students that fail to reach academic

benchmarks. In addition, a historically top down management style had led to stifled

communication channels that left teachers isolated from the responsibility in the dialogue on student achievement. Educational leaders should be constantly committed to shared development of knowledge and unpacking organizational tradition to benefit teaching and learning (Fullan, 2001). In this action research project, a means to open communication flow was discussed in an attempt to create a climate of shared leadership. When teachers were given the opportunity to emerge from the isolation of the classroom they were able to dialogue and develop best practice alternatives to retention. Educational leadership, then, is about mobilizing others and building capacity in them to solve problems that have not been successfully addressed (Fullan, 2001).

My action research on alternatives to grade retention has been an important contribution that has been shared with the Billingsport Elementary School community as we strove to prepare learners to be more competent in academics. As a result of this research, open communication has been improved and the insight gained through this study has been shared district wide in Paulsboro as well.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of my action research study was to transition from a school culture that endorsed retention to a culture that avoided retention through a process that developed interventions. This effort helped to create an atmosphere where teachers could openly and honestly contribute to my action research study in order to develop interventions which would eliminate or reduce the need for retention. Designing a process for communication and intervention influenced staff and changed practice through second order change. Through the design of both the process and interventions, I explored best-practice alternatives to student retention at Billingsport Elementary School.

Mixed methods of qualitative (interviews, observations, and journaling) as well as quantitative (test scores and surveys) research were used for data collection this study. For cycle 1 purposeful sampling was used by interviewing all instructional personnel at Billingsport Elementary School and the district director of curriculum and instruction. Cycles 2, 3, and 4 were interventions emergent through the processing of the twenty-two interviews from cycle 1. Cycle 2 action consisted of the development, implementation, and assessment of a summer program designed to offer basic skill instruction in reading and math. Cycle 3 action implemented a book study using "*A Framework for Understanding Poverty*" by Dr. Ruby Payne. The book study was designed to trigger critical conversations on advocacy and social justice (Freire, 1970). Cycle 4 action planned, implemented, and assessed an after school tutoring program offering basic skills instruction in reading and math.

Each year I continually refined our school protocol for retention and parent notification. We included multiple assessments and designed our Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) team around interventions that helped give every child the most we had to offer in and out of school. Each year teachers recommended students for retention based on their basic academic skill levels, but each year a number of parents insisted on social promotion. Social promotion then set the students in the overwhelming situation of starting the school year at an academic disadvantage. They did not meet the benchmarks of the previous grade level, but were expected to meet the benchmarks of their current grade level (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 1999). Despite these academic disadvantages, there existed a great deal of research that suggested that retention may

cause more damage in later years, such as increased drop-out rates, while temporarily

addressing the immediate academic issues (Witmer, Hoffman, & Nottis, 2004).

This study was developed to explore the following research questions:

1. What are the initial perceptions of grade retention among the faculty at
   Billingsport Elementary School?

2. How can the current retention model be improved?

3. What steps can be implemented to improve communication between all stake
   holders, parents, teachers and administration?

4. What improvements have been made in staff communications with administration
   in terms of academic achievement?

5. How has my leadership influenced this action research project?

Significance of the Study

This study explored best-practice alternatives to student retention at Billingsport

Elementary School. First I interviewed and observed the teachers so that a baseline

paradigm was established. I then developed, critiqued, and assessed alternatives to

retention that were emergent form the themes of the interviews. By using interviews as a

catalyst for critical conversations about student achievement, the teachers at Billingsport

Elementary School were given the opportunity to feel as though they were part of a

community of learners responsible for every student's success. The actions addressed the

immediate academic needs as well as the social needs. By combining a moral purpose

with an understanding of change, the Billingsport School Community of Learners

embarked on a journey of long-term success (Fullan, 2001). Given the context of my

school and administration, I received a great deal of support from my superintendent as I investigated Billingsport retention and retention alternatives.

From the outside, Paulsboro Public School District was looked at as a district that was more concerned with athletics than academics. Regardless of the levels of culture held by the superintendent, the culture of the community and school board was the constant that any educational leader had to recognize. The espoused and underlying beliefs of the school board and the community may in time move the superintendent away from his or her true frame into one that would keep his or her job. This may perhaps offer some explanation as to why retention has not previously been thoroughly investigated or addressed. Consequently, my research was welcomed. As a leader one must be consistent about what matters and realize that all change needs people to breathe life into it. Without the support of all stakeholders, a change initiative will not be supported over time and the vision will fade. By projecting oneself as a person first and a leader second the parents, staff, and students will feel that the leader is approachable and genuine (Fullan, 2001). Compelling messages are best delivered with transparency in mind. The human condition is not unique. Struggles of all kinds have plagued mankind for eons, and whenever man has triumphed it has been the result of effective leadership and a shared vision. Effective leaders use active listening, seek feedback from all constituents, and dignify others by looking for the best in people. The ability to foster positive attitudes and perceptions in others while at the same time looking at people, smiling, and responding in meaningful way creates an environment that is more receptive to change initiatives. If a change initiative fails, it could have failed three or five years

earlier when the leader missed a teachable moment with the parents, staff, or students. Everything a leader does effects everything that follows.

Reflection

In chapter 1 (Introduction), I have identified my area of interest and clearly stated the issue I wished to improve. Through this action research study, alternatives to grade retention were formulated, developed, and assessed. Throughout the entire process, I continually focused on relationship building as a means to establish second order change (Fullan, 2001).

Qualitative research is noted for complexity and variety of approach, thus allowing the researcher freedom to be true to the data and develop a reflective and informed change initiative (Glesne, 2006). Through an informed qualitative approach, action researched must strive to eliminate bias and control the urge to draw conclusions until the data has been thoroughly analyzed. By managing the complex nature of the data collection process, the action researcher is able to interact deeply with the issues and construct social processes in a reflective manner (Glesne, 2006).

As mentioned in the "Impact on My Leadership Platform" chapter of this paper, when defensive reasoning is employed to alleviate some type of embarrassment or threat by either the organization or the individual (Argyris, 1990), open discussion is precluded. As principal I was charged with evaluating the job performance of everyone that worked at Billingsport Elementary School, and as such my presence altered the communication process. As an action researcher I acknowledged this situation as a limitation, and I carefully reflected and adjusted as I struggled to create an improved communication

system and sustaining a change initiative. Conducting action research, like any human

endeavor, could not be mastered; it could only be improved upon (Glesne, 2006).

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

   Grade retention was a common practice at Billingsport Elementary School. As the principal I was charged with student placement and made decisions based on research, best practice, and theories that coincided with my own leadership platform. At the time I started my action research, I was undecided on the volumes of research and opinion as to what exactly was the best course of action for students who do not reach academic benchmarks at the end of each grade. In other words I was on a quest to explore whether my espoused beliefs really did match my underlying assumptions on the topic of grade retention.

   This topic was a very important one as our school district already had a high school in year five of a CAPA review and an elementary in year four of a CAPA review. In addition the district had not made AYP on the New Jersey standardized tests in over five years. As a result the entire district was under intense scrutiny at the county and state levels. All of this negative attention raised the level of concern for the topic of retention versus social promotion knowing that all promoted second graders were required to take the NJASK test in third grade whether ready or not. Student's lives are in the balance; no stone could remain unturned in the search for a change to the current grade retention paradigm.

Why Retention is Needed

   It is possible to find teachers at all grade levels that believe retention is an acceptable practice (Witmer, Hoffman, & Nottis, 2004). The most influential factor in

retention decisions is low student academic performance. However, teacher's factual knowledge on the research on the effects and outcomes of retentions was low and consisted primarily of assumptions with little or no basis in knowledge (Witmer, Hoffman, & Nottis, 2004). It is also noted that teachers rarely change their opinions based on research; instead they tend to cling to practical knowledge that they have developed over time based on their teaching experiences. The authors look for a correlation between a teacher's theoretical knowledge or lack of knowledge and the number of retentions that were recommended. There was no significant relationship found between the teachers' own knowledge of retention and the number of retention recommendations made (Witmer, Hoffman, & Nottis, 2004).

The grade level with the most reported retentions was kindergarten (Witmer, Hoffman, & Nottis, 2004). Kindergarten teachers indicated that retention was needed due to an inability to master basic skills, while teachers of older students tended to indicate overall effort as an indicator for retention. Primary teachers in this study (grades K-4) believe that retention was useful in maintaining grade level standards in light of high stakes state testing (Witmer, Hoffman, & Nottis, 2004). Researchers suggest that as grade level increased, the teachers were more likely to believe that retained students presented more behavioral problems than non-retained students (Witmer, Hoffman, & Nottis, 2004). This factor contributes to the wide spread notion that early retention is more beneficial to students than retention in later grades. Another belief that supports early retention is that teachers of kindergarten through second grade were more likely to feel that retention would have positive self-esteem benefits. Teacher's opinions on self esteem change as grade level rises. Starting in seventh grade, more teachers believe that

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retention could harm self-esteem rather than improve it (Witmer, Hoffman, & Nottis, 2004). This effect could be a result of children feeling more anxious and conscience about retentions as they move through the grades. Students can become more aware of the negative connotations over time especially as other children, parents, and even teachers make comments that use retentions as a threat for underachievement.

One application of retention is to attempt to deal with low academic achievement, another wide spread notion about retention is that it can assist in the remediation of below level social and emotional development. When measuring social emotional effects, some sub groups need to be established. Social emotional characteristics can be further broken down into measurable categories of self-concept, attitude toward school, and social acceptance. However when comparing same-age data, researchers find that retention can have the opposite of the desired effect (Bonvin, Bless, & Schuepbach, 2008). Additionally, unlike academic achievement, social emotional development is often times included with the overall term of maturity and is not quantifiable at the teacher level. Often times the teachers' personal views and gut feelings are the basis for the notion that maturity is a contributing factor in the retention decision. Often times the low achieving child may exhibit a lack of maturity as a manifestation of the frustration that accompanies not being able to complete the work that peers are doing. Thus in many cases academic remediation would eliminate the social emotional issues. This "what came first" scenario is a main argument behind eliminating maturity from the discussion of retention altogether. Few classroom teachers would argue against the notion that low achievers act out at a rate higher than students with stellar academic achievement.

Researchers have studied retention as it applies to academic achievement in the short, middle, and long term. Additionally, researchers have studied the social emotional effects of retention as it impacts social and emotional development over time. Despite the many studies that suggest that grade retention does not lead to the desired effect, in fact often times the opposite effect over time is achieved. Still retention continues to be embedded in the culture of most schools. Retention is needed because schools are often times ineffective at remediating learning deficiencies early in a child's education. Kindergarten teachers are viewed by some as lacking knowledge on how to effectively transition students to elementary school (Mantzicopoulos, 2003). The counter argument is supported by the fact that unready children continue to come to schools where school personnel are in a constant state of consciousness concerning increased accountability, and as a result retain them. The low academic achievement that is often times based upon reading levels is bolstered in the mind of the teachers when it is linked to some type of perceived delay in maturity or social emotional growth. The school climates are supportive in the belief that repeating a year is a gift of time for those students lacking in the basic foundation. The concept of retention is not fading; schools are under tremendous pressure to have all students to demonstrate proficiency by a specific grade level offering no leniency for students who may be under resourced.

Effects on Learning

The strongest predictor of retention at the primary grade is reading level (Bonvin, Bless, & Schuepbach, 2008). Proponents of extra-year policies believe that academic advantages outweigh disadvantages for the short and long term. Research shows that immediate academic advantages do exist but that they tend to dissipate over time

(Mantzicopoulos, 2003). Lorence and Dworkin (2006) were able to follow retained third graders through their tenth grade year and found that there were academic benefits to retention. Lorence and Dworki (2006) focused on reading scores between retained third graders and socially promoted third graders. The researchers had the advantage of a dataset that contained the entire population of Texas public school children over a nine year period. Most previous research had limited populations or limited time. The wide range of data accessed in this study showed the benefits of retention persisting over time.

The Texas state dataset was one of the strong points of this study and made it stand out from others. The dataset was large enough to enable comparisons of retention effects across broadly defined racial and ethnic segments of the school population. The researchers focused on the scores of the state's reading examination because that was the basis of the third grade retentions. They examined only those that failed the May 1994 Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) reading test. The researchers compared the average reading scores of those that failed the third grade test and were required to repeat third grade (experimental group) to those who also failed the test but were socially promoted (control group). They limited the treatment group to only those that were required to repeat third grade and no other grade. They examined only non-Hispanic white, Hispanic, and African American students because the number in each of these groups was significantly large enough for comparisons between retained and socially promoted students.

Out of all the students examined in this study, boys and minorities that were also more likely to be economically disadvantaged had a higher percentage of being required to repeat third grade. Lorence and Dworkin (2006) first reviewed the low performing

non-Hispanic white students. An examination of the mean reading scores of the retained and the promoted students showed that the retained students had higher averages than the socially promoted in all grades but eight and ten. By adjusting for initial differences between the groups, a more pronounced positive effect of retention than was previously observed was revealed. The retained non-Hispanic white students passed the TAAS reading test every year after being held back except in grade four. They also exceeded the 75% needed to pass the test. The fourth grade failures were possibly a result of a much harder test. Although the effects were not pronounced in eighth and tenth grades, the retained students continued to correctly answer more reading items than the non-retained. The positive effects of retention were replicated in the minority groups as well.

Lorence and Dworkin (2006) were aware of the criticism that came with their findings, and they address this. They believed that one reason they found a positive effect in retention was because they examined the impact of holding students back a year only in third grade. They acknowledged that the impact may vary with grade level. They believed that children retained in earlier grades may have been retained due to learning disabilities, emotional immaturity, or behavioral concerns. By third grade, the student may have only needed additional exposure to the class material to meet promotion criteria. The researchers also found that many of the retained students also received considerable extra assistance, but students who failed the TAAS also received this same assistance. At minimum, the findings contradicted the belief that retention and remediation are likely to be disappointing. Their strength that suggests that educators and policy makers take their findings into serious consideration is the fact that they examined a very large and broad group of students who failed third grade due to reading scores and

they were then followed for several years as opposed to previous work that has limitations in both groups and time.

Morrison and On No (2007) found results similar to what most researchers found in the area of retention. They found that repeating a year made no difference or a negative difference to results. They found that while there was a small rise in female performance, retention was detrimental to the performance of males. They suggested that repeating a year sharpened gender differences in learning and performing English as a foreign language. Despite these findings, this research demonstrated the flaws that Lorence and Dworkin (2006) addressed, which were limited groups and limited time.

Morrison and On No (2007) examined whether having students repeat a year improved their performance, focusing on learning English as a foreign language. They reviewed students' examination results from five years from a Chinese – medium school, together with data on their learning styles and learning strategies. The students examined in this study were all Chinese students in a Chinese medium school that were influenced by traditional pedagogy in the Chinese culture as well as Confucian heritage culture (CHC). CHC is very different from American culture, and this influence alone made it questionable whether or not the results from this study could be applicable to American schools. Besides the cultural differences, learning a foreign language was an elective in American schools and did not single-handedly determine retention or promotion. Overall, the researchers found that repeating a year increased the homogeneity of scores for each sex. It may have helped females, but for males there was little difference. Their median scores remained the same, though their scores had greater homogeneity. While the researchers suggested that retention was a poor strategy to increase performance scores, it

must be taken into consideration that a foreign language was not a basic skill in America. While one may argue that it is still measuring effects on performance, the differences in culture prevent these findings from being universally applicable in the field of education. Furthermore, in comparison to researchers such as Lorence and Dworkin (2006), they were examining a very narrow range of students during a shorter time period in completely different subject areas.

Hong and Yu (2007) were in agreement with the majority claiming that early-grade retention did not bring benefits to the retainee's reading and math learning toward the end of elementary years. The researchers found that the negative effects of kindergarten retention on the retainee's reading and math scores at the end of the treatment year gradually faded over the elementary years. They also found that first grade retention displays negative effects that appear to be constant from the mid to late elementary years. They then concluded that there was no evidence that retention in either grade brought a general advantage to the retainee's cognitive learning toward the end of the elementary years. Hong and Yu (2007) used six waves of Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Kindergarten Cohort Dataset (ECLS-K) collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The sample included 21,409 students. This gave the researchers a very wide range of data to work with, but again, like other researchers before them, the data was taken from a limited time frame. The data was from fall 1998, spring 1999, fall 1999, spring 2000, spring 2002, and spring 2004. While the number of students was impressive, the fact remained that only short term impacts of retention were examined.

Effects on Social Emotional Development

     With a growing emphasis on test scores and accountability, grade retention became increasingly controversial in the United States. School systems were under intense scrutiny to produce learners that benchmark as early as grade three. Accountability included state mandates, inspection teams, school restructuring, and state take-over. The stakes were high and the consequences severe. Schools often operated under intense pressure to produce good test takers. Little credit was given to the social - emotional baggage the students came to school with in reference to low-test scores. The politicians wanted results and held the schools accountable for the dollars that came with state and federal aid. As a result of the intense standardized test pressure, the benefits of early retention have been given a closer look. More and more students are retained every year. According to the National Association of School Psychologists, the kindergarten retention rate has risen 40% over 20 years (Dawson, 1998).

     Many argued that students would learn more about reading and math by being promoted to the first grade instead of repeating the kindergarten year. Others argued that benefits were short term and that there was no evidence that kindergarten retention benefits students two to three years later. Past research has been inconclusive with regard to academic benefit as a result of retention. Many researchers instead focused on the measurement of increased benefit on social - emotional development as a result of early retention. Hong and Yu (2008) explored the effects of kindergarten retention on children's social-emotional development. The authors suggested that earlier studies have been biased because of methodology errors such as selection bias, measurement error,

and divergent perceptions of multiple respondents in the different domains of child development.

This empirical study specifically examined the effects of kindergarten retention on children's social-emotional development in the early, middle, and late elementary years. The authors found that there was no evidence suggesting that kindergarten retention did harm to the children's social-emotional development. The authors concluded that had the retained kindergarteners been promoted instead, they would have possibly developed a lower level of self-confidence and interest in reading and all school subjects two years later and would have displayed a higher level of internalizing problem behaviors at the end of the treatment year and two years later.

Hong and Yu (2008) investigated the relationship between kindergarten retention and children's social emotional outcomes. They examined multiple domains including self-perceived ability in and interest in math, reading, and all school subjects. In addition the authors investigated self-perceived ability and interest in peer relationships, and internalizing problem behaviors as seen by teachers, parents, and by the retained children themselves.

Proponents of early retention often said that early retention at the primary grades prevents failure in academics and in social-emotional development from becoming more severe. In other words the gift of time enabled children to reach a maturity level required to build and manage relationships and adapt to the school setting. Hence, retained kindergarteners will be better adjusted than they would have if they were socially promoted. This point of view predicted improvement in academics and social-emotional development in the short term and over time. The opposing point of view however argued

that retention actually deprived students the opportunity to have true age appropriate interactions thus eliminating the chance that the student would catch up on their own in the social-emotional arena. In this manner of thinking, the retained student would actually be further behind their same-age peers later in life. Hong and Yu (2008) stated that many parents and teachers felt a second year in kindergarten improved student self-perception about academics because usually the children entering kindergarten had little if any formal schooling. The retained kindergartener would automatically feel that they were more competent in academics and experienced a social advantage. Hong and Yu (2008) felt the advantage of self-perception far exceeded the disadvantages but they also discussed a counter argument for early retention. Many researchers felt as though early retention was more beneficial because kindergarteners were less perceptive about their own and others' situations and therefore less likely to tease or bully others who were retained. This counter argument directly conflicted with Hong and Yu who feel that the self-perception benefits outweigh the negative effects. If the retained kindergartener felt better about himself or herself, then certainly other kindergarteners could develop negative awareness for retained students. Both retained children and promoted children have described retentions as sad, bad, and upsetting.

The next article concerned a Swiss nationwide empirical study of the determinants of grade retention, its effects on learning, and its social and emotional consequences. Bonvin, Bless, & Schuebach (2008) concluded that the decision for grade retention did not lie solely in student's academic performance, but also on teachers' attitudes and evaluations. The authors did not find evidence of negative social or

emotional consequences, but still concluded that globally the effectiveness of retention was unsatisfactory and should be avoided at the primary level.

Bonvin, Bless, & Schuebach (2008) pointed out that retention was often applied when children failed to reach curricular goals. One of the main pedagogical principles in support of retention was more time to develop the basics. However, the authors indicated that neither the learning objectives nor the instruction methods were tailored to meet the retained students' needs. Instead Bonvin, Bless, & Schuebach (2008) said retention was just another year of the same material that failed the student in the first place. Bonvin, Bless, & Schuebach (2008) focused on early retention designed to prevent an accumulation of gaps later in the school trajectory. There was little in the way of research about the determinants of retention, and in many instances each school followed their own protocol. Often times the teacher's gut feeling played a large role in determining when retention was appropriate. This concern along with the increased efficiency of support services led the author to focus their study primarily on the social-emotional aspect of retention. Teachers most often cited reading levels at the beginning and the end of the year as their main reason for retention. Bonvin, Bless, & Schuebach (2008) indicated that consideration of the factors that lead teachers to the retention decision points to the need to further study the procedure. The attitude of the teachers should not be minimized, however, regional variations on this procedure can be related to numbers of at risk students, and foreign speaking students are two examples.

Bonvin, Bless, & Schuebach (2008) posed a counter question: a dismissal of retention would result in automatic promotion to the next grade. Is it justifiable to promote low-achieving students despite their poor performance? Additionally this study

did not take into consideration the SES status of the student or the support level in the home of each student. The research did not give answers for the special cases. Non-reliance on retention may have caused a higher percentage of referrals to special education services. Also, students who were frustrated in class were more likely to act out as a result of increased pressure for academic achievement. The increased pressure in addition to below age level social skills contributed to behavior disorders. According to Bonvin, Bless, & Schuebach (2008) no clear negative effects of grade retention on social-emotional factors have been found. Its alleged dangerousness in those domains was not corroborated.

Byrnes, and Yamamoto (2001) interviewed retained elementary students and their teachers about their views on retention. The authors concluded that concerns about retention were well justified. Their findings suggested that retention was of doubtful effectiveness as an answer to low achievement and motivation and was often internalized by the students as a negative and confusing experience. To add stress to those who repeat grades, little was done to help students work through their negative perceptions and fear associated with retention. Teachers felt that treating the retained students the same as the non-retained students was fair; however, these students were often times very sensitive to teacher comments and perceptions about performance. Conversely, retained students benefited from additional praise and encouragement during their initial adjustment period following retention (Byrnes and Yamamoto, 2001).

Retention the Gift of Time?

Mantzicopoulos (1997) re-examined whether or not early retention results in positive long-term academic and behavioral outcomes for a subgroup of kindergarten

students with attention problems. Mantzicopolous studied a group of 40 children, 25 of which were retained and 15 promoted. The students had high inattention and were selected from the original group of 60 students who served as a behavioral sub-sample in an earlier study by Mantzicopolous and Morrison (1992). The original group of students had been rated by their kindergarten teachers at or above the 75th percentile on the Attention Problems scale of the Revised Behavior Problem Checklist (RBPC). During the course of this study, students were tested using a variety of standardized testing methods for both academics and behavior. The study employed both same age and same grade comparisons in order to obtain a balanced view of the results.

In the same grade comparisons, Mantzicopolous did see an advantage of the retained group in math achievement, but not in the area of reading. The math advantage was detected in both the same age and same grade groups. While this supported the notion that retained children make the most significant gains in their second year of the same grade, one cannot ignore the fact that the students were tested with the same material, thus seeing it for the second time. The RBPC indicated no consistent differences between the groups in terms of behavior. Furthermore, the two groups of children that were described as significantly inattentive in kindergarten, continued to be considered by their teachers as troubled children in the first and second grades.

The results of this study did not support the theory that pre-elementary school retention was a beneficial educational intervention for children with academic and/or attention problems. There were no consistent academic benefits for retained children with attention problems. The high inattention scores were also accompanied by increased problems in other behavioral domains and did not improve as a result of an extra year of

kindergarten. This was contrary to what many elementary teachers believed (Witmer, Hoffman, & Nottis, 2004). Despite the notion that early retention was more beneficial to students than retention in later grades, this study concluded that there were no consistent or significant academic or behavioral gains in the early years through second grade. The "gift of time" via retention did not contribute to young children's school adjustment. Mantzicopolous (1997) concluded by saying that with overage being a strong predictor of dropping out of school, our schools could not afford the high price of grade retention.

Longitudinal studies have failed to show that early retention was more effective than later retention (Silberglitt, Jimerson, Burns, & Appleton, 2006). Researchers studied the growth trajectories of retained student in grades k-2 and grades 3-5. Data showed no appreciable difference between the growth rates of these two sub-groups, thus the findings have not supported any advantage to early versus later grade retention (Silberglitt, Jimerson, Burns, & Appleton, 2006). The myth of "the gift of time" was not supported in the research.

Alternatives to Retention

What could schools do when a student could not read? In the past schools would simply pass students on to the next grade, a practice that could be viewed as educational malpractice. We have all heard the horror stories of students graduating from high school unable to read. The practice of social promotion was popular during the 1970s; in the decades following it became apparent that damage was done (Alexamder, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 1999). The pendulum then swung in the opposite direction as was often the case in educational reform. President Clinton challenged the educational policymakers to take heed in public addresses made in the late 1990s. The president used his executive office

influence to comment strongly against the rising tide of mediocrity by stopping the policy of promoting children who didn't learn. Conversely, promotion should only be considered when merited. Merit based promotion that was grounded in benchmark achievements in math and reading was accepted. President Clinton implied that we did no favors for students who were socially promoted.

Transitional programs referred to as extra-year programs and were viewed by many as alternatives to retention. Other names for transitions classes were: developmental, junior first-grade, pre-first, or readiness classes. Most transitional classes were sequenced between kindergarten and first grade. As noted earlier kindergarten was the grade most repeated by students (Mantzicopoulos, 2003).

At-risk and low socio-economic populations have stimulated schools to provide added instructional support services. The federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has been the impetus behind schools creating after-school programs to assist in reaching academic minimums. One such problem with this current configuration was that supplemental education services were usually given to students only if they were in one of the grades that was given the state test. The majority of retentions were in kindergarten which was not a grade that was tested and consequently less after-school programs were targeted to that grade level. Additionally, when after-school programs were offered to kindergarten student they were more likely to be recreational in nature and not academic.

Because under-resourced learners often attended under-resourced schools, extra academic programs were often not within a school's budget. Schools were left to redefine their instructional options and explore new ways of delivering instruction. In a study on alternatives to social promotion, researchers found that elementary schools were more

flexible than middle schools in how they delivered instruction when given a grade promotion survey (Picklo, Christenson, 2005). The most frequently used instructional option was the use of cooperative learning and second most popular was small group instruction. The least popular were looping and multi-age grouping. Before school and after-school programs were reported to be used roughly half of the school surveyed but these options have a cost associated with them. Summer bridge programs designed to boost academic achievement and address retention were popular alternatives. Research showed that the largest achievements were among the lowest ability groups showing that increased learning time was an effective means of remediation (Smith, Roderick, Degener, 2005).

Reflection

Retention represented a clear example of non-communication between research and practice (Witmer, Hoffman, & Nottis, 2004). Most teachers described their knowledge on retentions as limited, and developed what they did know by talking with colleagues. The teachers' perceptions tended to be based upon what did and did not work with retained students of theirs and their colleagues. Teachers either were not aware of the research or chose to ignore it. In order to change teacher perceptions of retention the teachers needed to be connected to the research in a meaningful ways. In this embedded manner teachers changed what they felt as a result of doing. As indicated earlier in this literature review, teachers tended to have a narrow focus when discussing retention, by involving the teachers in the research they were given an opportunity to broaden their base of knowledge on the subject and base their views on research instead of personal beliefs. Teachers were empowered by learning about the necessity to implement practices

that prevented retention in their own school and their own classroom. In addition, more should be done to educate potential teachers at the university level while still in their pre-service years before personal experience engrains beliefs about retention.

Studies showed that academic benefits were short lived, most students benefited from the first year of retention but began to decline thereafter (Bonvin, Bless, & Schuepbach, 2008). Many researchers felt that there was little support that retention offered more benefits to the students than did promotion to the next grade (Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002)(Jimerson, Ferguson, Whipple, Anderson, & Dalton, 2002). Retained students felt that retention was a punishment and that it fostered negative concepts about school (Byrnes, & Yamamoto, 1986). Retention was not however the single event leading to dropout; instead it was one event in a series of events that led in that direction. Researchers felt that increasing frustration and lowering students' sense of academic self-concept had a snow ball effect over time that led to dropout (Allensworth, 2005). There was no single reason why students came to dislike school or developed a low sense of academic self. The No Child Left Behind Act played a prominent role in the learning for testing sake mentality that contributed to kids growing older before their time. When compared to the kindergarten classroom of 30 years ago five years old was the new seven years old. Kindergarten was not viewed as a place to play; instead it was filled with large time blocks of literacy, math, and test preparation. Many parents felt as though 3 year olds were not necessarily developmentally ready to use the potty, but were ready to drill the same child with flash cards on letters and numbers. The increased pressure on schools to quantify learning contributed to the culture of grade retention as a means to remediate in order to build a better child. Politicians contributed to this

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mentality when they insinuated that children needed to be pushed even harder in an attempt to compete on the world stage. The recent economic down turn fanned the flames of this line of reasoning allowing politicians the latitude to insist that rigor must be increased to help with the patriotic principles this country was founded upon.

Participatory action research was an effective means to influence staff and change practice. The old adage came to mind, give someone a fish and feed them for a day; teach them to fish and feed them for life. Action research was a means to teach teachers how to fish. By involving their own students teachers were given the opportunity to analyze their actions in their context. Teachers' ideas about retention have been developed over time based upon personal beliefs of their own and colleagues. A second order change of this magnitude could only be achieved through an open loop mechanism afforded by action research. In this manner the school culture was redeveloped around a new model.

My dissertation research focused on the topic of grade retention. Specifically I developed methods or programs to reduce retention rates. Prior to developing possible alternatives, a detailed analysis of the factors used to determine retention was examined. Another area of consideration was teacher, parent, and student views on retention collected through surveys and interviews. Academic data collected and analyzed included grades, progress reports, reading levels, NJPASS test results, basic skills records, and pre and post language arts and math tests. Before any type of change in thinking or procedure could be considered a detailed analysis of what was occurring was conducted.

Chapter 3

Leadership Theory

"What is past is prologue." – William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

Past Influences on My Leadership Style

While some people try to escape their past, it is not something that should be forgotten. Some may argue that what is done is done, and therefore it should be put behind us and forgotten. As leaders, we are doing ourselves and those we lead a great injustice if we forget our past. Our past shapes and influences our future; it helps define us on a variety of levels. Our past experiences are learning experiences that often define our mores and help us develop leadership platforms. My past is certainly what instilled my sense of leadership and responsibility long before I even knew I wanted to be an educator.

As a child, I was involved with the Cub Scouts. Some of the key purposes of Cub Scouting are: character development, good citizenship, respectful relationships, personal achievement and friendly service (http://www.scouting.org/Media/FactSheets/02-502.aspx, 2008). All of these elements are necessary traits of a good leader. Furthermore, the Cub Scouts define character as, "the collection of core values possessed by an individual that leads to moral commitment and action," (http://www.scouting.org/Media/FactSheets/02-502.aspx, 2008). The Cub Scouts go on to define their core values as: citizenship, compassion, cooperation, courage, faith, health and fitness, honesty, perseverance, positive attitude, resourcefulness, respect, and responsibility (http://www.scouting.org/Media/FactSheets/02-502.aspx, 2008). With that said, I believe that my involvement in the Cub Scouts, beginning at age eight, is what set

me on the path to leadership. It instilled a set of values that are necessary to achieve a position of leadership and to succeed in that role. It also shaped me into what the Leadership Orientations Assessment (Leadership Frameworks, 1988) describes as a human resource leader. The human resource leader emphasizes the importance of people, coaching, motivation and teamwork. From a very young age, I was exposed to these traits through the Cub Scouts.

Additionally, the Cub Scouts teach boys to learn through action. Scouts learn a variety of practical skills, which they practice and ultimately test for merit badges. Scouts earn badges for skills such as swimming, first aid, life saving skills, and physical fitness. These are just a few of many badges a scout can earn. This hands-on approach to learning has carried over into my years as a student, teacher, and administrator. I am always fully involved in problem solving. I had issues with traffic patterns in front of my school during morning drop-offs. While a group of police officers were on the site, I was out there with them, helping, giving input, and trying to be a part of the solution. Parents were parking on the wrong side of the street, and they were allowing their children to cross the street at inappropriate and unsafe locations. I worked with the police officers to communicate the importance of maintaining safety and efficiency to the parents. We also changed parking regulations to further insure the safety of the children. Parking was no longer allowed on one side of a street that is closest to the school entrance in order to enhance safety. The hands-on approach to learning that I gained from Cub Scouts inspired me to be a part of this safety solution. In addition to teaching the importance of core values and practical skills, the Cub Scout leaders model these characteristics. This safety issue gave me an opportunity to model the behavior I wished to see in my staff and

students. I did not pass the problem on to someone else or issue a policy without first being in the middle of the problem and experiencing it first-hand. One must be a human resource leader to guide and lead young Cub Scouts. These leaders develop our future, and they certainly helped develop my future. My past experience with this organization truly served as my prologue to a career as an educational leader.

"Duty is the most sublime word in our language. Do your duty in all things. You cannot do more. You should never wish to do less." – Robert E. Lee

As a child, I also grew up in the shadows of a military base. All of my friends' fathers were in the army and lived on the base. I spent countless hours playing on the base. Such a militaristic environment inevitably influences play. It brought a certain amount of order even to imaginative play. My friends and I frequently played "army man" emulating the army dads. Many of the older grandfathers and uncles in our lives were also World War II veterans. This brought out a fascination with our military history and veterans. To this day I collect World War II memorabilia and attend World War II reenactments. Through emulation of the army dads, I learned to not shy away from crisis. I am often the first responder in a crisis situation.

The Boy Scout motto of "be prepared" combined with my military influenced sense of duty has made me feel responsible for confronting crisis. On one occasion in the middle of the night, I was woken by a loud crashing sound. I immediately grabbed a flashlight and pocket knife and ran out to the scene of a horrendous automobile accident. I was prepared to cut a man out of his seatbelt and rescue him from his car. Sadly, the man was dead upon impact, and there was nothing I could do to save him. Regardless, I was prepared and willing to help. This sense of duty carried over into my leadership role

as I calmly confronted crisis and worked to develop the best system to handle crisis. I handled both my professional and personal lives in such manner. My cars and house always have first aid supplies, tools and equipment that would assist my family in surviving any crisis or natural disaster. As a family man and educational leader I felt responsible for the well-being of everyone in my life, and preparedness was key in handling this successfully.

These influences helped me in my life when pacesetting was necessary. Setting an objective and achieving that important objective is the primary goal of a pacesetting leader (Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, A. 2002). In the military the worth of a battlefield leader is accessed by the objectives achieved. Often the objective is achieved at the expense of many casualties. As an educational leader the pacesetting model must be used sparingly. The pacesetting model was in my leadership tool belt and has served me well when very large seemingly impossible tasks are required. Breaking the task into smaller parts and using a pacesetting model kept the job manageable. The Rowan master and doctoral programs required a pacesetting mentality. Assignments had to be submitted by certain times; research needed to be done according to certain guidelines and timelines. All of this needed to be balanced with a very demanding leadership role within the school system as well as a leadership role within family. If one was to stop and think of the overall goal, it would have been overwhelming. It was necessary to break the goals and jobs into smaller components and make small yet continuous steps toward the desired outcomes.

"Dignity does not consist in possessing honors, but in deserving them." --

Aristotle

In high school I encountered learning experiences, which impacted my leadership skills. Most of these experiences came through my involvement with the wrestling team. I got a late start in wrestling and did not have many wins. I learned that how one handled loosing was as important as winning. Even when loosing, handling the loss with dignity and maturity, ultimately one gained respect. Learning from losses and handling them with poise was an invaluable skill for all leaders. My experience with wrestling helped me to hone those skills. Furthermore, I learned to never give up. A person who toughs it out and continues to participate with class despite the losses is much more respected than the quitter. I continued to wrestle despite the discouragement that came with losing. As a result, my coach awarded me with a varsity letter. This was a great honor and reward that was given to me for the perseverance and positive attitude that was initially instilled through Cub Scouts. It reinforced that temperament within me, which later helped me through some of the most difficult times in my life. For the first time, I fully understood the aphorism, "It's not whether you win or lose; it is how you play the game." Playing the game was really all about the attitude and behavior that you showed when engaged in any activity whether it was sports, carrying out a job, or caring for family. How one does things makes a great impact on people's perceptions and it also sets a standard and model for influence.

"The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy." --Martin Luther King, Jr.

In 1987, I began my undergraduate studies, which ultimately led to my career as a science teacher. The path to this career also had great influence on my leadership style. I became very ill in 1987 and again in 1991 and had to put my education on hold. My illness was so overwhelming, impacting my academics so much, that Rowan academically dismissed me. On two different occasions, I spent 30 days in the hospital and had major surgery, which forever altered my life. I had to complete two successful years at a community college and interview with the dean at Rowan in order to start over again. I had to start over while learning to live with my health problems. I was a twenty year-old single man starting school over while learning to live with no colon. Again, the perseverance I attained through scouts and wrestling came to assist me. I finished my bachelor's degree and became a science teacher. This experience served to further mold my human resource style. It helped to define the things that are truly important in life, and that is life itself, health, and family. This made me realize that at any given time, any staff member or student may be dealing with a life altering experience, which can affect their performance. It taught me that empathy could produce commitment and a positive working environment. I learned that what is fair is not always what is equal, and differentiation is crucial in both education and educational leadership. Sometimes people need accommodations to give them a sense of fairness. A person with a devastating illness may need certain modifications such as extended time or home schooling in order to have a fair chance at education. If those options had been given to me during my illness, I may have been able to start my career six years earlier. I was given equal treatment at Rowan, which at the time was not a fair expectation given the nature of my illness. While I eventually succeeded, it was in an indirect and longer route.

"Be the change you want to see in the world." -- Mahatma Gandhi

My role as a biology, chemistry, and physics teacher further influenced my leadership style as it allowed certain traits to become more dominant yielding what the LCI assessment (Learning Connections Resources, 2008) describes as a dynamic learner who uses technical and precise patterns at the first level, but requires an intentional effort to switch between learning patterns. With technical being my dominant style, I often work alone, I need to see the purpose in what I am doing, I am practical, I like to figure out how things work, and I am often not verbal. All of these traits are characteristic of a scientist, and my years spent as a biology major and science teacher honed these traits making them a vital part of my leadership style. When I combined these traits with my human resource instincts, it enabled me to thrive as both a teacher and administrator. I was named "Teacher of the Year" at Paulsboro High School in 2004, and my human resource nature combined with my technical style enabled me to achieve such an honor. It also allowed me to differentiate instruction and the way I handled students' needs. Without such ability, I would not have been as successful. The technical approach has allowed me to come to very reasonable, logical and fair solutions to problems and administration.

As a scientist, I constantly needed skills that could be described as precise. This further influenced me as a teacher, but it also inspired me to become an administrator. The LCI assessment (Learning Connections Resources, 2008) also described me as frequently using precision. I often ask and answer questions. I have a need for accuracy and correctness. I like thorough explanations, and written documentation of my success as well as test results. As a scientist, I have a need for evidence, research, and data to

support claims and conclusions. As a teacher in a struggling district, this precise nature

led me to question decisions and programs within the district. I found myself analyzing

policies and procedures and thinking of alternatives that I believed would work better. I

then made the decision to continue my education so I could be a part of successful

solutions. In 2004, I earned my master's degree in educational administration from

Rowan University, and by the fall of 2004, I found myself in my first administrative

position.

The leadership styles that define an educational leader are also a reflection of

personality. Personality is something that is developed over years, starting at birth.

Personality is yet another example of how past becomes prologue. All of my past

experiences, my Cub Scout involvement and scientific interests in particular, have helped

shape my personality, which in turn has shaped my leadership style. When evaluating my

leadership styles, the Humanetrics Jung Myers-Briggs Typology Test, which focuses on

personality, described me as intuitive and introverted in addition to orderly and

systematic (Humanetrics, 2008). My type was INFJ (Introverted Intuitive Feeling

Judging), and only one percent of the population has this personality type

(http://www.personalitypage.com, 2008). INFJs focus on finding the best system for

getting things done, and this can certainly describe my leadership style. As an

administrative intern within my current school district, I developed a number of systems

for handling operations such as fire drills and substitute teacher instructions. After

becoming principal, I implemented systems such as common planning time for grade

levels, continuous instruction blocks for language arts and mathematics, portfolio

assessments, and lengthened student-teacher contact time. I consistently reevaluate our

programs and systems seeking for the best way to handle things. This is a part of my personality, which was developed in the past, defines my present, and paves my future path.

"What we are today comes from our thoughts of yesterday, and our present thoughts build our life of tomorrow: Our life is the creation of our mind." Hindu Prince Gautama Siddharta, the founder of Buddhism, 563-483 B.C.)

My Leadership Role

I served as the principal of Billingsport Elementary School in Paulsboro, New Jersey from July 2006 to July 2011. I was the only administrator in a building that covered pre-k through second grade. I had approximately 400 students and 55 staff members in my building. As the sole administrator, I was forced to reflect on my leadership platform and implement it on my own. First and foremost, I viewed myself as a teacher. While my title may have been principal, I am and always will be a teacher and student. Instead of teaching in a classroom, I taught other teachers. While the teacher's primary role is to empower, inspire and motivate the student, it is the administrator's job to do just the same for both students and teachers. As I empowered and motivated my staff, they in turn did a better job at empowering and motivating the students. While I directly supervised the staff more so than the students, I was very hands-on and tried to work directly with the children as often as possible throughout the day. I tried to model the way I would like to see teachers interact with students. As the sole administrator this opportunity to work directly with the students often presented itself through disciplinary action. Whenever a student was sent to my office, I used it as a teachable moment rather than a disciplinary sentencing. I tried to get to know the students and understand why

they behaved the way they did. Therefore, this became a teachable moment for both the student and me. As I understood them, I helped them understand their actions and consequences. Furthermore, I made every effort to be in the hallways, cafeteria, playground, and classrooms. I enjoyed my interactions with the students that were more positive in nature. During Reading Awareness week, I went into the classrooms and read to the students. This was by far the most enjoyable part of my job, and I did it because I am an educator by nature even if I was labeled as an administrator.

As a hands-on leader, I often found myself assuming the roles of other staff members. I was often in the trenches, and that was where I was the happiest. That is where job success can be measured in hours and days rather than in years, which is how leadership success is often measured. For example, my school nurse was on disability for several months due to a broken leg. When we could not get a substitute nurse, I found myself bandaging playground injuries and caring for the sick. Additionally, we only had one custodian during the school day. When she was on her lunch break, I was often the person cleaning lunch spills and vomit. It was not unusual for a teacher to find me in the hallway spreading "Vomitzorb." The staff often joked about me being a "jack of all trades," but that was just my personality and style. I was not the kind of leader that dictated and designated. I was not above any task. I think that set of values helped me to earn the respect and cooperation of my staff. It also enabled me to understand the problems and frustrations that they faced which further improved my relationship with the staff.

My willingness to jump in and do a job rather than designating jobs was characteristic of my human resource or servant leadership style (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

According to Bolman and Deal (2008), the servant leader's power comes from traits such as caring, sensitivity and service rather than position or force. Furthermore, human resource leaders think of their employees as partners that have a stake in the organization's success (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Human resource leaders are visible and accessible. When the staff saw me mopping up an accident on the cafeteria floor because the custodian was at lunch, they saw that I truly cared about our school. They knew that I understood their jobs and frustrations, and that sensitivity was what inspired their commitment to me as their leader. They did things because they cared and they knew I cared, not because contracts and policies said they should.

"A prudent man should always follow in the path trodden by great men and imitate those who are most excellent." – Niccolo Machiavelli

Another role I often assumed for my students was that of the male role model or father figure. A large number of my students came from broken homes, and many of them had never known a father. Before becoming an administrator, my experience came from the high school level. When I began working in the elementary school, it was a bit of a culture shock the first time a young fatherless child asked me if they could hug me. I found this happening several times a day. Initially I was uncomfortable with this, as I was always taught that a teacher should never touch the high school student; however, I began to realize that many of these children were starved for affection and positive attention. It was actually somewhat of an honor that they felt comfortable coming to me for that. In one particular case, I witnessed firsthand the trials of these young children. Once again, I assumed the role of another staff member when our truancy officer was on disability. I went to the home of a five year-old boy to address an attendance issue. I found the boy

alone in a room. A neighbor, who was not paying any attention to him, was caring for him. He was seated on the floor in a room with absolutely no furniture or decorations. The only thing in the room was a carpet remnant and a television. The boy was absorbed by the television program and had no real human interaction or affection. Not surprisingly, this child often engaged in attention seeking behaviors within the classroom and became quite a challenge. I developed my own behavior modification program for him. In the end he earned a football, which I personally bought for him. His reaction to this reward was priceless. The facial expression and excitement he illustrated upon earning the football suggested that this was the best and perhaps only gift he ever received. After that, he worked very hard to earn positive attention and reinforcement. His behavior and academic performance improved tremendously. I would like to think that the attention I gave him and the behaviors I modeled for him led him to such success.

The experience I had at that young boy's home made me realize how dire the situation is for students who do not have strong family support and how such support can make such a significant impact on the young child's performance and life in general. Sadly, this is the situation that affected a large percentage of my students. I tried to be a role model for them both in and out of school. My wife and I purchased a home within my district in 2005, less than a block away from the school of which I was the principal. The students saw me with my nuclear family at the playground, local stores, community parades, and midget football field. Based on the children's reaction to seeing me in the community, one would think I was a celebrity. It was an honor to be received by them in such a way as they often shied away from adult males in a position of authority. For example, while serving the role of substitute truancy officer, the families would often

hide when I knocked on their doors. Once the children realized it was me, they would answer the door, and say, "Oh Mister Neff, it's just you. We thought you were the police." Sadly, in addition to having such challenging family situations, these children were often surrounded by crime. They often witnessed crimes within their neighborhoods. Some witnessed drug abuse, domestic violence, and aggravated assault. Some had family members that were serving time in the county prison. All of this negativity had a dramatic impact on the children. I did my best to always be their positive role model. I often went to the midget football field to watch my students play. I was often the only adult there to support them. Their experience with crime made them shy away from police officers at such a young age. This was a time in which they should have seen the police officer as figures of safety and security that could always help them. Their family and community experiences took that resource away from them. If I could inspire one student to work towards a better life, then I was beginning to be truly successful. I strove to positively impact the community by serving as an upstanding citizen and role model who lived within the community. I hoped that by obtaining advanced education, maintaining a respectable job, demonstrating positive law abiding behavior and morality, that I influenced those around me to do the same.

It's not only children who grow. Parents do too. As much as we watch to see what our children do with their lives, they are watching us to see what we do with ours. I can't tell my children to reach for the sun. All I can do is reach for it, myself. -- Joyce Maynard

In October 2006, I had another life altering experience, which also helped me to become a better leader and educator. On October 29, 2006, I became the father of my first son. Words cannot even begin to accurately and thoroughly describe the effects of parenthood, but I can say that it has helped me to understand situations from the perspective of a parent. Parent meetings were frequently a challenge, but as I saw the situation from the eyes of a parent, I could anticipate reactions and handle the situations more effectively and with more sensitivity. I know how I would want teachers and administrators to work with my own sons and me, and I took that into consideration when dealing with students and parents. Being a parent also helps a person to see the world from the eyes of a child again. Early childhood is marked by such a pure innocence. As we age, disillusionment often takes hold and innocence is lost. The birth of a child helps us to revisit that childhood purity. This incredible experience helped me to relate to my students, especially my early-childhood students with better understanding and empathy.

Pregnancy and childbirth also helped me develop my feminist side and a new level of caring that carried over into my leadership role. My wife faced a number of challenges throughout pregnancy. She had epilepsy, which was exacerbated by hormone changes, and she developed preeclampsia. Her doctor induced labor three weeks before her due date. She was in labor for 56 hours before the doctor finally performed a c-section. I was with her for every doctor appointment and for every minute of labor. I watched as nurses collapsed her veins five times while trying to insert an IV. I held her hand as she underwent surgery. The anesthesia made her very sick, so I stayed by her head comforting her and cleaning her up as she vomited on the operating table, all the while the doctor was removing my son from the womb and inviting me to come see. As

much as I wanted to see my son, I remained with my wife until I knew she was okay. This experience made me develop a new appreciation and understanding of women. It helped me better understand the mothers that come in to discuss their children's performances and the female teachers that were juggling motherhood and the workforce. Only two of my 55 teachers were male, so this new understanding of women certainly helped my leadership abilities.

Furthermore, in November 2007, my second son was born. This presented a great deal of joy as well as a great deal of new challenges. My sons are only 12 months apart in age, which has forced me to further fine tune my ability to multi-task. My wife and I were often trying to change two diapers, clean two sets of messy hands and faces, feed two boys, soothe two crying babies, nurse two sick children back to health, prepare two babies for bedtime, juggle two babies at family functions, and intervene between two babies fighting over toys. Not only do I have to seamlessly multi-task, but also I need to manage the stress that comes with such a role and maintain a calm temperament throughout. This experience enabled me to empathize with both parents and staff members who had children. It also helped me to strengthen my abilities to smoothly navigate the multiple daily challenges that a principal must face. At any given time, I was responsible for over 400 students and 55 staff. There were always several things that required my attention. Being the father of two toddler boys helped me to manage things effectively.

Parenthood further improved my leadership skills when I discovered that my oldest son had developmental delays in June 2008. An early intervention team determined that my son was delayed in receptive communication, social-emotional skills

and had sensory integration disorder. Sensory integration disorder often yields extreme behavioral challenges as the child feels that his senses are assaulting him. I successfully worked with an occupational therapist and early intervention team to help my son cope and succeed. As a regular education science teacher, I did not receive training in educating special needs students. As a principal, I worked with special needs children every day. Being the parent of a special needs child quickly taught me how to work effectively with a special needs child. It also helped me to understand the frustrations that their parents encountered. Every day of parenthood further enriched my life and improved my leadership abilities.

All of the experiences I had as a father strongly influenced my leadership as they deepened my sense of caring. Caring is one of the principles of moral judgment (Bolman & Deal, 2008). It is a value and guideline about the right actions, and leaders must make decisions about the right actions on a daily basis. Leaders must question if their decisions and actions show concern for the legitimate interests and feelings of others (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Caring and compassion are also the values that hold families and communities together (Bolman & Deal, 2008). This type of community or family needs a servant-leader. When an elementary school is led by a caring servant-leader, the children, staff and families can truly thrive as this leadership builds a safe haven for them.

"Leadership can be thought of as a capacity to define oneself to others in a way that clarifies and expands a vision of the future." – Edwin H. Friedman

As the principal within a district that failed state AYP for several years, it became necessary to clearly define a platform on instruction. Again my experiences throughout life and as a father influenced my platform on instruction. Teachers need to teach through

modeling. Children emulate those that they respect, so as the teacher models certain skills and values, the students will follow. Additionally, instruction needs to be differentiated and catered to the students' individual learning styles. Just as a doctoral student takes assessments to determine leadership style, a student should be assessed for learning styles. Instruction needs to be brain based and complimenting learning styles, gender differences, and individual learning needs that arise from variables such as learning disabilities. Students should be given opportunities to use their skills in practical settings allowing them hands-on learning experiences. Unfortunately the state assessments that my district often failed were standardized, which was not necessarily an authentic assessment or a true reflection of a student's abilities. However, if we can individualize instruction, we can help each student develop the necessary skills that will allow him or her to meet state standards.

Another key component of leadership is staff management, and consequently it needs to be considered when developing a leadership platform. Quite simply, I state that one should treat others as he/she wish to be treated. With that said, I actively listen to the concerns and input of my staff. This is part of my democratic leadership style. The democratic and human resource styles dominate my personal leadership style. The democratic style is marked by teamwork, collaboration, conflict management, influence, and communication (Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, A. 2002). I keep an open door policy and try to be approachable. While this may inhibit work production at times, it helps to maintain staff morale and a positive working environment. While I may not always agree with the input of my staff, I always hear them out, and when we disagree, I explain my decisions. I also believe in having all the information before making a decision,

especially when it comes to disciplinary action. When I was a high school teacher, I was in the hallway with another teacher investigating a commotion. My principal came upon us after we cleared the hall and were preparing to return to our respective rooms. My principal said nothing to me, but later put a letter in my personnel file reprimanding me for not attending to my class. It was the only time in my career I ever received a letter of this type, and I was angry that my principal never bothered to ask for more information. She acted first and asked questions later. The one positive thing I gained from this experience is a lesson on how not to handle employees. I realize that first impressions and appearances can mean nothing, and you must thoroughly investigate a situation before acting.

Setting for My Leadership During the Research Period

Today, Paulsboro, New Jersey can best be described as a small industrial town on the Delaware River across from the city of Philadelphia. The town is geographically bounded by the Delaware River on the north, East Greenwich on the south, Greenwich Township on the west, and Mantua Creek on the east. This is an economically challenged area; however, the district is not ruled an "Abbot District." The median household income as of the year 2007 was $46,453. http://www.city-data.com/city/Paulsboro-New-Jersey.html (4/20/09). The median house value in 2000 was $156,269. The area is composed of 61.7% White Non-Hispanic, 31.6% African-American, 4.4% Hispanic, two or more races 2.8%, other race 1.3% and Native American 1%. Thus, the area is racially diverse. The borough compared to the state average is above the unemployment percentage, significantly above the African-American population percentage, significantly above the Hispanic population average, number of college students

significantly lower than state average, and percent of population with a Bachelor's Degree or higher significantly below the state average. The crime index in Paulsboro was significantly higher than the national average until 2007 when it dropped to 303.6, a rate just under the national index of 320.0. Violent crimes in Paulsboro during the year 2007 included 4 robberies, 23 assaults, 40 burglaries, 199 larceny counts, 1 arson, and 22 auto thefts. This environment definitely presents a less than ideal learning environment with such crime literally occurring sometimes within view of the schools or a student's home. http://www.city-data.com/city/Paulsboro-New-Jersey.html (4/20/09)

Paulsboro High School was constructed in 1916 and consisted of 17 classrooms. (Gloucester County Historical Society Report, 1948) Since that time the building has had three additions; one in 1931, one in 1965 and the most recent in 2001. The building has three stories, with the first floor halfway underground level. The building houses seventh through twelfth grades and contains an auditorium, a cafeteria, a media center, and a gymnasium. Paulsboro High School was able to escape the wrecking ball; in fact, many renovations have kept the building in fine repair. In 2002-2003 a major Hollywood movie and two commercials were filmed at Paulsboro High School, which with its tin ceilings and enormous windows harkens back to a simpler time and place.

The current curriculum at Paulsboro High School is a comprehensive program containing academic, business, and fine and practical arts classes. Grades seven and eight take cycle and full year courses, while grades nine through twelve take full year and semester courses. Honors courses are available in English, history, math, and science. Advanced placement courses are offered in English, calculus, and biology. In the 2003-2004 year an alternative school program was created to help the most challenged

students. This program operates as a school within a school in a self-contained separate area within the media center. An agreement with the Gloucester County Institute of Technology allows students from Paulsboro High School to attend for half days to pursue vocational training. All high school graduates are required to earn 130 credits. The high school also offers a wide range of athletic and extracurricular activities.

The Paulsboro School District's administration in 2009-2010 consisted of the superintendent of schools, three building principals, three assistant principals, a director of curriculum, a director of assessment, and a supervisor of special services. Paulsboro High School had a building principal, Mr. Paul Morina and three vice principals. The vice principals for grades ten through twelve was Mr. James Pandolfo, the vice-principal for grades 7 through 9 was Dr. Louis Guinta, and the vice-principal in charge of athletics was Mr. Tony Chila.

The teaching staff of the Paulsboro School District in 2009-2010 consisted of 130 professional staff. (Paulsboro School District's Personnel Directory, 2010) Twenty-five percent of the professional staff held advanced degrees. The student to faculty ratio was 11.1% for the school year 2007-2008. (New Jersey State Report Card, 2008) The mean teacher salary was $69,724 in the 2007-2008 year. (New Jersey State Report Card, 2008)

The district is made up of three schools; Billingsport which houses grades pre-K through 2, Loudenslager which houses grades 3 through 6 and Paulsboro High School which houses grades 7 through 12. The Paulsboro Board of Education is a nine member policy body that is elected in April. The board of education receives input from the superintendent, the board solicitor, and the business administrator.

Paulsboro High School has consistently recorded a student suspension rate twice that of the state average. For the year 2007-2008 the student suspension rate was 27%. Average class size for 2007-2008 was 20.1. The student attendance rate was 88.2%, approximately 6% lower than the state average. (New Jersey State Report Card, 2008) The teachers' attendance rate was 96.6%, which was nearly 1% higher than the state average. The percent of school revenues from local taxes was 21% for the year 2007-2008. Total cost per pupil for 2007-2008 was $13,830. Paulsboro High School graduated 91.3% of the senior class in 2007-2008. In the 2007-2008 school year, 72.4 % of the 11th grade scored at or above proficient on the HSPA. In the same year 63% took the Scholastic Aptitude Test. The average combined SAT score was 1310, which was approximately 200 points below state average. (NJ State Report Card, 2008)

I worked as a principal at Billingsport Elementary School in Paulsboro, New Jersey during the course of this study. The 2010-2011 school year was my fifth year in this position. Prior to my administrative path, I taught chemistry and physics in Paulsboro High School. I have worked in the district for a total of fourteen years. During that fourteen-year time span there have been two superintendents. Dr. Quint was the superintendent who hired me as a teacher fourteen years ago, and Dr. Scambia was the superintendent who hired me as an administrator. Dr. Scambia was the superintendent throughout the study, and the 2010-2011 school year was his tenth in that position.

From the outside Paulsboro Public School District is often looked at as a district that is more concerned with athletics than academics. Regardless of the levels of culture held by the superintendent, the culture of the community and school board is the constant that any educational leader would have to recognize. The espoused and underlying beliefs

of the school board and the community may in time move the superintendent away from his or her true frame into one that would keep his or her job.

The Paulsboro Board of Education, as in any town, publicly espouses academics; however, board actions suggest that athletics are equally or more important than academics. During the 1997-1998 school year a new principal started enforcing a policy that loosely stated that lateness to school could prevent a student from playing sports on the weekend. After a star football player missed an important game, the policy was no longer enforced. The underlying belief that athletics is more important than academics is a negative and dysfunctional norm. The 2008-2009 school year found Paulsboro High School in year five of a school in need of improvement. In addition, the school developed a CAPA and QSAC corrective action plan. The Paulsboro School District will benefit by a leader that understands his own leadership platform but also understands the culture of the community and can work to influence the community to reevaluate its priorities. Historically, the board has allocated resources in a direction that has ignored academics in favor of the symbolic frame of championship football and wrestling teams. The hallways need to be decorated with academic as well as athletic symbols of success. Academic facilities need to be given as much consideration as athletic facilities. Argyris (1990) states that whenever organizations or individuals act in ways contrary to how they should act, there is defensive reasoning going on. Defensive reasoning is the skillful use of defensive routines to justify saying one thing and doing another (Argyris, 1990). The hypocrisy occurs in an attempt to alleviate some type of embarrassment or threat that surrounds an error made by the organization or an individual. The inconsistency shows in

the difference between the espoused beliefs and the theories actually in use by the organization or individual.

Defensive reasoning can develop as a result of the social virtues instilled in humans as we develop. We are taught from an early age to share, be polite, to consider others' feelings, and to be caring. As a principal, I frequently used the phrase, "If you don't have anything nice to say, then don't say anything at all." That phrase is an example of a social virtue that is taught almost from birth. It is also an example of how human beings create interdictions that preclude the thorough discussion of individual and organizational errors.

Skilled incompetence represents the many ways in which organizations and individuals develop a protective blanket to protect them from failures and errors (Argyris, 1990). Embedded in the skillful action taken are inconsistencies that prevent the real issues from being discussed. Argyris (1990) points out that buried deep in the organization is the capacity to be over-protective. The over-protection has been developed over decades to deal with tough and embarrassing issues. Often times a low level of trust underlies the cover-up. At board meetings, above ground and below ground dynamics dictate what is actually spoken and when.

Upward communication is often lacking when lower level employees feel that the term "management" is actually a myth. The "kill the messenger" scenario stops meaningful feedback from flowing up to those who could set policy to change in a positive way. A top leader, who wants to maintain the status quo and never deals with the embarrassment of failure, chooses Model I incompetence to command others. In this way they conclude that it is effective for them to make everyone else ineffective. Argyris

(1990) writes, "If you were to act toward me the way I act toward you, then I could not act in the way I intend" (Argyris, 1990, p. 13). This paradox explains the inconsistency that in truth creates complacency and mistrust in organizations.

In Model I theories, leaders strive to control. Humans feel better when they have a sense of being in control of their actions, surroundings, and future. Model I leaders need their followers to be dependent on leadership. The paradox is that passive employees are counterproductive to meaningful feedback and higher order change (Argyris, 1990). The *Wizard of Oz* is an example of Model I leadership. Once the shroud of omnipotence is broken, any perceived power is gone or at very best shared with others.

The Challenger tragedy and management of the Vietnam War are examples in which defensive reasoning, skilled incompetence, and Model I themes led to disaster (Argyris, 1990). In the case of NASA, a "can do" vision led upper levels to minimize the possibility of failure as reported by engineers (Argyris, 1990). In the case of the Vietnam War, a meaningful flow of information was also not received or perceived by those in charge (Argyris, 1990). In both cases, the design and management of these endeavors was such that they minimized embarrassment and covered up errors. In both cases, the espoused theories in use were opposite of what was actually happening. In both cases, a lack of trust was a critical factor.

When we are skillful at something, it comes automatically. Boxers practice the speed bag and jump rope so that certain skills come instinctively and naturally in the ring. When the fight or flight sense kicks in, one needs to fall back on skills that are first nature. For many in leadership roles or large organizations, the boxing metaphor is appropriate. Training to take a leadership role or working in a large organization requires

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stamina, strength, and perseverance. An example of fancy footwork in organizations is the concept of "teams." While the team concept is a positive approach in other theories, such as shared governance and small learning communities, can be a defensive routine when misused (Argyris, 1990). The team is not cohesive enough or too set in their ways. The team is not experienced enough, or the team is comprised of too many cooks spoiling the soup. The team approach can protect individuals from blame as blame can be divided and placed on the group as a whole. In this manner, the real issues remain undiscussable.

Another example of fancy footwork is the feedback loop (Argyris, 1990). Subordinates claim they do not get enough useful feedback from supervisors. The supervisors in turn say that their feedback is not acted upon or is viewed as criticism (Argyris, 1990). In each case, the defense is a justification for inaction and the maintenance of the status quo.

Argyris (1990) sums up the progression from skillful incompetence to mediocre performance in a flow chart on page 64. The flow travels in one direction with feedback coming in from all levels reinforcing and entrenching the concepts of organizational defenses. The continuous cycles of skillful incompetence, defensive routines, fancy footwork, blaming of others, and mediocre performances all lead to mistrust and use of Model I theories (Argyris, 1990). The more complete cycles of this flow, the more undiscussable the issues become (Argyris, 1990).

One strategy that Argyris (1990) promotes as a solution is to design and manage organizations in ways that do not activate the organization's defensive patterns to begin with. Defenses are activated to deal with embarrassment and threat. Managing an organization that reduces errors that are likely to be embarrassing or threatening would

seem to be the solution. When leaders empower the members workforce to be effective performers, errors could be reduced. This empowerment requires maximum trust from the leaders and the led. Another strategy is moving from Model I leadership to Model II theories (Argyris, 1990). Model II values are valid information, informed choices, and responsibility to monitor how well the choice is implemented (Argyris, 1990). Others must constantly be encouraged to act in the manner consistent with the espoused beliefs and organizational mission (Argyris, 1990). Leaders must give sound advice and clearly model their expectations and changes. In addition, a leader will have reflected on how the message could have been misinterpreted and address that as well. Trust must be earned, and once earned; the leaders must continue to empower the led to feel trusted. Most importantly, leaders must walk the talk. Inconsistencies and hypocrisy are the surest precursors to cynicism and mistrust.

As time goes by, it becomes ever increasingly difficult for administrators to relate to teachers simply because it has been so long since they have been in the classroom. This is why it is so important for an instructional leader to visit the classrooms frequently and find creative ways of eliciting authentic feedback from staff. Emotional intelligence is crucial in achieving these things. This emotional learning process is a cycle that can never stop. The past, present, and future are all closely related, and understanding this relationship and learning from it helps to define the true leader.

The very first job I had to do as a new principal was defend the retention recommendations of teachers I did not yet know and with criteria I was not familiar with. After each and every parent meeting in July and August of 2006, I would ask myself is retention what is best for this child and how can I be sure. Since that time I have

constantly refined our school protocol for retention and parent notification. We have included multiple assessments and designed our Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) team around interventions that helped give every child the most we had to offer in and out of school. I initiated the formation of the I&RS team in my first year as principal. The I&RS team was a continuation of the PAC (Pupil Assistance Committee) committee from years prior. When I took over as principal there was a file labeled PAC in my filing cabinet that had five cases in it. The first time I asked a teacher if they had used the PAC/I&RS committee for a struggling student they said, "Why? Nothing will get done." I realized then that this situation needed attention. The 2008-2009 school year was the third year for the I&RS team at my school, and the team handled 56 cases. In my estimation this was because I used the principles I developed during my coursework at Rowan in Educational Leadership. To be an effective leader you must balance the four frames as presented by Bolman and Deal (2008): human resource, political, structural, and symbolic. How an administrator spends his or her time is just as important and what he or she says. As a leader you are not afforded down time; you must constantly model the model for parents, staff, and students. The point is that if you just plan to implement a specific change you have already missed the boat. Instead, leaders should strive to create an atmosphere where meaningful change will be accepted and embedded as culture. A leader should begin to create a culture accepting to change from day one. This general atmosphere can be created over time using the proven concepts of Bolman and Deal (2008) as well as others. If a leader can successfully manage to walk the balance between the human resources, political, structural, and symbolic frames with a healthy dose of moral leadership, the majority of the staff will recognize the intent to move forward and

will be less likely to develop defensive reasoning. In this manner I state that leadership is less about planning for specific change and more about the overall way in which people feel secure. Change without security will always be fraught with difficulty. A leader should think about change every minute of every day because followers tend to model the leader.

As a leader one must be consistent about what matters and realize that all change needs people to breathe life into it. Without the support of all stakeholders a change initiative will not be supported over time and you vision will fade. By projecting oneself as a person first and a leader second the parents, staff and students know the leader is approachable and genuine. Compelling messages are best delivered with transparency in mind, the human condition is not unique, struggles of all kinds have plagued mankind for eons and whenever man has triumphed it has been the result of effective leadership and a shared vision. Effective leaders use active listening, seek feedback from all constituents and dignify others by looking for the best in people. The ability to foster positive attitudes and perceptions in others while at the same time looking at people, smiling and responding in meaningful way create an environment that is more receptive to change initiatives. In my opinion if a change initiative fails it could have failed three or five years earlier when the leader missed a teachable moment with the parents, staff or students. Everything a leader does effects everything that follows.

"Today is only one day in all the days that will ever be. But what will happen in all the other days that ever come can depend on what you do today." **–Ernest Hemingway,** *For Whom the Bell Tolls*

My Leadership Future

When reflecting upon leadership styles and platforms, it is necessary to consider goals for the future. Overall, my goal is to never stop learning. An effective leader continues to grow and change with the times. Education allows us to do so. If we fail to grow, change and educate ourselves we cannot survive. I have already started work on this goal through the doctorate program at Rowan. Once I receive my doctorate; however, it is important that I continue to further my education at any given opportunity. This may come in the form of workshops, research, and professional development. Just as teachers are required to complete 100 hours of professional development every five years, administrators should do the same.

One of my ultimate goals is also to lead by commitment rather than compliance. To achieve this I must continue to develop my emotional intelligence (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, A. 2002). To be a true leader, you must come to the realization that we are all a work in progress. Just as a good teacher needs to constantly learn new ways to differentiate instruction for students, good leaders need to continually find new ways to relate to their employees. My life experiences have served to help me do just this to date, but I need to continue to make those connections in the future in order to be a good leader. As time goes by, it becomes ever increasingly difficult for administrators to relate to teachers simply because it has been so long since they have been in the classroom. This is why it is so important for an instructional leader to visit the classrooms frequently and find creative ways of eliciting authentic feedback from staff. Emotional intelligence is crucial in achieving these things. This emotional learning process is a cycle that can

never stop. The past, present and future are all closely related, and understanding this relationship and learning from it helps to define the true leader.

"Leaders aren't born they are made. And they are made just like anything else, through hard work. And that's the price we'll have to pay to achieve that goal, or any goal." – Vince Lombardi

Reflection

As part of my continuous self- assessment, I sent out a survey to my staff. This survey and value of the staff's input is characteristic of a democratic leader (Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, A. 2002). The staff appreciate that their ideas are considered and valued. One of the questions I asked was, "What can I do to help make your job easier?" One response resonated within me. One anonymous respondent said, "You are the principal, lead." I realized that people want and need guidance. They want a strong leader that can relate to them. Leadership provides a sense of security. In times of crisis, people feel comfortable knowing that they have someone they can go to. A leader is made through hard work, past experience, continuous learning and perseverance. A leader has vision. A leader realizes that life and learning are an endless cycle and past, present and future are intricately related. I worked hard to become a leader, and it is now my responsibility to constantly self-assess and improve. I am responsible for leading and educating our youth and the teachers that teach our youth. Quite literally, I am responsible for leading and educating our future.

Chapter 4

Methodology

Introduction

Many primary teachers (grades K-4) believe that retention is useful in maintaining grade level standards in light of high stakes state testing (Witmer, Hoffman, & Nottis, 2004). Despite perceived academic advantages, there is a great deal of research that suggests that retention may cause damage in later years, such as increased drop-out rates, while only temporarily addressing the immediate academic issues (Bonvin, Bless, & Schuepbach, 2008). Students can become more aware of the negative connotations over time especially as other children, parents, and even teachers make comments that use retentions as a threat for underachievement (Witmer, Hoffman, & Nottis, 2004). This dichotomy in the retention research represents a clear example of non-communication between research and practice.

Retention was embedded in the culture of Billingsport Elementary School. The ultimate purpose of my research was to develop alternatives to grade retention. I chose to develop alternatives to grade retention because as one teacher stated, "What alternatives do I have, if a child cannot read on level how can I send them on?" We reconstituted the school culture by inviting teachers to give feedback that led to the development of the interventions (Fullan, 2007). Designing a process for communication and intervention influenced staff and changed practice through second order change. Mixed methods (interviews, observations, and focus groups) were used for this action research project; a qualitative approach involved interviews as part of cycle 1. There were a total of 22 interviews conducted during the months of March and June of 2010. The interviews

included all teachers at Billinsgport Elementary School. In addition the school social worker and the director of curriculum were interviewed.

As the principal and educational leader at Billingsport Elementary School, I needed to gain insight into teachers' perceptions about retention and the interventions they would recommend developing. By ultimately contributing to the reduction in grade retention, the teachers would "make a difference" and support their sense of efficacy (Fullan, 2007). This study was developed to explore the following research questions:

1. What were the initial perceptions of grade retention among the faculty at Billingsport Elementary School?

2. How could the current retention model be improved?

3. What steps could be implemented to improve communication between all stake holders, parents, teachers, and administration?

4. What improvements were made in staff communications with administration in terms of academic achievement?

5. How was my leadership influenced this action research project?

Research Design

Teachers at Billingsport Elementary School, like teachers in most places, had much to do and little time to do it. Time management was essential; ideologies and paradigms were handed down from experienced teachers or gained through practical personal experience. Unfortunately classroom teachers did not have the time to conduct their own action research projects; instead they relied on what came before them or what they could develop through their practical experiences. The prevailing school culture at Billingsport Elementary School was one that readily accepted retention as a viable

solution for students that failed to reach academic benchmarks. In addition, a historically top down management style has led to stifled communication channels that leave teachers isolated from the responsibility in the dialogue on student achievement. This project offered an open communication flow which created a climate of shared leadership (Evans, 1996; Fullan, 2007). Teachers were given the opportunity to emerge from the isolation of the classroom, dialogue, and develop alternatives to retention.

As an action researcher my role was complicated by my position as principal of Billingsport Elementary School. As principal I was required by job description to provide leadership and managerial oversight to the instructional program and school operations to ensure a school climate that fostered the educational development of each pupil. This written job goal prepared by the superintendent and the board of education was accompanied by unwritten leadership expectations by the staff of their principal. The staff at Billingsport Elementary School looked to the principal for vision in leadership; in essence they expected the principal to have answers and plans of action. The leadership expectations held by the staff made the data collection techniques chosen very critical to eliminating bias or coercion from the data. Action research utilizing both qualitative and quantitative data analysis assisted the researcher in unpacking complex issues and research questions. Using action research allowed me to build a team of change agents by incorporating the teachers into the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the interventions (Creswell, 2007). Action research was ideal for my project, and as an insider there was no possible way to remove myself from the research or data collection. In other words, as a practitioner and participant observer, action research was the best technique for investigating my own back yard.

I have never been the type of person that wholeheartedly bought into any theory or explanation. Instead I try to break the theory into parts and reassemble my own beliefs ala carte. I have science background and taught chemistry and physics for nine years. As a result of this background, I tend to approach things from a very analytical perspective. In this manner I would say I am influenced by a realist approach and can relate to post-positivism which recognizes that the world is not knowable and the imperfect nature requires multiple methods used in a differentiated approach (Creswell, 2007). As a building level administrator (principal), I felt that my practical approach was an asset at times especially during crisis. However, the practical approach was a limitation when trying to create a second order change that involved shared leadership.

It was clear to me as the principal and researcher that designing a process for staff to feel free to contribute ideas and viewpoints openly was a critical component of this action research project and to any second order change initiative.

Role of Researcher

Within this study certain limitations were acknowledged as a responsible researcher. The most obvious limitation I discovered was the impact of the positional power I possessed as principal of Billingsport Elementary School. I taught in the Paulsboro School District for nine years prior to becoming an administrator and always viewed myself as a teacher first and an administrator second. However as a result of this study, I could not ignore the fact that being the "boss" and a participant observer influenced people around me. During the pilot study, I constructed questions that caused the teachers to give me all very similar answers. In retrospect they did this because they were the answers they expected the boss would want to hear. For further data collections,

I needed to be conscious of this impact and design techniques that minimized the disruption caused when administration wanted honest and useful feedback. If this was not addressed then the status quo would have continued and any change initiative considered would meet with failure.

Action researchers use a variety of methods to collect data; in this manner the methods contribute to the validity of the data (Creswell, 2007). Before beginning my action research project I sought and received district approval from the superintendent of schools and Rowan University approval through the IRB process. For cycle one I used a qualitative approach and used interviewing and journaling as my data collection methods. All teachers at Billingsport Elementary School were interviewed give depth and breadth to the study. In all 26 interviews were conducted in the months of March and June 2010. The interviews were approximately 45 minutes in length and developed an understating of what grade retention interventions the teachers would develop if given the opportunity (interview protocol appendix B).

Interview data from cycle one was tape recorded and then transcribed, and then a data outline was developed. The transcripts were read numerous times, and then organized by common responses. Analysis of the responses led to the coding of the data. After coding the data emergent themes allowed for interpretations and inferences to be developed.

Cycle two data was collected using a quantitative approach. Cycle two revolved around planning, executing and assessing a summer program for students that were performing below level academically. A pre-post data collection was developed that analyzed Developmental Reading Basement (DRA) scores. The pre DRA scores were

recorded during the month of April 2010 and the post DRA scores were recorded during the month of August 2010. The pre-score was recorded towards the end of the 2009-2010 school year and the post scores were recorded after offering a 20 day summer school program to the participants. Attendance for the program was also analyzed.

Cycle three data was collected through a qualitative approach using interviewing and journaling to assess the results of a book study group. The Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) Team read and discussed the book *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* by Ruby K. Payne. The book study helped participants to recognize multiple contexts that were affected by political, social, cultural, historical, and economic realities (Delpit, 1995; Freire, 2008). The data was analyzed and used to determine what participants were able to take away from the book study in terms of understanding others with whom they were culturally mismatched.

Cycle four was the final cycle of data collection for this action research study. Cycle four involved planning, implementing, and assessing an after-school tutoring program. Quantitative data was collected with the use of an emergent literacy survey (appendix H) and through statistical analysis of total number of teacher recommended grade retentions per school year. In addition, parents were surveyed about their perceptions of the after-school tutoring program (appendix J).

Review of Research Cycles

Cycle I March –June 2010		Cycle II July- August 2010		Cycle III Oct. – Dec. 2010		Cycle IV Nov. 2010- May 2011
• Twenty-Two Teachers Interviewed • Emergent Themes Informed Cycles	→	• 20 Days, 3 Hours Per Day • 103 Students Invited • 67 Students Attended • 76% Attendance Rate	→	• Understand Multiple Contexts • Increase Awareness Through Dialogues • Better Customer Service Relationships	→	• I&RS Team Referred Students for Tutoring • Tutoring Program 4 Days Per Week, 1 Hour Per Day • 26 Students Received Tutoring
Setting the Baseline		Summer School Program		Book Study with I&RS Team		After-School Tutoring Program

Context

     My research for this action research study took place at Billingsport Elementary School. Billingsport School was located at 441 Nassau Avenue, Paulsboro, New Jersey. The school housed grades pre-kindergarten through second and had 367 students during the research period. I selected this location because I was the principal and sole administrator there from July 1, 2006 to June 30, 2011. The 2010-2011 school year was my fifth year in this position. Prior to my administrative path, I taught chemistry and physics in this district at Paulsboro High School. I had worked in the district for a total of fourteen years. I served multiple roles within the district including teacher, administrator, and taxpaying resident. These various roles enabled me to examine the district from multiple viewpoints.

From the outside Paulsboro Public Schools was often looked at as a district that was more concerned with athletics than academics. Regardless of the levels of culture held by the superintendent, the culture of the community and school board was the constant that any educational leader would have to recognize. The espoused and underlying beliefs of the school board and the community have the ability over time to move the superintendent away from his or her original vision into one that would promote keeping his or her job.

The Paulsboro Board of Education, publicly espoused academics; however, board actions suggested that athletics were equally as important as academics. This topic was a very important one as our school district already had a high school in year five of a Collaborative Assessment and Planning for Achievement (CAPA) review and an elementary in year four of a CAPA review. In addition the district had not made Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) on the New Jersey standardized tests in over five years. As a result the entire district was under intense scrutiny at the county and state levels. All of this negative attention raised the level of concern for the topic of retention versus social promotion knowing that all promoted second graders were required to take the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK) test in third grade whether ready or not.

The staff at Billingsport Elementary School did not consist of the same ethnic/cultural diversity as the students. The teaching staff was all college educated and most came from middle-class families. During the 2010- 2011 school year Billingsport staff consisted of one African-American female teacher, one African-American female social worker, no Hispanic or Asian staff, and approximately 25 Caucasian staff. Of those

25 Caucasian staff, 22 were female and 3 were male. The staff lacked diversity in ethnicity, gender, and socio-economics when compared to the population we served. Our district was a district group factor (DFG) A, which was the lowest ranking. The DFG scale represented an approximate measure of a community's relative socioeconomic status (SES). The classification system is often used to compare academic achievement data and school aid formulas.

Argyris (1990) states that whenever organizations or individuals act in ways contrary to how they should act, there is defensive reasoning going on. Defensive reasoning involves the skillful use of defensive routines to justify saying one thing and doing another (Argyris, 1990). Hypocrisy occurs in an attempt to alleviate some type of embarrassment or threat that surrounds an error made by the organization or an individual. The inconsistency shows in the difference between the espoused beliefs and the theories actually in use by the organization or individual.

Defensive reasoning can develop as a result of the social virtues instilled in humans as we develop. We are taught from an early age to share, be polite, to consider others' feelings, and to be caring. As a principal, I frequently used the phrase, "If you don't have anything nice to say, then don't say anything at all." That phrase was an example of a social virtue that is taught almost from birth. It is also an example of how human beings create interdictions that preclude the thorough discussion of individual and organizational errors.

Another issue that becomes a problem in organizations is communication. Upward communication is often lacking when lower level employees feel that the term "management" is actually a myth. The "kill the messenger" scenario stops meaningful

feedback from flowing up to those who could set policy to change in a positive way. A top down leader, who wants to maintain the status quo and never deals with the embarrassment of failure, chooses Model I incompetence to command others. In this way they conclude that it is effective for them to make everyone else ineffective. Argyris (1990) writes, "If you were to act toward me the way I act toward you, then I could not act in the way I intend" (Argyris, 1990). This paradox explains the inconsistency that in truth creates complacency and mistrust in organizations. Paulsboro moved certain administrators around in the past few years, and when I first took my principal position, I had to overcome the problems that resulted from a number of things including communication. I had to separate myself from other administrators and focus a great deal on communication to earn the respect of disgruntled employees. That open line of communication tremendously improved the relationship, and morale between staff and administration paved the way for this research project which ultimately included all of the staff at Billingsport Elementary School. Through this action research project I hoped to empower the staff to continue to improve the flow of communication as we journeyed together to explore best practice alternatives to retention.

Participants

After completing cycle one I continued action research investigating alternatives to grade retention at Billingsport Elementary School. I interviewed and observed all of the staff so that a baseline paradigm was established. Next, I developed, critiqued, and assessed alternatives to retention that were gathered through the differentiated feedback approaches. The ultimate purpose of my action research was to reduce the number of grade retentions by some processes that the teachers themselves proposed.

The target research participants for this study varied with the cycles. For cycle one all teachers at Billingsport Elementary School were interviewed including the school social worker and the District Director of Curriculum and Instruction. All together 22 interviews were conducted. Cycle two instituted a summer program; the program was offered to 82 students from first and second grades and 21 students from kindergarten. Altogether the target population was 103 students. Of the 103 students invited to participate in the summer program 67 of them actually signed up and came to the program at least once. Of the 67 students that participated in the summer program nineteen of those were students who were recommended by their teachers for grade retention. For cycle three of my action research study, I conducted a book study targeted at the Billingsport Intervention and Referral (I&RS) Team. The I&RS team was composed of three white men (myself included) and five women, four of which were white, and one was African American. The I&RS team was composed of the following positions within the school: social worker (African American, female), speech specialist (white, female), school nurse (white, female), school counselor (white, male), special education inclusion teacher (white, male), two basic skills teachers (both white, female), and the school principal (white, male). Cycle four was the final cycle and it focused on an after-school tutoring program which involved 26 students who altogether received 546 hours of tutoring. The tutoring hours were provided in addition to the normal school day. All of the parents of the 26 students were given surveys about the program. Of the 26 surveys eleven were returned.

Data Analysis

This brief outline of the data collection methods is just that, an outline. The data collected in cycle 1 informed data collection for cycle 2, and as an action researcher I let the data emerge and inform the study as connections were made (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Qualitative research is noted for complexity and variety of approach thus allowing the researcher freedom to be true to the data and develop a reflective and informed change initiative (Glesne, 2006). Through an informed qualitative approach action researched must strive to eliminate bias and control the urge to draw conclusions until the data has been thoroughly analyzed. By managing the complex nature of the data collection process the action researcher is able to interact deeply with the issues and construct social processes in a reflective manner (Glesne, 2006).

As mentioned previously in this methodology, when defensive reasoning is employed to alleviate some type of embarrassment or threat by either the organization or the individual (Argyris, 1990), open discussion is precluded. As principal I was charged with evaluating the job performance of everyone that worked at Billingsport Elementary School, and as such my presence altered the communication process. As an action researcher I acknowledged this situation as a limitation, and I carefully journaled my feelings on this issue. Conducting action research, like any human endeavor, cannot be mastered; it can only be improved upon (Glesne, 2006).

Reflection and Connections to Fullan

As a result of this study I have been made keenly aware of the impact I have as the principal to influence the feedback loop. This influence can be used in many ways to improve the overall efficiency and atmosphere of Billingsport Elementary School; however, I am now very certain that as the principal my presence was a hindrance to the

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communication process. I strove to continually find ways to differentiate my avenues for feedback after analysis of which methods worked best with the various individuals and groups were included in the feedback loop. For some, one-on-one conversations worked to gain open feedback, for others a survey was best for honest and open communications, and still others felt more comfortable with participation in a small focus group atmosphere. Michael Fullan tells us that relationships are critical in implementing any change. Without the relationships the change will be superficial and will not last (Fullan, 2001). Through initial interviews I initiated an opening for teachers to engage in dialogue about student achievement. From the dialogues we developed interventions that we then put into action. The results were analyzed, shared, and celebrated. This action research study spanned one year, during that time we were able to show "quick wins" that served to motivate the staff and myself (Kotter, 1995).

Chapter 5

Cycle One: School-Wide Interviews

Introduction

As an action researcher my role was complicated by my position as principal of Billingsport Elementary School. Through an informed qualitative approach, action research must strive to eliminate bias and control the urge to draw conclusions until the data has been thoroughly analyzed. As principal I was required by job description to provide leadership and managerial oversight to the instructional program and school operations ensuring a school climate that fostered the educational development of each pupil. This written job goal prepared by the superintendent and the board of education was accompanied by unwritten leadership expectations by the staff.

The staff at Billingsport Elementary School looked to the principal for vision in leadership; in essence they expected the principal to have answers and plans of action. The leadership expectations held by the staff made the data collection techniques chosen very critical to eliminating bias or coercion from the data. In this initial cycle of data collection, I sought to establish a baseline from which future cycles were developed. In this manner the teaching staff was collectively involved in the improvement process from the bottom up (Evans, 1996). The information systems required for school change must be transparent and reflective. Interviewing all staff at Billingsport Elementary School about grade retention offered an opportunity for all stakeholders, including myself, to reflect on theories in action and test them through the action research model (Fullan, 2007).

As mentioned in the "Impact on My Leadership Platform" section of this dissertation, when defensive reasoning is employed to alleviate some type of

embarrassment or threat by either the organization or the individual (Argyris, 1990), open discussion is precluded. As principal I was charged with evaluating the job performance of everyone that worked at Billingsport Elementary School, and as such my presence could alter the communication process. As an action researcher, I acknowledged this situation as a limitation and carefully reflected on my feelings as I struggled to create an improved grade retention paradigm and sustain a change initiative (Fullan, 2007; Evans, 1996). Conducting action research, like any human endeavor, cannot be mastered; it can only be improved upon (Glesne, 2006).

The Plan for Interviews

My first data collection (cycle one) involved interviews of all teaching staff at Billingsport Elementary School. This group included all teachers from pre-school through second grade. Additionally, special education teachers, basic skills teachers, the school social worker, and the director of curriculum were included in the sample. The total sample population interviewed was twenty-two. All of the interviews were conducted at Billingport Elementary School and lasted approximately 45 minutes. The intention of the interviews was to begin to develop a global understanding of the grade retention interventions teachers would develop if they were able to put their ideals into action. This initial approach was a completely bottom up endeavor with a free flow of ideas paving the way for future cycles. I reached out to each educator one-on-one so they were given the opportunity to genuinely feel as though they are part of a community of learners responsible for every student's success (Evans, 1996).

The data collected in cycle one informed data collection for cycle two, and as an action researcher, I allowed the data to emerge and inform the study as connections were

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made (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Qualitative research is noted for complexity and variety of approach, thus allowing the researcher freedom to be true to the data and develop a reflective and informed change initiative (Glesne, 2006). By managing the complex nature of the data collection process the action researcher is able to interact deeply with the issues and construct social processes in a reflective manner (Glesne, 2006).

Research Sample and Population

All of the participants in this study were employees of the Paulsboro School District in Paulsboro, New Jersey at the time of the data collection. There were a total of 22 interviews conducted during the months of March and June of 2010. The interviews were divided into two categories; the first three interviews conducted were pilot in nature. The second/final nineteen interviews were conducted as a refinement of the pilot interview protocol. Responses were coded multiple times thus developing emergent themes on the interpretive and inferential levels. The pilot interviews were conducted with one teacher from each kindergarten, first, and second grade levels. The final interviews were expanded to include all teachers at Billinsgport Elementary School. In addition the school social worker and the director of curriculum were interviewed.

Interview data in cycle one was tape recorded and then transcribed, and then a data outline was developed. The transcripts were read numerous times, and additional data was added to the outline. The outline was then organized by common themes and responses. Analysis of the responses and common themes led to the coding of the data. After coding the data emergent themes allowed for interpretations and inferences to be developed. In this section a discussion of the results and themes will be presented. Common findings resulted in the following themes why students were retained; academic

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proficiency, academic concerns, maturity level, student frustration level, and parent

concerns.

Academic Proficiency

All of the participants believed that grade retention was viable option used after

careful consideration of multiple indicators. Academic Proficiency was the indicator that

was most prevalent. One participant said, "I think retention is needed for the children

who are showing not on level of basic skills in reading and math and maturity level is not

matched up with their age". Another participant responded similarly saying, "skills,

skills, I believe that they (students) are going to first grade behind other children, if they

do not have a good grasp of the letters and numbers...." In one case a teacher indicated

that academic levels were the primary indicator used for a retention decision by stating:

> Retention is based on academic levels, which include a student's DRA
>
> (Diagnostic Reading Level) level and also skills in math. I also base my decision
>
> on students' performance throughout the school year. If they have been struggling
>
> with a majority of concepts in all subject areas and seem to be getting frustrated
>
> then I take that into consideration also.

Academic Concerns

Every participant interviewed mentioned academic concerns as the cornerstone of

the multiple indicators necessary before a retention decision was reached. One participant

said "You cannot build a house on a weak foundation..." The selection of academic

indicators listed included math skills, reading levels, test scores, readiness skills, grades,

and the ability to read. Furthermore, several participants listed the lack of parental

support as an academic indicator, implying that at the early education level having

someone at home to reinforce skills is an academic requirement for each student.

Maturity Level

Another indicator mentioned by participants was maturity level. Several

participants indicated that birth dates were considered somewhat when retention decision

was being formulated. One educator interviewed said:

Reasons might vary but usually were associated with immaturity. Since these

were primary students, the gift of time was most often cited by staff as to what

was needed to have the child develop the necessary skills to be successful in the

next grade.

When compared to the kindergarten classroom of 30 years ago, play has been

replaced with skill and drill. The early years of schooling have been filled with large time

blocks of literacy, math, and test preparation. The increased pressure on the education

system to close the achievement gap has contributed to the culture of grade retention as a

means to remediate in order to build a better child. Often times students rebel against

formalized skill development in favor of their natural instincts of play (Mantzicopoulos,

2003). In these cases educators often cite immaturity as the main reason the child is not

ready to learn though Socratic method. Maturity level was not listed as the primary

indicator for any of the interviewees; it was however, frequently mentioned as a supporting indicator in formulating a retention decision.

Student Frustration Level

Another common indicator was student frustration level. As educators we are taught that each person has an independent working level and an instructional level. A student may be taught and given support by the teacher at a level (instructional) higher than they could achieve without the teacher's support (independent). Frustration occurs when either level is too far above the student. Often times parents would mention that the child came home from school and tried to do homework but instead broke down in tears crying (Bloom & Traub, 2005).

Parent Input

A final reason why students may be retained was through parent input. On rare occasions parents would request retention that was not otherwise recommended by the school district. In these rare instances, sports were usually cited. This occurrence usually revolved around a male student and the notion that repeating a grade would result in an advantage of physical size or speed by the time the student would progress to high school sports. As mentioned previously Paulsboro has a deep tradition in athletics and the notion that a student athlete could make it to the professional level was a dream of many.

Analysis & Implications

In this section, the overarching themes of possible alternatives to retention are presented in detail. The interview question discussed next asked the interviewees to consider any changes they could make to eliminate the need for retention. The answers to this question were grouped into three main categories: student centered interventions, family-home interventions, and interventions that would require a whole school reform effort. The student centered interventions involved educators working with the students to deliver some type of extra services in order to gain the basic skills required to be successful in the next grade. The family-home interventions involved the school establishing a relationship with the parents in order to assist them in educating their children. The whole school reform interventions required some major redesign of the school system that in turn would require both contractual changes and school board approval to implement. In the next section the three main categories of interventions mentioned above will be developed further.

Student Centered Interventions

Student centered interventions required the schools to provide something additional or extra for the students that were struggling. If the interventions were provided during the regular school day, a decision as to what class the student was pulled out of must be made. The school day was already completely accounted for with no built-in free time. One might think that recess was a time that could be taken from underachieving students, but it was not ideal. Obesity rates among children were at all time highs, and inactivity was more the norm than the rare occurrence. With that in mind,

recess took on a new importance and was needed to meet the state requirements for physical education mandates as well. Developing interventions that took place during the regular school day was problematic to say the least. If a student was pulled out of a class to make up basic skills, then they missed the content that the rest of the class was receiving and the cycle continued itself. Thus the students were never able to fully catch up the rest of the class academically and the achievement gap widened. To be student centered, children must be identified early and worked with immediately at their level. One interviewee stated, "We would be ready to activate a team of resource personnel to carry through with…interventions". Another respondent thought that after -school tutoring would help eliminate the need for retention by saying:

I would definitely incorporate after-school tutoring. I think this would help improve the academics of those students that are receiving help from the basic skills team.

Another participant responded similarly saying:

I would offer tutorial services daily for the students that were struggling so that the tools needed to enhance their academics were readily available.

Another approach to providing extra instructional time was mentioned by a teacher in terms of taking the special areas away from the child. Each student at Billingsport Elementary School was assigned special area classes: physical education, science, library, world language, art, and music. The idea presented was that struggling students could be pulled from the classes occasionally so as to still give them the exposure to the special subjects but also give them additional academic support.

Regarding additional student support during the school day, each of the

respondents mentioned that the support should be provided as soon as possible. The possibility of interventions being applied as soon as possible would be a function of the school assistance committee. Every school in New Jersey is required to have an Interventions and Referral Services Team (I&RS) to identify students that are struggling and assign them appropriate interventions. The team at Billingsport School consisted of the principal, the school nurse, the school counselor, two basic skills teachers, the special education resource room teacher, the speech teacher, and the guidance counselor. This team was assigned the responsibility of matching interventions with students and following up on the progress.

Family-Home Connection

In addition to school based student centered interventions, the data cited that the family-home connection should be an area of focus. Improving the relationship between home and school was an area that was consistently discussed in school reform and improvement. One teacher said, "Also the parents may need to be educated as well because we can't assume they have the educational knowledge or capability to work with their children." The participants indicated that offering parents classes and assistance would offer a multi-fold benefit. In this manner the dividends of the investment would be compounded; many of the parents had multiple children and helping them to work with their children with academics had long reaching and lasting effects. Another participant said:

> We would have quality parent education classes focusing not so much on how to raise their children but give guidelines for a structured home life. I mean not to try

to change or instill other values – I guess respect them as parents and teach them how to plan healthy meals, prepare for the week, and have structured activities planned for kids, sports, and arts.

The ability to reach out and establish relationships with the parents is an important factor in second order change with children (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). For some people trust only comes from the establishment of a meaningful relationship. In other words, people do not care how much you know until they know how much you care. By offering assistance and building relationships, the parent -school bond will grow and pave the way for academic achievement (Fullan, 2001; Fullan, 2007). In order to pull in under- resourced populations you must think outside the box, as one participant commented:

> Parents with resources will get the help for their children with or without our support. Most of our parents, however, do not have those resources and will depend upon us for additional help. Reaching out to parents in nontraditional ways (parent liaisons, school social worker, school-home based contacts, etc.) would provide us with the best opportunity to get parents on board. The hardest to reach parents are the biggest challenge and will continue to be in whatever system we devise. So the biggest question for us all…how do we reach them and keep them interested in his/her child's educational progress?

Reaching out to parents in nontraditional ways was a common thread in the data. In many ways the parents of under- resourced learners were nontraditional themselves. Many were not trusting of government systems and bureaucracy. In some instances the school systems have offered them a failing experience during their own educations

further complicating the relationship building process. The only way to build trust was a little at a time, offering classes over an extended period and building parental participation into the culture (Fullan, 2007). One teacher mentioned that parents felt guilty about their child's academic underachievement. The parents felt as thought it was their entire fault. Another teacher indicated how dysfunctional she felt the school to home connection was by saying:

The school to home connection is very weak. The faculty and staff at school often reach out to parents offering parent night, back to school night, and movie night. The attendance at these functions is minimal and parents do not seem very involved in their child's education.

Whole School Reform

The next intervention represented in the data is change requiring some type of whole school or district reform. For a whole school reform to occur, approval at the highest levels was required. For instance one respondent mentioned year-round schooling as an out-of-the-box intervention stating, "School would be in session year-long with appropriate breaks occurring throughout the year…no more two and a half months summer break in the learning process." Many in education feel that just when the kids really start to learn, they are given a summer break, and in essence the learning stops. In many cases the students lose previous learning (Ivey & Fisher, 2006; Boykin & Noguera, 2011). In order to change to year-round schooling many considerations would have to be addressed. To switch to year-round schooling, teacher contracts would have to be modified, and additional payment for the new schedule may be required adding to the overall expense of operating the school district. In addition, the summer months in New

Jersey would require that all instructional areas be air-conditioned, which would be a great expense to install and maintain. In the Paulsboro School District, none of the school buildings are air-conditioned with the newest building being constructed in 1922. In order to make the above changes the school board, and ultimately the voters in the town, would have to be committed to the reforms and open to the additional taxes required to support the initiatives.

Another whole school reform intervention mentioned in the data was related to special education and the students having an Individual Education Plan (IEP). An IEP is an individual road map written with specific goals and objectives that lead to monitored progress for education success for the student. A team of professionals closely monitor the IEP with parent input along the way; yearly meetings with all stakeholders are also required. One participant said: "We would have our own Child Study Team (CST) to focus just on our kids that could intervene as early as pre-school age, the length of would be much shorter for their evaluations." Another similar theme related to special education included making modifications and accommodations that commonly are found written in IEP's created by the CST. The respondent said:

> I would like all classroom teachers on board with a multisensory approach to teaching by utilizing different ways and ideas to teach the same objective using a variety of senses realizing that all the students do not learn in the same way. Also during testing, giving a variety of sensory tools that might be useful – pencil grips, seated assistance, squishy toys to grasp in the less dominant hand, timed timer, etc. These are just some examples so that students do not feel as much pressure and anxiety.

Adopting many of the practices of special education would give the students more opportunities to learn in different ways. Once again this approach would be heavily influenced by cost factor. Child Study Teams usually consist of administrators, secretaries, behavior specialists, learning teacher consultants, social workers, teachers, aides, and school psychologists. Another special education type intervention cited was the idea of smaller class size and two teachers or an aide and a teacher in each classroom. This reform initiative would of course require additional payroll; moreover, smaller class size would require additional classrooms to be built necessitating increased taxes and school board approval.

Many of the initiatives identified from the data analyzed for this paper would require school board and tax payer approval further complicating their implementation. However, many of the recommended interventions could be initiated through site based methods requiring little formal approval.

Reflection

At the core of this action research project was the notion that no significant learning can take place without a significant relationship. If a teacher was going to truly create an atmosphere of shared learning that flows in both directions, then a meaningful relationship must be established with each of their pupils. Similarly if a principal was interested in developing a second order change of any type they must first take the time necessary to develop meaningful relationships with the faculty long before the change initiative was considered (Fullan, 2001; Fullan, 2007). Just as educators point to the fact

there was no one cookie cutter approach to learning, there was no one way to establish a

rapport with a group of teachers. Instead a differentiated approach was developed so that

the relationships developed do not seem contrived and situational in nature. Once again,

people did not care how much one knew until they knew how much one cared.

Communication was a major theme repeated throughout the interview process. In

order to advance the communication between school and home, some roadblocks were

addressed. During analysis of the data it became evident that there was an underlying

assumption that the parents of some of the students were not keeping up with their

parental responsibilities when it came to working with their children on academics at

home. As mentioned earlier in this section often times under-resourced learners have

under-resourced parents. To keep this change initiative moving forward, this underlying

assumption was addressed and explored. In the chapter 7, I initiated a critical discourse

through a book study with the faculty. The book we used was *A Framework for

Understanding Poverty* (2005) written by Dr. Ruby Payne. The book discussed how

poverty impacts learning, work habits, and decision making. The reality of living with

poverty brings out a survival mentality and turns attention away from opportunities taken

for granted by people in middle and upper class. This started discussion on the how and

why questions that were roadblocks to building significant relationships with the parents.

An excerpt from *A Framework for Understating Poverty* (Payne, 2005) says:

Most teachers today come from middle-class backgrounds. In an educational

setting, economic class differences create conflict and challenges for both teachers and

students alike. Designed for educators at all levels, but helpful to counselors,

administrators, and support staff as well, this seminar provides practical, real-world support and guidance for overcoming barriers and helping others succeed.

All teachers interviewed mentioned that the students were recommended for grade retention because they were not on level academically with their peers. The other themes mentioned were used in conjunction with below level academic skills. In addition, teachers indicated that in order to avoid retention, the students would have to be given "something" extra that the other students were not receiving. The interview data collected in this cycle led to the action in the next cycle. The next cycle is about a summer school program offered in response to the data collected from the teachers at Billingsport Elementary School. Through this process the teachers saw their thoughts put into action. I leveraged my leadership and established teacher advocacy as a change agent (Fullan, 2001; Fullan, 2007).

Chapter 6

Cycle Two: The Summer Program

Introduction

As the data from cycle one emerged it was evident that educators at Billingsport Elementary School would, if given the opportunity, develop interventions to grade retention that were coded into three categories. The three main intervention categories gleaned from 22 teacher interviews were: student centered interventions, family-home interventions, and interventions that would require a whole school reform. Cycle two concentrated on planning and implementing an intervention emergent from these categories, specifically student centered and whole school reform interventions.

Leadership Challenges

The spring of 2010 was a turbulent time in terms of education in New Jersey. The Governor of New Jersey, Chris Christie, cut the education budget for New Jersey schools drastically and reverberations of these drastic cuts will continue to be felt for a long time to come. As a result, funding for any new initiative has been very hard to come by as many in education find themselves going into "survival mode." During the months of March and April 2010 my own job was on the line as the superintendent spoke to me on several occasions about the possibility of my job being eliminated as a reduction in force. At this time the superintendent discussed the possibility of letting me go as principal of Billingsport Elementary and returning back to Paulsboro High School as a science teacher, a position I held seven years prior. During these months planning and researching my dissertation topic was very difficult to say the least, and at several points

along the way I felt as though I would have to postpone my research and take a sabbatical from the doctoral program altogether. I felt as though all was lost.

As a result of my participation in the Rowan Doctoral program, I have developed a better understanding of myself as an educator, leader, and human being. True leadership can only be assessed under extreme circumstances, for Rudolf Giuliani, the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center was his defining leadership moment. The sign on Mayor Giuliani's desk said, "I am responsible." He was not responsible for the disaster, but once the tragedy occurred he was responsible for everything that followed in terms of a response. He could not be paralyzed by fear or overcome by personal feelings; at that moment everything he did mattered to the extreme. Likewise, for myself, after the initial shock of the possibility of the loss of my job and not being able to continue the doctoral program, I chose to act.

During the next several weeks I continued to engage the superintendent in the pressing educational needs of the students at Billllingsport School. One of my recommendations at this time was to plan and implement a summer school program. The summer school program would be made available to those who needed remediation, but especially targeted for those who were recommended for grade retention for the 2010-2011 school year. I agree with Fullan (2001); change cannot be managed, it can be understood and one must constantly self-asses, reflect, and act. In this case the reaction I chose after hearing the potentially catastrophic news about my position was to continue to try to steer the ship in the direction I knew was best for all stakeholders, especially the students. All educational leaders must incorporate plans to monitor and adjust and show the courage to make deliberate change.

The thought process behind offering a summer school as a best practice alternative to retention emerged from the interviews conducted during cycle one. The concept developed from two of the major themes cited in my cycle one research. First, the idea of summer school was a student centered intervention directed at increasing the basic skills of the students enrolled in order that certain benchmark criteria could be met and thus the student could be promoted to the next grade. Second, summer school was in essence a whole school reform that changed the length of the school year from the required minimum of 180 days. For the students involved, summer school brought them closer to the concept of year-round schooling and in this manner could be used to eliminate any academic loss associated with having three months off from school. Researchers conclude that differential summer learning over the course of the elementary school years substantially accounts for the achievement gap. In addition, the end result of this achievement gap is major differences in high school dropout rates and college attendance (Anderson, Hiebert & Wilkinson, 1985).

Teachers at Billingsport indicated that baseline academic levels should be achieved in order to be promoted to the next grade. In addition, many interviewed based their retention decision on below level benchmarking in reading and math. Teachers indicated the emphasis on basic skills measured with reading and math assessments as a strong indicator for retention.

Many struggling students at Billingsport began to show academic progress late in the school year. During the months of April, May, and June many of the students really started to hit their stride and make larger incremental changes in academic achievement. Multiple factors can impact the rate of achievement such as the continued growth of the

teacher-student relationship, effective basic skills instruction, more detailed assessment and instruction, and parental/home support. In any case, for many of these students just as they were starting to experience success with their teacher, the school year is ended; they go three months without instruction, and then start all over with another teacher. In the case of summer school, instruction and remediation could be maintained and most importantly, the students could continue to experience growth and success which would contribute to their own efficacy.

The Plan: A Summer Program

Despite the possibility of losing my position as principal during the months of March 2010 and April 2010, I continued to recommend to the superintendent that we offer a summer school for struggling students. I began my principalship in July of 2006, and from that time I met with the superintendent almost every Friday at 3:00 p.m. to discuss hot topics and my vision for the school. During these one-on-one meetings I was able to engage in casual conversation that helped me as I built my relationship with my "leader." Throughout the years I have spent studying educational leadership at Rowan, I have focused most of my leadership reflection on my relationship with my staff and not as much effort on the relationship with my leader. The relationship I had with my leader (superintendent) was critical if I wanted to get projects moving and resources allocated to do so. Schools, like businesses and government, operate in the four frames (Bolman and Deal, 2008). The political frame dominates when discussing resources and approval from superiors. Without support, programs and interventions cannot be advocated for. Often times obtaining that necessary support is directly linked to your relationship with your boss.

On April 21, 2010 during an administrative meeting, the superintendent announced we would run a summer program for the students at Billingsport Elementary School. I was ecstatic. At this point I was still not sure if I would have my job as principal by then, but I would start planning the program immediately either way. We were now almost through April, and plans for a summer school ideally would have started January. My positive approach told me to unofficially start planning before I got the official word, and I was glad I did. I had asked if anyone was interested in a potential summer school at a faculty meeting a month earlier in March, and I had a file with teacher names already lined up. On the May 2010 school board agenda, a recommendation was made for a Title 1 summer program for students in kindergarten through second grade. The program was to be five weeks long Monday through Thursday with Friday off. One of the big challenges of a summer program is attendance, and Fridays off can help with families planning extended weekend trips. Additionally, having Fridays off helps the teaching staff balance their family vacation time with their summer work schedules. The total cost of the program was not to exceed $16,000. The Paulsboro Board of Education unanimously approved the recommendation in May of 2010, and the next step was to hire the teachers and secretary. I would serve as sole administrator for the project and as such would require no additional compensation; the only cost associated with the program would be salaries and supplies.

The program really started to take shape during the month of May 2010. In addition to the free summer program, I was able to work with the cafeteria manager, Bill McCummber, to amend the summer feeding application so that all the students attending the summer program would be offered free breakfast before the program and free lunch

after the program. Another service to be provided to students during the summer program was speech services. I met with the Director of Special Services and asked if we would be able to continue speech services during the summer program, and he was in agreement that it would be possible. My argument behind this request was that the more successful we were as a district in remediating at an early age the less special education referrals we would have later. Any student that would otherwise receive speech services during the regular school year would also be provided summer speech services. Program hours of operation for teachers would be 8:00a.m. to 12p.m. I wanted the teachers to have ample preparation time and also time to record student data daily. With that in mind I requested that the teachers be given a half hour before the students arrived and a half hour after the students left every day to prepare for lessons and record performance data. The plan was to offer breakfast from 8:00a.m. to 8:30a.m. and lunch from 11:30a.m. to 12p.m. The time assigned for breakfast and lunch would give the teachers the requested preparation time, but I still needed supervision for the students during this time. I had wanted all of the funding to go to actual instruction that I could schedule, and as a result I made the choice that I would personally supervise students every morning and afternoon in order to facilitate my plan.

The next priority was to invite the students and get the word out. I wanted as many students as possible to attend, but at the same time I was not given unlimited resources to carry out the summer program. In this manner while planning, I tried to realistically project student enrollment, but if I underestimated the project could go over budget, and that was not an option. A list of 82 basics skills students (Title 1) was compiled. This list represented all the students at Billingsport Elementary School that

received basic skills support in either math or language arts or both for the school year 2009-2010. Students were initially determined to be eligible for basic skills by multiple measures. Students could be recommended by their teacher or parents, and benchmark assessments were used such as Diagnostic Reading Assessment (DRA) testing, math pre and post testing, and weekly assessments and tests as given by the classroom teacher. After students were recognized as needing basic skills instruction, their parents were notified by letter (appendix F) and asked to sign a permission slip for entrance into the basic skills program. In a few rare instances, the parents declined services. The 82 students were from first and second grade levels only. I still wanted to offer this program to students in kindergarten, but they were not officially designated as basic skills students. The reason they were not so designated was that all kindergarten classrooms had a teacher and an aide in them and first and second grades do not have the aide position included. In this way each kindergarten class in theory is given additional service with basic skills with the addition of a classroom aide. But as of May of 2010, there were 21 kindergarten students on the retention list out of a total of 101 kindergarten students at the school. How could I not offer the program to a grade level that had a roughly 21% retention rate? At this point I went back to the superintendent's office to once again advocate.

The next conversation I had with the superintendent revolved around two topics, first allowing kindergarten to participate and second keeping student to teacher ratios low. Both of these points were in the best interest of the students and the maximization for the educational process, but both of them resulted in a more expensive program. As a principal I was constantly making recommendations I knew would benefit my students,

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but ultimately the approval of which rested in the superintendent's hands. He was the one that had to balance fiscal accountability versus educational excellence. Every time I engaged him in such conversations I realized that if I was to pursue a career path that would lead me to be superintendent, I would have to struggle with decisions I knew would benefit kids but would not be financially prudent given the big picture. I knew how much sleep I already lost every night when it came to feeling like I just had not done enough for my students now. If I was to be the one ultimately in charge, I would have to develop a mental paradigm that would allow me to function in that light.

Next, I needed to develop a compelling argument for allowing kindergarten students to participate in the summer program. I used a two-fold approach to persuade for approval; first, I pointed out that Paulsboro High School and Loudenslager Elementary School were both in multiple year status as schools in need of improvement due to their standardized test scores on the NJ ASK tests and the NJ HSPA tests. In addition, the benchmark proficiency scores continued to rise with the 100% proficient benchmark implemented in the year 2014. With this in mind, I said these were the students that could help us reach those goals if we helped them now. Attempts to remediate after loss of basic skills were uphill battles. The more resources you devoted to the lower grades, the stronger the upper grades would perform (Boykin & Noguera, 2011).

The second approach to the argument involved semantics. The first and second grades were eligible because the students were already officially classified as basic skills students, and conversely the kindergarten students were not classified as basic skills because they were in a grade that had a teacher and an aide in every room. However, if the kindergarten students that were recommended for retention were to be promoted, then

they would be fast tracked to basic skills anyway in their first grade year. With this thought I recommended that we open up the summer program to only the kindergarten students that were recommended for retention. This population of kindergarten students had a very high probability of becoming basic skills students based on their underperformance in kindergarten (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). The superintendent agreed to this line of reasoning and allowed the kindergarten students that were recommended for grade retention for the school year of 2010-2011 to be eligible for the summer program of 2010.

The target population for the summer program was now set at any first or second grade student that had received basic skills instruction for the school year of 2009-2010 and any kindergarten student that was recommended for grade retention for the 2010-2011 school year. The next step in organizing the summer program was to develop a letter inviting the students to participate. The letters were sent out at the end of May 2010. A total of 82 letters were sent to the basics skills students in first and second grades, and 21 letters were sent to the retention candidates from kindergarten. After the letters were sent it became a waiting game to see how many replies came back stating they would attend. The waiting game spurred the next conversation that needed to be held, teacher to student ratios.

On June 11, 2010 I met again with the superintendent with my preliminary enrollment data to discuss how many teachers we could hire for the summer program. There were six teachers willing and eager to teach for the summer program, and I wanted to hire them all. This proved to be a leadership challenge in and of itself. My hope was to keep the class sizes small. During the regular school year I advocated for smaller class

sizes to help maximize instruction. The students in the Paulsboro School District had many challenges, and the smaller the class size the more effectively teachers could build relationships, and in turn work to help students focus on academics. The summer program focus was increasing skills so students might benchmark and possibly avoid grade retention. If class size was too large, the instruction would not be able to be focused or prescriptive enough to move students along in the 20 days scheduled. If the class sizes were too large then in many ways we would just be lengthening the school year for the students but not necessarily offering them something new or different from our regular school year approach. This approach in effect had already failed the student, in order to truly intervene; we had to offer something targeted and a true alternative to retention. After discussions with the superintendent, I was denied a 10 to 1 student to teacher ratio. Instead the superintendent said we would have a 15 to 1 ratio with the thought that in the summer time rarely would all 15 students show up at the same time.

The student to teacher ratio that the superintendent insisted upon meant that only four of the teachers would be hired because at the time (June 11, 2010) we had approximately 40 students signed up for the summer program. He and I both anticipated some last minute sign-ups so he felt hiring four teachers would be sufficient. I talked to the perspective teachers on June 14, 2010 and told them I would not be able to use all six of them for the summer program. They were disappointed to say the least, as was evident by their facial expressions. I thought they were very much devoted to helping kids, but also believed because of the economy at the time, they were counting on summer work. Two days after the meeting I had with the teachers telling them I may not be able to employ them all for the summer, one of the potential summer teachers met with me after

school. The teacher started with the standard statement, "I hope you aren't mad at me but.." and she finished with something like she had gone over to the administrative building and met with the administrator (the Director of Assessments, Lucia Pollino) in charge of the Title 1 program, and the administrator thought it was a good idea if we hired all six teachers. The teacher told me that Ms. Pollino was going to talk to the superintendent, and they all would be hired for the summer program. I told the teacher I was not mad; in fact I was very pleased that we would be able to keep the class size lower than anticipated. At this point I realized that the phrase team approach worked from all angles. In addition as noted earlier, our current superintendent was very much theory Y and accepted input and feedback from all levels of the organization. By following his lead, I was not offended by what some might view as going over top of my authority; instead I now realized the value in it. Regardless of who implemented the change, the students benefited. Before initiating a change one must identify all stake holders and mobilize them to the common vision. A stakeholder can be underestimated especially if the leader holds a narrow or underestimated view of the potential sphere of influences the stakeholders have. Never underestimate the possibility of influence.

By June 16, 2010 the Billingsport Summer Program employed six teachers and one part-time secretary. The secretary focused on several aspects of the program. The usual secretary duties of answering the phone and controlling access to the building through the main door with a buzzer system were primary. During the summer program just as during the school year, there were late arrivals and early dismissals. Also, on occasion there were sick children that needed minor first aid or were sent home. More often than not these duties fell on the secretary's shoulders. Other duties the secretary

performed were tracking attendance and making follow-up phone calls. As I mentioned

earlier in this chapter, attendance was always a challenge in Paulsboro, especially during

summer time. The procedure I developed was time intensive but effective. Every morning

the teachers would take attendance in their classrooms and send it to the main office.

Next, the secretary compiled the attendance on a comprehensive spreadsheet that would

track attendance for every student for the entire program. After recording attendance, the

secretary called every absent child's house every day the child did not come to the

program. In this manner we emphasized attendance and let the parents know we wanted

the students to attend every day possible.

The Action

The stage was set for a twenty day summer program that operated Monday

through Thursday 8:00 a.m. to 12 p.m. The educational component hours were 8:30 a.m.

to 11:30 a.m. with free breakfast served from 8-8:30 a.m. and free lunch served from

11:30 a.m. to 12 p.m. The instructional components were equal blocks of reading,

writing, and mathematics. The actual time allotted for these academic components was

one hour each during a three hour program; however, the nature of the more relaxed

atmosphere dictated that each instructional block actually be approximately 45 minutes in

duration. There were several reasons for structuring the program around three 45 minute

blocks instead of three one-hour blocks. First, the students needed frequent bathroom

breaks and water breaks. In addition Billingsport Elementary School did not have air-

conditioned classrooms, and the summer months were very heat oppressive inside the

school. As such, the teachers were able to utilize the school library which was air

conditioned. The teachers were able to develop a rotation schedule that allowed all the

classes at least one hour in the air-conditioned library each day. Addressing the summer heat was important for student comfort and safety as well as overall educational performance.

The focus for instruction was the next detail that needed to be addressed. In terms of interventions, the summer program needed to be as prescriptive as possible for each student because the entire program was only twenty days long and three hours in duration. I called upon two key district personnel to develop the focus for instruction. The district had employed a math coach and a language arts coach since the 2006-2007 school year. The positions were created as a result of the associated pressure from the state department of education in reference to the Collaborative Assessment for Planning and Achievement (CAPA) process because of not making adequate yearly progress on the state mandated tests in math and language arts. After meeting with both coaches, individual learning paths were created. Each student in Billingsport school grades kindergarten to second grade was given a Diagnostic Reading Assessment each October and April in a pre-post format. The DRA test was used initially to develop guided reading groups and to determine an independent and an instructional reading level. Its purpose was to identify students' reading levels, defined as a text on which students meet specific criteria in terms of accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. This level guided the teachers and the students when picking leveled books for the student to read independently and while being guided during small group reading instruction. The students were placed by DRA level in their summer classes, and the teachers were matched with their group of students based on the experience they had teaching reading at that level. The DRA test gave a reading level and also provided the teacher a focus for instruction to use to

advance the student to the next level. Students were organized in flexible groups daily or weekly depending upon what skills they needed.

Mathematics instruction was based upon the pre and post assessments used during the regular school year. The mathematics series used at Billingsport Elementary school since 2006-2007 was EnVisions Mathematics. The pre-test was given in November, and the post test was given in May. The results were mapped, and once again each student had a list of the items that they needed to master to become proficient for that grade level. The summer mathematics learning path was generated as a result of the areas the students scored in need of improvement. Across the board every student was in need of instruction on money, addition and subtraction, and telling time. These were areas of general focus that all students in the summer program in first and second grades benefited from. At the end of the 20 day summer program, all students present were given another DRA reading test and a mini math assessment. These were the basis for assessment of academic growth.

Every attempt was made to match the students' needs with the expertise of the teaching staff. With a program of twenty days, there was no time to develop a learning curve. Each teacher needed to hit the ground running and deliver prescriptive instruction from day one. Transparency in leadership is very important and in addition helps build leadership capacity in the teachers as well (Evans, 1996). The teachers involved in the summer program were well aware of the sense of urgency when it came to providing intervention services to the students. The program, which had never existed before in the Paulsboro District, was created specifically as an endeavor to meet the needs of the below level students and thus addressed the achievement gap. This was very serious business,

and the best teachers were selected and utilized based on what was best for teaching and learning. In addition, operating in the four frames of Bolman and Deal (2008) required that the political frame be considered if you were concerned with the allocation of resources, and any continuation of developing alternatives to grade retention required additional resources. In other words the perceived success of this program was the precursor for any additional programs or grade retention alternatives, and the implementation was handled in a careful manner.

Analysis of Results of the Summer Program

The analysis of results revolved around the DRA reading level of each child. Teachers most often cited reading levels at the beginning and the end of the year as their main reason for retention (Bonvin, Bless, & Schuebach, 2008). The students at Billingsport Elementary School were given the DRA test in October and again in April. Many students, but not all, were given the test at least one other time during the school year. The students that were tested more frequently were the students that may be recommended for grade retention for the next year. Additionally, if a teacher was considering moving a student from one level of guided reading group to the next higher level group but was not absolutely sure about their decision, they re-tested.

Since I started working as the principal of Billingsport, I insisted that if a teacher recommended retention that they must conference with the parents in January and tell them about the possibility of retention. There must be absolutely no surprises when it came to a retention recommendation, and many teachers gave an additional reading test in January to confirm or deny their thoughts about retention and used the DRA results during the parent conferences. My policy on retention was no surprises, and I would

rather the teacher mention it in January and retract it in May or June, but never surprise

the parent with the retention decision. My policy on informing the parents early caused

the teachers to utilize the DRA testing in the middle of the year to help them with the

very difficult process of formulating a retention decision. Since much emphasis was

placed on the DRA reading level in helping determine retention decisions, it was logical

that the DRA scores also be used to determine if summer school had contributed to

growth that indicated the student could be promoted. The data analysis for this cycle

revolved around DRA reading level as tested and recorded the week of August 2, 2010

(the last week of the 2010 summer program).

The average attendance rate for students in the summer program was 76% for the

entire twenty day program. This statistic included students who were absent because of

vacations and did not include anyone who attended two classes or less. Summer is

traditionally a time for families to go on vacations and visit with family and friends.

Summer attendance rates were much lower than the average school year attendance rate

of 93%. Any analysis of academic achievement must take into consideration this

important limitation. The initial data analysis then focused on correlating the days of

attendance by the student with the increment of reading growth. In other words, the more

time spent in the program translated into greater reading level growth. This correlation

was not proven out through analysis of the data. I was not able to statistically link

reading growth with days of attendance. Some students attended infrequently and

improved several reading levels, and others attended frequently and showed no growth

between April 2010 and the end of the summer program on August 5, 2010. This non-

correlation between summer program attendance and reading level growth is supported

by chart 1. Chart 1 offers a selection of students with the highest attendance rates and also shows their DRA reading levels for April 2010 and July 2010. The student who had attended 19 of 20 days of the program kept the same DRA score from April to July, and all others shown improved at least one reading level. Conversely, one student attended the program for nine days and increased one full reading level. It was difficult to assert that the growth of one reading level was the result of nine days of a program that offered roughly 45 minutes a day of reading instruction.
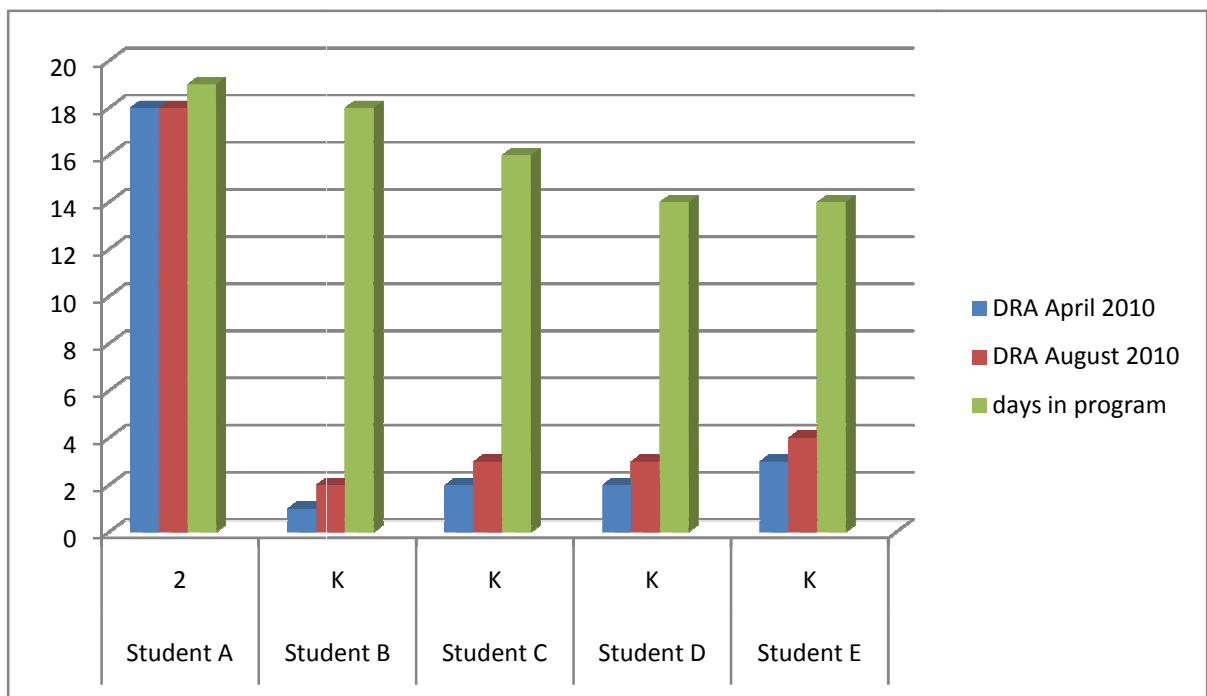
Figure 1   Individual Student Reading Growth

As a principal I had always subscribed to the mantra that the more time you spend in school, the more you achieved academically. This statistical analysis was a disappointment to say the least. In addition, I wished this project to be sustained over time and to become part of our "new normal" in the Paulsboro School District. I not only wanted this summer program to continue year after year, but I also wanted to advocate

for additional programs. The avenue of promoting the summer program from the statistical analysis of days present related to academic growth was a dead end.

The next analysis would revolve around overall reading level performance unrelated to any other variables. Both charts 2 and 3 focus on overall reading levels as assessed and recorded the week of August 2, 2010 and uses reading levels from April 2010 as the baseline for measuring the growth.
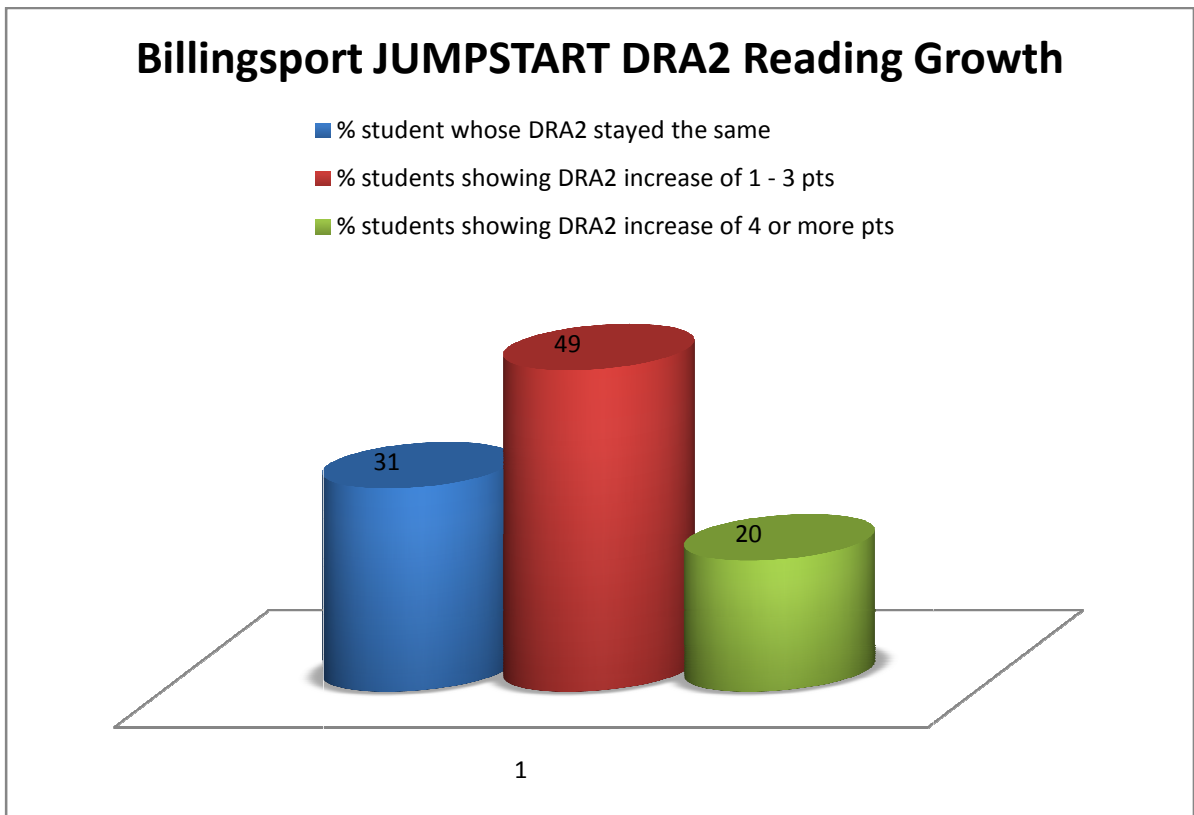
Figure 2   Overall Reading Growth

The overall reading growth can be determined by charts 2 and 3. These charts show the same statistics in two different formats. Both show the overall effectiveness of the summer program as determined by reading level growth. The students who showed reading growth were divided into two tiers, those who showed one to three points of growth, and those who showed more than four points of growth on the DRA reading test.

Statistically 49% of the students increased their reading level by one to three points. In addition 20% of the summer students increased their DRA reading levels by four or more points of growth. Overall, 69% of the students involved in the summer program increased their reading levels from the April 2010 testing (chart 3). This analysis would be my selling point for sustainability and future programs. As mentioned earlier some student showed no growth whatsoever from April 2010 to August 2010. Statistically 31% of the students attending the summer program showed no growth as measured by their DRA score.
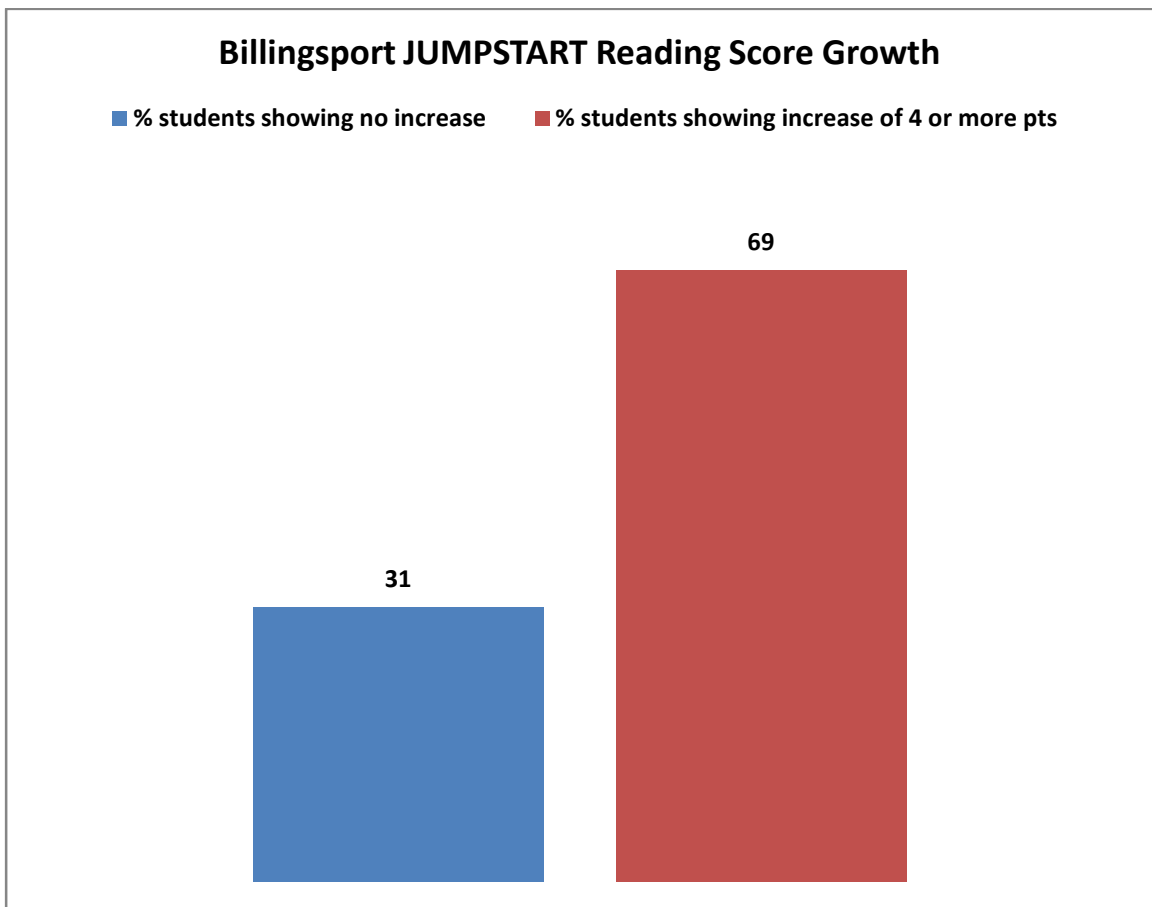
Figure 3 Overall Reading Growth

Frequently teachers comment on how their classes are doing on DRA reading tests throughout the school year. Often times after the October testing, the teachers compared the previous year's score to the current score. This is easily accomplished because the total DRA folder follows the child. It contains every test and score the child has had inside of it. Often times the teachers pointed out when a student scored lower in October of the current year than they did in April of the previous year. The comments sometimes revolved around the possibility of the teacher giving the student too many clues as the teacher was testing thus inflating the score somewhat. I instead pointed out to the teachers that summer brain drain can have such an impact on students. From this perspective, the growth shown in the summer program is, if nothing else, a counteraction to the possible academic loss some students suffer because of the summer months.

I also analyzed reading growth to determine average, maximum, minimum, and mean growth, as can be seen in chart 4.

Billingsport JUMPSTART LAL Pre-Post DRA2 Results

	MEAN (without outliers) ==>	MODE	MEDIAN	MIN	MAX	ST DEV
■ Series1	2.35	0	2	0	8	2.50
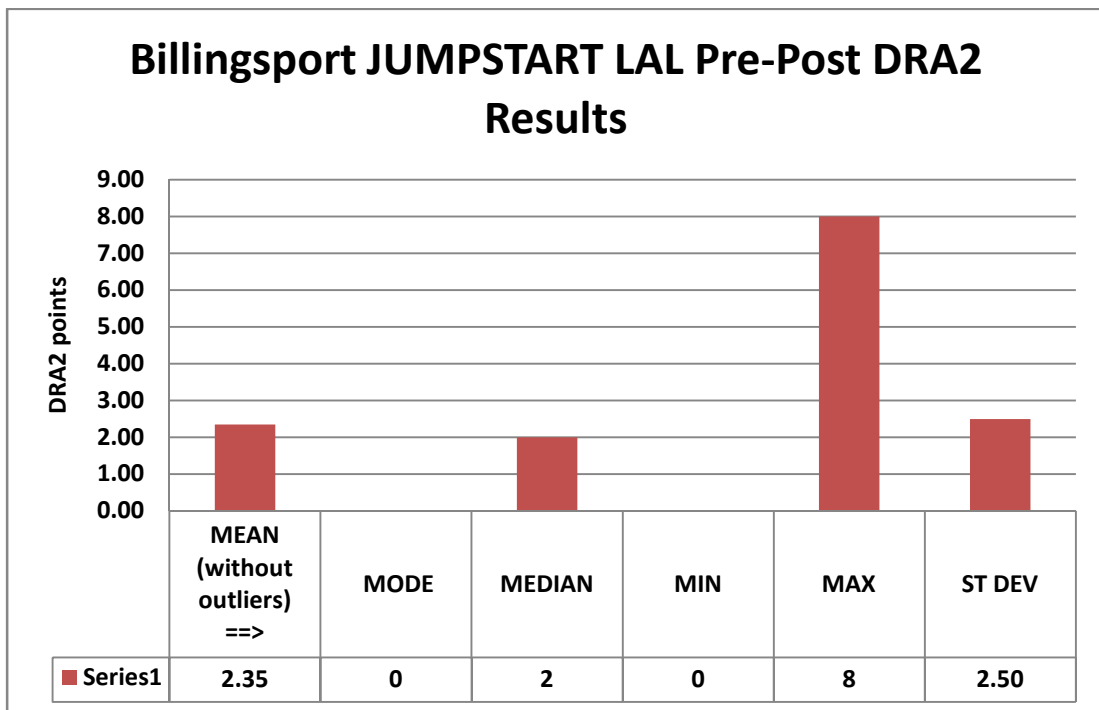
Figure 4   Overall Reading Growth Max and Min

The summer program offered individualized instruction in a small class setting. The program was intensive. By the end of the twenty day program, students and faculty alike were beginning to show worse for wear. Many students were commenting about siblings and friends who were not coming to summer school and were doing other things. Teachers were beginning to show the blank stares that indicate they were in need of a break as well. The intense heat without air-conditioning also had an effect. Both the staff and the students needed to recharge their batteries before the 2010-2011 school year started. The program was over, and it was obvious most students improved their reading, but how did the program impact grade retention?

Reflection

The hope behind the summer program was that it would offer a best practice alternative to grade retention at Billingsport Elementary School. At the end of the 2009-2010 school year there were 43 students school wide from grades kindergarten through second that were recommended for grade retention. All of these students were invited to attend the summer program. The total population of the summer program was 67 students. Of the 67 students that attended the summer program, nineteen of them were recommended by their teacher for grade retention. The 48 students that attended the summer program that were not retention candidates were invited because they were in need of basic skills but not recommended for grade retention. Of the total target population of 43 retention candidates 44% actually attended the program.

In the last week of the program, a letter from the office signed by me went to every home reminding the program would come to an end and that if they wished they

could schedule a meeting with me to discuss student progress. The only parents of the 67 students that did schedule a meeting with me were those whose children were recommended for retention. All together six parents scheduled meetings. At each parent meeting we sat together and reviewed summer school student portfolios and testing results. After completion of summer school and the parent meetings, six students of the nineteen students were moved to the next grade and the rest were continued to be recommended for retention. At this point I felt very good about our alternative to retention, and next my attentions moved towards opening school in September of 2010.

As the school year unfolded, I continued to think about the students that were retained as well as those who were promoted as a result of the summer program. By October 2010 (DRA reading test month) two separate teachers approached me about students they had concerns with who had come through the summer program. As we talked in each separate occasion the teachers asked why these two students were promoted because their reading levels indicated they should have been retained. In each case I showed them the student's portfolio of work and the testing results, but they still felt strongly that they were not performing at grade level at that time (October 2010). What had happened?

My analysis of the situation revolved around the differences between summer school and the normal school year. The summer school environment offered a very small class size with very prescriptive instruction. In addition the instruction was on the student's level, each summer class was grouped according to level, and they were homogenously grouped according to reading level. The normal school year had an average class size of 22 students, and they were grouped heterogeneously according to

reading levels. In essence I had created an instructional environment that I could not

sustain during the school year. I was happy and sad at the same time. We all worked hard

to create a great learning environment for the students and it worked, but it was not

sustainable. My next cycles had to focus on the best aspects of summer school but be

deliverable during the school year.

Cycle Three: Customer Service

Introduction/Context

Paulsboro School District was classified as a District Factor Group A school. Essentially this was a struggling community both financially and academically. Billingsport had over 68% free and reduced lunch students. The upper grade level schools have failed to make Annual Yearly Performance for four years. The United States Department of Education Institute for Education Sciences reported that in the 2008-2009 school year, Billlingsport had 3 Asian/Pacific Islander students, 214 African-American students, 40 Hispanic students, and 110 Caucasian students (2009). The staff is primarily Caucasian, middle-class, and college educated. The overall purpose of cycle 3 was engaging in a critical discourse that enabled the staff of the Interventions and Referral Services Team (I&RS) to better relate to the population they served (Freire, 2008).

Identified Need

The staff did not consist of the same ethnic/cultural diversity as the students. I addressed this disparity in social capital and experiences between the faculty and the population we served (Freire, 2008). The Intervention and Referral Services Team (I&RS) is responsible for working closely with the parents/guardians of struggling learners, and often when parents come in and talked to us about their life story and history, the staff could not relate (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). The staff was all college educated and most came from middle-class families. Very few of our parents were college educated. We only had one African-American female teacher, one African-

American female social worker, no Hispanic or Asian staff, and approximately 25

Caucasian staff. Of those 25 Caucasian staff, 22 were female and 3 were male. The staff

lacked diversity in ethnicity, gender, and socio-economics when compared to the

population we serve. The need for a diversity initiative was identified through

observation of the I&RS interactions with parents as well as general observation of staff

ethnicity and gender.

Action Plan

I conducted a book study with the I&RS team in the months of October,

November, and December 2010. The book we studied was Ruby K. Payne's *A

Framework for Understanding Poverty* (2005). I intended to help participants recognize

multiple contexts that are affected by political, social, cultural, historical, and economic

realities (Delpit, 1995; Freire, 2008). Ultimately, I hoped to increase awareness through

dialogues that may emerge from the theories and scenarios presented in the book. The

plan was to have our group meet during I&RS meeting times every two weeks and cover

three chapters per meeting. If this worked for the group members, we would have then

covered the book in three meetings. I planned to evaluate and assess the objectives and

outcomes through informal interviews of the I&RS team as well as observations of the

team's interactions with families during the I&RS meetings.

Environment

I have served multiple roles within the district including teacher, administrator,

and taxpaying resident. These various roles enabled me to examine the district from

various viewpoints. I worked as principal at Billingsport Elementary School in Paulsboro,

New Jersey. The 2010-2011 school year was my fifth year in this position. Prior to my

administrative path, I taught chemistry and physics at Paulsboro High School. I worked

in the district for a total of fourteen years. I was aware of many of the individual struggles

that took place in Paulsboro and became emotionally attached to this community and

school district.

Being empathetic involves listening first before reacting and giving feedback

(Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002). Schools often conduct themselves from a platform

of middle class norms and use the hidden rules of middle class norms not taught in

schools to help children be successful (Payne, 2005). The perception of the underlying

attitude during I&RS meetings conducted over my four previous years as principal was

frequently one of the banking model of education (Freire, 1970). During the I&RS

meetings the parents would come in and we would listen but possibly not hear them, and

then we would deposit them with information. We knew everything and they knew

nothing. This is an over simplification of the identified need and was not espoused at the

meetings, but was however an underlying assumption made during the after-meeting

conversations (Bolman, & Deal 2008).

Planned Intervention/Initiative

As Freire (2008) states, there is no such thing as a neutral educational process;

you are either part of the solution or part of the problem. To become a social justice ally

you first need to engage a social justice discourse in order to increase your awareness and

challenge your own critical situational awareness (Freire, 2008). The staff did not consist

of the same ethnic/cultural diversity as the students and therefore was challenged by its

own culturally clouded visions (Delpit, 1995). To assume anything was dangerous.

During this cycle, I talked to many staff members about social reproduction and

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culturally clouded thinking, and I was reminded that I could not assume that my staff

comes from homes where support for education is the norm. During one interview I made

the comment that our staff is mostly white, middle class, and probably comes from

families that supported education at home. A teacher responded that I was wrong, and

that her father gave her a hard time when she did homework instead of helping out

around the house. I learned to keep this in mind as we moved forward in the cycle.

To address the disparity in social capital and experiences between the faculty and the

population we served, the Intervention and Referral Services Team (I&RS) was targeted

for this initiative. The team was responsible for working closely with the

parents/guardians of struggling learners, and often when the parents came in and talked to

us about their life story and history, we found that their challenges were virtually

unknown to those of us from the middle class. Frequently the dire situations that were

involved brought out a survival mentality that was often times misconstrued as hostility, a

lack of interest in education, or an undeserved sense of entitlement. One example that

comes to my mind occurred two days before I began writing this chapter. As I stood

holding open our front door greeting students at 7:30 a.m., a second grade African-

American girl said, "Mr. Neff, I am in the newspaper, do you want to see it?" I replied,

"Sure, that is great! Can I see?" The little girl then proceeded to pull out a newspaper

clipping that she was pictured in because her father was murdered, and she was at the

candlelight vigil holding a picture of him and crying. In my mind if she was in the paper,

I thought it would be something good, as opposed to the murder of her father. The impact

that had on me was profound. I could not assume, as had happened many times before,

that the little girl was going to show me an award or sports achievement as opposed to the

somber reality that her father was murdered. Only by exposure to other worlds would we be able to step outside ourselves and our beliefs to allow the perspectives of others to penetrate our worlds. As such the I&RS team used the book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (Payne, 2005) as a launching pad for social justice discourse.

Leadership for Social Justice

The natures of the teaching and principal positions require certain human resource panache. Therefore, while I tend to lead from structural, logical, and scientific perspectives, I believe that the nature of the education field shapes the teacher and leader into human resource leaders. Human resource leaders emphasize the importance of people and relationships (Bolman, & Deal, 2008), and education is all about people and relationships (Fullan, 2007). Human resource leaders realize the importance of coaching, motivation and teamwork (Bolman, & Deal, 2008). These three things are vital to the success of a learner, employee, sports player, and anyone that is part of a larger group or system. I believed in leading by commitment and example rather than by compliance. A good leader serves as a role model who leads by example, which will in turn motivate the staff. This creates a more positive working and learning environment than the environment that is created when the administrator relies on subordination and disciplinary actions to coerce the employee into compliance. I feel my efforts in creating a positive working environment have paved the way for a book study designed to develop a more empathetic I&RS team. I chose this project for cycle 3 as a result of my feelings on leadership and social justice. As a leader I must constantly model the model. I felt that as the principal, I was able to lead the book study and take the I&RS team along for a journey to social justice enlightenment. I was somewhat flawed in this line of reasoning.

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Creating Social Justice

Ultimately in defining social justice, Dantley and Tillman (2010) acknowledge not only the need for practice but also the need to recognize multiple contexts within education and educational leadership. Public schools are influenced by race, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and politics, just to name a few. This makes the creation and implementation of justice very complex. It is that very complexity that makes practice so essential to fully understand, so theory and practice need to have a working relationship. Dantley and Tillmann (2010) further purport that, "Social justice demands deconstructing those realities in order to disclose the multiple ways schools and their leadership reproduce marginalizing and inequitable treatment of individuals because their identities are outside the dominant culture." Often this is seen in the form of tracking. Students that have little family support and economic hardships are often at a disadvantage coming in to the school system. Often their skills are below average because these skills are not being reinforced at home. When a school merely puts that child into a remedial track, but does not offer a program to help advance that student, they are not only reproducing inequitable treatment, but they are also committing what MacLeod (1987) describes as social reproduction.

Neumann (2009) proposes that a socially just ally is a person from the dominant class that is aware of the implications of social reproduction and is working in his or her professional and personal lives to advocate for the oppressed. As a dominant class member, influence and control are derived from "position power" as a byproduct of unearned privileges resulting from membership in a particular social class or majority (Ciulla, 2003). Faculty members have been conditioned to think that they bring an

objective perspective to the classroom; however, in keeping with the philosophy of a social justice ally we need to be aware of our own identities and how they are reflected to the student body (Neumann, 2009).

Being a social justice ally is like walking on egg shells (Neumann, 2009). In order to change people must unlearn by engaging in meaningful dialogue during the unlearning process that will in turn help to reconstruct social identity paradigms. The dialogue necessary to unlearn and reform new paradigms can be highly controversial and sensitive in nature. To be an active participant in changing social isolation and marginalization a consistent and conscious effort must be put into action despite the potential pitfalls. It is in the best interest of everyone to try to be a social justice ally and fail then to be indifferent.

This cycle was an attempt to try to be a social justice ally. There is no such thing as a neutral education process (Freire, 1970). Educational leadership must not be indifferent; the model must show a consistent effort to break the chain of social reproduction through a better awareness of the social identity paradigms and their potential for harm.

Objectives/Outcomes

In order for an organization to move towards a more socially just mindset, staff must engage in deconstruction of their realities so they can better understand the world of others. For this initiative I created a working relationship between theory and practice through socially just discourse as a result of participating in a book study. The book chosen for the I&RS team to study was Ruby K. Payne's *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (2005).

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The I&RS team at Billingsport school was composed of three white men (myself included) and five women, four of which were white and one was African American. The I&RS team was composed of the following positions within the school: social worker (African American, female), speech specialist (white, female), school nurse (white, female), school counselor (white, male), special education inclusion teacher (white, male), two basic skills teachers (both white, female), and the school principal (white, male). The team was not reflective of the population we served in terms of diversity of race or ethnicity. There was little that could be done to mitigate this issue since the team had to be comprised of staff from Billingport, and the overall staff at Billingsport was representative of the team.

To meet this identified need, the book *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* was chosen because the book presents scenarios or case studies of persons from poverty. Before discussing the scenarios, the book offered operational definitions of topics such as: generational poverty, the language of the oppressed, the language of the establishment, and social reproduction. Once the team was exposed to a common language, the plan was to review the specific case studies of generational poverty so that we might better relate to the people we served.

To measure the outcomes I used anecdotal records of staff conversations during and after the I&RS meetings during the months of November and December 2010. There were five meetings per month with a total of ten meetings. In addition, I informally interviewed each team member at the end of December 2010. I chose to informally interview the staff because I felt it would garner the best results. During past action research conducted at Billingsport as a part of cycle one, I felt teachers were saying what

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they thought I wanted to hear. The data was tainted in part by the influence of positional power. As a result I interviewed seven I&RS team members informally, and the structured protocol was one question. By using one question I wished to have a conversation instead of a question and answer session with the principal. For this cycle I wished to determine if the members of the I&RS team had changed their ability to relate to people with different experiences and background than theirs. The question asked of every team member was, "What if anything have you learned as a result of participating in the book study?"

Elements of the Project

The books for the study were purchased in early October 2010 and distributed to all the team members. The plan was to have our group meet during I&RS meeting times every two weeks and cover three chapters per meeting. If this worked for the group members, we would have then covered the book in three meetings. This plan was not as successful as I had hoped. The major issue that stopped planned progress was the heavily increased volume of I&RS referrals that we had to evaluate. During the 2009-2010 school year, the team did not receive the first student referral until late October, with a total of ten referrals by the end of December 2009. This school year (2010-2011) however, the team received 34 referrals by November 18, 2010.

Why the radical increase in referrals to the I&RS team? Cycle four of my dissertation research was the creation of an afterschool tutoring program. I had been trying to institute this tutoring program for several years and finally received superintendent and board of education approval in September 2010. One of the selling points I made during my pitch to the superintendent and the school business administrator

was that the I&RS team would handle referrals to the after-school tutoring program. The tutoring program was funded with $20,000.00 and the team would track referrals and monitor progress as an accountability measure. During this very tumultuous time in terms of school funding, I was elated to get this project off the ground. In addition, I felt there was great potential to offer targeted intervention to struggling learners. The unforeseen down side to the success of one of my dissertation cycles was an increased work load for another cycle of research, in all a good problem to have. The sheer volume of referrals tremendously strained the team. The team members all had other key positions at Billingsport School, or what I referred to as their "day jobs". The team now had to work over time to catch up on the volume of referrals.

The first two chapters of the book study went well. The staff all read the chapters and we met to discuss. During this discussion the team was able to operationally define poverty and resource issues. In addition, we began to apply this common language to the population we served. This important first step was a success, but the success was short lived as we were unable to keep to the planned schedule for the book study. At this point the team lost momentum as we refocused our efforts on meeting with teachers and parents. The team had to add an additional day to meet each week. Normally the team would meet every Friday if necessary, but we increased our meeting schedule to every Monday and Friday during November and December 2010.

In order to revive the project, I asked for help. I spoke to a fellow administrator in my district; Ms. Lucia Pollino was the Director of Assessment for the Paulsboro School District and the former principal of Paulsboro High School. Ms. Pollino was also a doctoral candidate, and we often times discussed our various projects and research.

Through one of our scholarly conversations, we discussed my diversity initiative using the book *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* by Dr. Payne (2005). During this discussion in late October 2010, I learned that Ms. Polino was scheduled to attend a workshop in Maryland given by none other than Dr. Ruby Payne. The workshop was centered on her new book *Research Based Strategies: Narrowing the Achievement Gap for Under-Resourced Students* (2009). I now had a plan.

For phase two of this initiative I asked Ms. Pollino to meet with the team. Due to the intense schedule for the team I did not want to add one more thing for them to do, so I searched for a way to add this to the schedule in a sensitive manner. The district was scheduled to participate in a countywide professional development in-service on November 3, 2010. The plan now was to try to get approval for the team to meet with Ms. Pollino and share new ideas from her recent workshop with Dr. Payne and continue on our mission.

In order to proceed I found myself back in the superintendent's office again. I must say that I was very fortunate to work with a supportive superintendent. He has continually supported my personal academic efforts and offered advice and personal anecdotes from his doctoral quest. Again I was not disappointed by his response; I was allowed to schedule the team to meet with Ms. Pollino to continue our book study on November 3, 2010. Ms. Pollino presented a power point presentation with a handout, and best of all she was given extra copies of the new book by Dr. Payne herself and passed them on to the team. The presentation was very well received especially because of the more relaxed atmosphere of the in-service day versus a normal day of school with the multiple distractions associated with all of us having to still contend with our "day jobs."

To measure the outcomes of the efforts to become more aware of under-resourced learners, I was able to observe the interactions of the team during meetings for the remainder of November and December. Team meetings were held on November 12th, 15th, 19th, 23rd, 29th and December 3rd, 6th, 10th, 13th and 17th of 2010. I recorded my thoughts and observations in a journal during and after the team meetings in November and December. I felt I was able to actively journal during meetings without raising the level of concern for other team members because all team members took notes during the meetings. As mentioned many times during this action research study, I was keenly aware of my influence as a result of positional power connected to principalship. Often times I recognized that staff members would be very aware when I wrote things down. As principal, I observed every staff member yearly and used a note pad to do so, as a result I contributed to a culture that "perked up" when the note taking started.

Leading up to and informing this cycle, I noted that team conversations after the parents left the meetings were occasionally defensive, accusatory, and overall negative in nature (Argyris, 1990). The notion for this book study grew from uncomfortable feeling I experienced when I listened to these comments. Instead of commenting directly in response to my feelings I chose to offer an opportunity for enlightenment instead of suppression. The majority of students were referred to the I&RS team because they were performing significantly below level academically. The team listened to the teacher's academic summary, and then the parents commented. Often times the parents would elaborate on their personal and family struggles. Sometime the conversation would include medical, financial, psychological, legal, and substance abuse issues. After the parents left the team would continue to discuss and process the information as we

developed interventions for the students involved. On several occasions prior to initiating

the book study, two different team members made comments that questioned if the

parents had a sense of entitlement or were not working hard enough for their families.

One I&RS team member said:

I had two children, and I worked my way through school, and we did it. People

need to do for themselves and pull themselves up by the bootstraps.

This sentiment is shared by many in society; many question the work ethic of

others as they are pushed to work harder themselves. Another team member commented,

"The more you give people, the more they want. If you stop giving, they will have to start

doing for themselves." The comments made by various I&RS team members were

disheartening, but they were not perceived by me as hate or contempt. Instead they were

perceived as a misguided version of "tough love." I felt this reasoning was flawed

because I felt no matter how objective people say they were, underlying beliefs come

through either in facial or verbal expression. Once people feel you are not listening or

have already made up your mind, the relationship building process essential for change is

curtailed (Fullan, 2007). I noted comments such as these during three separate I&RS

meetings during May 2010, however I did not note any comments such as these after the

book study was initiated in October of 2010. I was pleased to conclude that team

members had grown in depth of understanding of others, were less judgmental, and were

more open-minded and supportive. A limitation of this study was that it was very difficult

to measure individual growth on such a sensitive issue. As the principal, I was leading the

book study; therefore, if I picked the book it was something I thought was important. The

real measure of success was if the participants changed not only their espoused beliefs

but also changed their underlying assumptions. I was not able to determine if the team actually grew or if the members became increasingly aware of my views and did not speak their mind at meeting because I was there.

After the book study was over, I informally interviewed each I&RS team member individually. The seven interviews were conducted in the third week of December 2010. The interviews were conducted at Billingsport School in either the classroom or office of the individual being interviewed. The interview consisted of one structured question, "What if anything, have you learned as a result of participating in the book study?" Each team member indicated that they had learned something. The common response was that they learned not to assume that they knew what other people had to go through. One team member indicated that they were more empathetic as a result of the book study by saying:

> I have never had to choose between paying the heating bill or paying for food. If I had that experience, I think it would give me a different perspective.

Another team member indicated they had learned that in some families living with generational poverty, money is closely associated with love; money is something to be shared. As such, money is not saved but used as soon as you get it to buy things for those you care about because you will never get ahead so when you get extra money you spend it. She went on to say that in her family you saved money for those you loved for a "rainy day." This difference in view point contributes to the misunderstandings about cultures (Payne, 2005).

Five of the seven interviewed mentioned that they learned that fighting or having someone who will fight for you is important to survival in poverty. In addition, fighting for someone shows them that they are loved and worth fighting for. Many times violence

is used because words may not be respected or effective. On one occasion as principal, I asked a mother of a second grade student to meet with the classroom teacher. The student was two grade levels below in reading and in need of academic intervention. I asked two basic skills teachers and the resource room teacher to meet with us as well. The parent came into the office where four teachers were waiting to discuss what we could do to help the situation; the parent immediately took a defensive posture and clenched her fists. She immediately responded, "Where I come from, if this many people want to meet with you it is a serious problem." I assured her that I had assembled a team of experts so we could help her son in the best manner possible. Throughout the meeting the parent was visibly irritated and from that point forward I viewed large groups of school staff differently when considering the parent's perspective.

The outcomes of the project were multifaceted. The team did develop a common core language which we then used to engage in socially just discourse. In addition, the team was able to connect what we did to current trends and research through the timely workshop presented by Ms. Pollino. The added benefit was a heightened awareness of under-resourced learners and the role social reproduction plays in the lack of academic achievement. Several team members shared the sentiment that they had a better understanding of empathy versus sympathy and that you can never really walk a mile in someone else's shoes. Another epiphany was that people of poverty, especially generational poverty, live in the moment; it is very hard for them to plan for the future. Once in survival mode it may not be beneficial to look too far in advance.

During this cycle, I learned more about the personal lives of the team members than I did about diversity issues in general. During the individual interview stage of the

project, the team members opened up, and I learned once again that I cannot assume anything. One team member told me that the member's father robbed a gas station on Christmas Day when she/he was six years old so he could buy Christmas gifts for the family. Several hours later the police came in and arrested the mom and dad and put the children in foster care. As a result Christmas has been a time of sadness instead of joy. She/he may be a well-educated middle class professional, but she/he has first-hand experience with generational poverty.

Although all I&RS team members indicated they improved their ability to relate to people of different demographics, an undertone of cultural mismatch was lingering. Cultural changes can occur but the difficulty is often underestimated. A change in cultural patterns requires new thinking, big pictures, and rebuilt paradigms (Evans, 1996). For some this never occurs; for others it takes a lifetime. This cycle just scratched the surface of cultural change but as a collective we are better off having tried to move towards an increased social justice conscience (Freire, 1970).

Reflection

As a result of this study I have been made keenly aware of the impact I have as the principal to influence the feedback loop. This influence can be used in many ways to improve the overall efficiency and atmosphere of Billingsport Elementary School; however, I am now very certain that as the principal my presence can also be a hindrance to the communication process. I must strive to continually find ways to differentiate my avenues for feedback after analysis of which methods work best with the various individuals and groups within the feedback loop. For some, one-on-one conversations work to gain open feedback, for others a survey would be best for honest and open

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communications, and still others would feel more comfortable with participation in a small focus group atmosphere.

At the core of this project was the idea that no significant learning can take place without a significant relationship. If a teacher is going to truly create an atmosphere of shared learning that flows in both directions, then a meaningful relationship must be established with each of his or her pupils (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Fullan, 2007). Similarly if a principal is interested in developing a second order change of any type, he or she must first take the time necessary to develop meaningful relationships with the faculty long before the change initiative is considered. Just as educators point to the fact there is no one cookie cutter approach to learning, there is no one way to establish a rapport with a group of teachers. Instead a differentiated approach must be developed so that the relationships do not seem contrived and situational in nature. Once again, people do not care how much you know until they know how much you care (Boykin & Noguera, 2011).

Communication is a major theme repeated throughout the interview process of this cycle. In order to advance the communication between school and home some roadblocks need to be addressed. During analysis of the data it became evident that there was an underlying assumption that the parents of some of the students were not keeping up with their parental responsibilities when it came to working with their children on academics at home. As mentioned earlier in this section, often under-resourced learners have under-resourced parents (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). To keep the home-school connection moving forward, this underlying assumption needs to be addressed and explored. One way to communicate the necessary information required to build a better

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relationship with these parents could be a book study for the faculty as a whole. One book to consider would be *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (2005) written by Dr. Ruby Payne. The book discusses how poverty impacts learning, work habits, and decision making. The reality of living in poverty brings out a survival mentality and turns attention away from opportunities taken for granted by people in middle and upper class. This could start discussions on the how and why questions that seem to be roadblocks to building significant relationships with the parents. An expert from *A Framework for Understating Poverty* (Payne, 2005) says:

Most teachers today come from middle-class backgrounds. In an educational setting, economic class differences create conflict and challenges for both teachers and students alike. Designed for educators at all levels, but helpful to counselors, administrators, and support staff as well, this seminar provides practical, real-world support and guidance for overcoming barriers and helping others succeed.

Through the above mentioned book and personal experiences in the district, I realized how dire the situation is for students who do not have strong family support and how such support can make such a significant impact on the young child's performance and life in general. Sadly, this is the situation that affected a large percentage of my students. The final cycle of research (cycle four) pursued after-school tutoring. The after-school tutoring was academic in nature but was also closely related to mentoring. When the students to teacher ratios are kept low (one teacher to three students) then a special relationship can be fostered that extends beyond what the classroom has to offer (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). Researchers cite that teacher-student relationship quality (TSRQ)

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significantly impacts the ability to close the achievement gap. When teacher to student

ratios are kept low the teacher can come to better understand the student and ultimately

fill the gap that may be missing at home. The higher the level of TSRQ the more likely

the teachers are to display empathy, support, encouragement and praise. In essence

academics and social-emotional aspects can be more efficiently addressed in the small

group setting (Boykin & Noguera, 2011).

Chapter 8

Cycle Four: After-School Tutoring Program

Introduction

As soon as the data was analyzed from cycle two (summer program) I shared it with the superintendent of schools, promoted what we had accomplished and advocated for more interventions. I hoped to offer more of what I proved to be effective in cycle two so we could continue to reduce the number of grade retentions that were occurring year after year. When I met with the superintendent and other key administrators during the months of August 2010 and September 2010, I focused discussions on the summer program and the simple fact that 69% of the students that attended the summer program improved their reading levels. In addition, at very least none of the students attending scored lower on reading test thus avoiding the pitfall of the summer slide and would be better prepared to start school in September. During this time the Director of Curriculum and Instruction, Steve Blake, and the Director of Assessment, Lucia Pollino, were very interested in the positive results of the summer program and became allies in advocating with the superintendent for additional programs.

In referring back to the interviews from cycle one, I realized that the traditional method of offering assistance to the struggling learner revolved around providing extra support in the classroom or to pull students out of the classroom and provide one on one or small group instruction. This method had merit because you were able to meet the students where they were academically speaking; however, the students were usually missing something that the rest of the class was doing and therefore were never really able to catch up. We needed to offer more in addition to all that was offered during the

regular school day so we could increase the possibility of truly catching up with the rest

of the class. Additional support outside of the "normal" school day allowed us to develop

an intervention that was more sustainable than the summer program offered.

Student centered interventions required the schools to provide something

additional or extra for the students that are struggling. If the interventions were provided

during the regular school day, a decision as to what the student is pulled out of must be

made. The school day was already completely accounted for with no built-in free time.

One might think that recess is a time that could be taken from underachieving students,

but it was not ideal. Obesity rates among children were at all time highs, and inactivity

was more the norm than the rare occurrence. With that in mind, recess takes on a new

importance and was needed to meet the state requirements for physical education

mandates as well. Developing interventions that take place during the regular school day

was problematic to say the least. If a student was pulled out of a class to make up basic

skills, then they missed the content that the rest of the class was receiving, and the cycle

continues itself. Thus the students were never able to fully catch up to the rest of the class

(Boykin, &Noguera, 2011). To be student centered, children must be identified early and

worked with immediately at their level. One interviewee during cycle two stated, "We

would be ready to activate a team of resource personnel to carry through

with…interventions". Another respondent thought that after –school tutoring would help

eliminate the need for retention by saying:

> I would definitely incorporate after-school tutoring. I think this would help
>
> improve the academics of those students that are receiving help form the basic
>
> skills team.

Another participant responded similarly saying:

> I would offer tutorial services daily for the students that were struggling so that
> the tools needed to enhance their academics were readily available.

Armed with these teacher comments and the summer school achievement data, I met with the superintendent and business administrator, Jennifer Johnson, in late September 2010 to discuss the possibility of starting an after-school tutoring program as soon as possible. As I was making the case for allocating resources for tutoring, the superintendent, Dr. Scambia, called for Director of Curriculum, Steve Blake, to come into the meeting and we all discussed the possibilities. One question posed by Dr. Scambia was who would oversee the program, and I immediately responded that I would and the Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) Team could handle the approval of services and the parent meeting side of things. They were sold and gave me approval to get started as soon as the Board of Education (BOE) approved the program. I was required to write up the BOE recommendation, and I wrote it saying that I wished to approve all the teachers at Billingsport to be able to work the program if needed. In this manner if a student was recommended for tutoring, I could approach the student's classroom teacher first, and if they were unavailable I could ask any of the other teachers depending upon expertise.

Sometimes it is really hard to predict where a plan or project may take you. Often times there are unforeseen advantages and disadvantages that may take shape. This project started to really gain momentum after the success associated with the summer program (cycle two) was realized. I often said, nothing succeeds like success, and in this case once the snow ball began to roll, it picked up others in its wake. Up to this point my

doctoral research had been somewhat contained to Billingsport Elementary School. I had a lot of control and oversight since I was the principal and sole administrator there. That was to change as a result of my asking for the tutoring. The superintendent liked the idea so much that he also wanted the after-school tutoring plan to extend to Loudenslager Elementary which was the third through sixth grade school in our district.

Expanding the after school tutoring plan beyond Billingsport School was decided by the superintendent without the input of the principal of Loudenslager Elementary School, Mildred Williams; in fact up to that point I knew she was not even aware of the possibility of a tutoring program. I knew this because the principal at Loudenslager and I were very close from a working relationship stand point. For the 2004-2005 school year I was her assistant principal, and we enjoyed an excellent working relationship. As I moved into my principalship, Mildred Williams helped me immensely with all types of issues, and we developed a relationship where we would call each other if we felt the other might forget something or benefit from a cautious word. In other words we watched each other's backs, and that was mutually appreciated. So how would she feel about this additional program thrust upon her as a result my doctoral research? It did come to her as a complete surprise. Instead of letting her find out some other way I chose to call her immediately and give her forewarning. I owed her that much consideration and that is what I would want others to do for me. When one works in an elementary school often times talking to students and asking them, "How would you feel if they did that to you?" is second nature. I try to live my life by that simple thought, and so far it has paid off. I called her and explained the progress I had made on my research and how I was planning to continue it and that the tutoring plan was also considered for her school. Her first

response was to ask how the program would be run or administered because she already had enough on her plate due to the involvement of the Collaborative Assessment and Planning for Achievement Team (CAPA) from the New Jersey Department of Education. As I mentioned, Loudenslager was labeled as a failing school and in need of improvement, and as such Mildred Williams already had much to do as far as restructuring and compliance. My response was that this additional resource could in the long term help with those issues. In addition, my suggestion was to utilize the Intervention and Referral Services Team to manage and help facilitate the after-school tutoring plan. This plan seemed to be somewhat more palatable than just giving the principal one more thing to do.

I did not want to jeopardize the relationship I had with Mildred Williams, and I also did not want to begin to isolate myself in any way as a result of my pursuing a doctoral degree. I did not want this to appear as though I was creating additional work for others while trying to better my situation. The best way to accomplish this was to be transparent in one's plans and explain what I was trying to achieve. I had done this thoroughly at the building level; however, in retrospect I could have done a better job of communicating ideas at the district level. At the start of this doctoral program, I did not foresee my plans taking a district wide approach, and that was an underestimation on my behalf. Overall, this was a good problem to have, but none the less one that needed to be managed. Others in the doctoral cohort shared their frustrations over not being able to get permission to begin any of their work at all, and I was concerned over my program expanding beyond my immediate sphere of influence and what perceptions developed as a result of the broader implementation of the after-school tutoring program. After

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thinking through program implementation with Mildred Williams, I understood that she was much more comfortable with the after-school tutoring. For now this unforeseen land mine was side stepped, but what else was I not able to see?

The Plan

The plan was simple in concept - offer an after- school tutoring plan to struggling students and then determine if the tutoring was an effective means to reduce grade retention. As it turned out, the only thing simple was the initial concept. Although I had been advocating for after-school tutoring for some time, the actual approval came as somewhat of a surprise in terms of how school systems work. Program approval and implementation usually takes months or years, not weeks. As mentioned earlier, 2010 was a turbulent time in education as far as funding. The fact that I was given 20 thousand dollars to run an after-school tutoring session came as a pleasant surprise. In addition, September of any school year is a very busy time; the first month of school is an opportunity to set the tone for the rest of the year, and there is much to do. To begin with I needed to develop a list of teachers willing to work after school. The teachers' contract set after-school pay at 32 dollars per hour and that was not negotiable.

During late September 2010 I mentioned the after-school tutoring at a Billingsport School faculty meeting. The teachers were very excited about this brand new concept and also seemed eager to begin recommending students for the program. During cycle one teacher interviews, one interviewee stated, "We would be ready to activate a team of resource personnel to carry through with…interventions." Another respondent thought that after –school tutoring would help eliminate the need for retention by saying, "I would definitely incorporate after-school tutoring. I think this would help improve the

academics of those students that are receiving help form the basic skills team." Now the program was coming into fruition; however, during the faculty meeting none of the teachers expressed a desire to sign up to be a tutoring teacher. This was anti-climatic to say the least; I was hoping to at least have few teachers express interest immediately. I went on to explain how I was seeking approval for all the teachers at Billingport so that teachers could roll into or out of the program as needed and that they did not have to feel locked into the program. In this manner I was being sympathetic to the idea that things come up in the teachers' personal lives and that we would make every attempt to work through those potential issues. Even though I tried to present the tutoring opportunity in the best light, I still had no takers during the faculty meeting.

Next, I needed to discuss this program with the Intervention and Referral Services Team of which I was the chairperson. The plan I sold the superintendent revolved around the I&RS team managing the after- school tutoring program. The team was created to help provide services to students and assist teachers with those students as well. Some examples of services that were routinely provided by the I&RS Team were speech, occupational therapy, child study team evaluation, basic skills instruction, counseling, or other related services by the school social worker. Most of the cases that came to the team were academic in nature, and the team had limited resources to offer for struggling students. Often the team started the discussion with the parents about the possibility of grade retention. This discussion was almost always a very difficult and stressful situation both for the I&RS team and the parents. During the best case scenario, the discussion would raise the level of the parents' concern and also clearly communicate that we needed to work together to try to help the child and that the parents were key in assisting at home

reinforcing skills. With the advent of after-school tutoring the team had more services to provide and now had a much stronger intervention plan. Now the team could offer services that were outside of the regular school day, a true intervention that was above and beyond what the other students were receiving. Now we were able to directly address needs as were assessed during cycle one of this dissertation.

By offering after-school tutoring that was approved and recommended by the I&RS team, we had a team of personnel that were ready to carry out academic intervention in the form of after-school tutoring. The I&RS Team started to receive referrals at the end of October 2010. In previous years we did not receive our first referrals until November; I attribute the change to the fact the team was now authorized to offer after-school tutoring. It was great that we were receiving referrals, but I was very concerned because I still had not heard from any teachers that were interested in teaching the tutoring program. At this point a teacher, that often gave me friendly advice, visited my office and in confidence and explained that the teachers were not showing interest in the program because they had not yet settled their contract and were advised to not do anything "extra." The teachers were working under an expired contract, and the union leadership felt the teachers should stand united and send a message by not doing the extras that they usually so freely do. My immediate comment to the teacher who had confided in me was that I did not view it as something extra if you were offered payment, especially at the contractual union rate of 32 dollars per hour. The teacher understood my point, and said she would take that information back and spread my view point. I was thankful for the information and appreciated the teacher's attempt to spread my word. At least now I understood the perceived lack of interest in the tutoring program. Once again

I felt as if my research would be put on hold.

Armed with this new information, I addressed the staff once again at the October faculty meeting. This time I relayed that having been a former teacher and union member in this district; I understood where they were coming from. In addition, I added that these were our students that needed help and that the tutoring teachers would be getting paid so maybe the union could view this as something other than extra. I also mentioned that I was afraid if we did not use the money allotted for this program we may not be lucky enough to get the program again next year in a "use it or lose it" type scenario.

My comments were heartfelt and honest; however, they did not have the desired effect. The tutoring program did not get teachers' interest until November of 2010. The teachers began to sign up because the teachers union settled for a new two year contract, not necessarily because of my appeal to them. The devil is in the details, and this was another detail I was not able to predict or control. The tutoring program got off to a late start but a start none the less. November however has been referred to as the best month to be a teacher. There are many days off during November (there were only 17 school days), and that made it difficult to get the program started until the very end of the month.

The tutoring program was approved to operate four days per week for one hour per day. The time was 3:00 to 4:00 p.m., with Fridays off. When I originally met with the superintendent and the school business administrator, they had mentioned two hours per day. My recommendation was one hour per day because I was worried about both teacher and student burn out. The teachers and students already had a full time situation, and now we would be adding one extra hour to their day. I was also concerned with the program's effects on the teachers' and students' abilities to participate in after-school activities such

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as sports. Many of the students participated in football, baseball, soccer, and cheerleading, and with all those put together, there might be very little time left to just be a kid. In addition, thinking from an emotionally intelligent perspective (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002), many of the teachers have children that competed in after-school activities that they might wish to support as well.

The first step to initiate tutoring was through the I&RS team. The team had already met with parents starting the end of October and had made the recommendation for tutoring, but we were not able to start the actual tutoring until the end of November 2010. The tutoring started slowly. One teacher and two students tutored through to the end of November. The tutoring teacher just happened to be the day time classroom teacher as well. In this manner the teacher already knew the students' areas in need of improvement and hit the ground running with the students. This matchup between teacher and students was a homerun, but not every classroom teacher would be able to tutor after school, and as we preceded this proved to be a challenge.

Another detail to be worked out was class size or how many students would a teacher have at any one time after school? It was similar to the summer program; I was sitting in front of the superintendent advocating for smaller class sizes, and he was also looking at the fiscal side of things. I asked for 3:1 student to teacher ratio hoping he would say 5:1. However, he said 8:1, and that is what we settled on. I pride myself on being the type of person who follows the rules, but in this instance it was going to be difficult. I made my mind up at this point that I would do everything I could to keep the ratio at 5:1.

The tutoring got off to a slow start due in part to the union issues at the time, but it

started to pick up some serious momentum in December 2010. The I&RS referrals were being turned in at an unprecedented rate. In most cases the teachers were citing the need for tutoring. I was finding it very difficult to respond and schedule all the necessary meetings in a timely manner. In addition to the increased referrals for the team, I was also taking two doctoral classes in the fall of 2010. The classes were my last of the program and were very intense to say the least. I would not recommend to other doctoral candidates that they take classes as they try to complete cycles and write their dissertations. I was very lucky to be able to continue my research and gain the necessary approval to move forward, but as each new cycle unfolded, I gained additional work on top of an already full day. At this point I was concerned not only with teacher and student burn out but principal burn out as well. For instance, as I was writing this cycle (after-school tutoring) I was also in the midst of the 2011 summer program. I was one step closer to sustainability and creating a new normal with the continuation of the summer program into another year, but at the same time the work continued to mount. This year as summer approached instead of, "Can we have another summer program?" it was "How are we looking for the summer program?" The success of the previous summer program made the next summer program a fore drawn conclusion. This was a great problem to have and was also evidence that we were working to change the culture of retention at Billingsport Elementary School and potentially in the whole district.

The Action

The after-school tutoring program had cleared many obstacles and was now underway. The months of September 2010 and October 2010 suffered from setbacks in terms of getting teachers signed up to participate. As November came and went, the very

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first students began to stay after school and receive services. The format of instruction

mimicked what worked for us during the summer program. As mentioned earlier,

approval and implementation of the program came quickly and using the summer

template was an expedient. The very first teacher who signed up and who began tutoring

in November happened to be one of the teachers who had worked the summer 2010

program and was very comfortable jumping in. Not all the teachers were as experienced

or as comfortable with what at first, may have seemed like a less structured environment

than that of a normal school day. To help get things started with other teachers, I sought

the involvement of our reading specialist and district language arts coach, Paula

Mulvenna. Paula was not only someone I trusted but was really good at what she did.

Since my first day on the job as principal at Billingsport, Paula had offered solid advice

on everything to do with language arts, especially emergent literacy. In addition, Paula

was a respected member of the faculty at Billingsport before she moved to the district

position of language arts coach. Paula had shared with me that she was retiring at the end

of this school year (2010-2011) and that she wanted to leave things in the best shape they

could be in. Paula was thrilled that we were able to get the tutoring program

implemented, and she also started coming to the I&RS Team meetings and began tutoring

herself. She said this was her chance to really help some kids and, "push them forward".

Paula made many recommendations to help move the program along, and I cultivated her

teacher leadership in this area and supported her as much as I could. One suggestion

Paula made was to use the book *Recipe for Reading* by Frances Bloom and Nina Traub

(2005) as a guide and book study for the tutoring teachers. Paula was eager to lead the

book study, so I immediately ordered 20 copies of the book including some extras. The

book study took off, and soon several teachers not signed up for tutoring asked me for a copy of "Recipe for Reading" so they could use it on their own. I was thrilled that the book study was generating a positive buzz, so I gave out the books and ordered some more to have on hand. Paula also continually reminded me that after-school tutoring needed to be one teacher to no more than three students to be really effective. I now had it made up in my mind that I would keep the numbers at 1:3 at all costs. In Paula I had found a kindred spirit and came to realize how much she really influenced me as an educator and early literacy advocate.

The number of I&RS referrals by the end of December 2010 was already at 46; in contrast for all of the previous year (2009-2010) the I&RS team received 55 referrals. We were almost at the previous year's number and not even halfway through the school year. Teachers were starting to ask when their cases would come up for meetings, and some parents were calling as well. Since the inception of the I&RS team we had always had one day per week set aside if we needed to meet. Now we needed to meet every week, and that still would not handle the overload. Before the winter break I added up all the referrals, and predicted it would take two months to meet on all the cases, and that was only if no more came in the mean time. I thought about shortening the process or meeting additional days. The process had always been one meeting with the team and the referring teacher in order to meet once before the parents were asked in. Then we would schedule the parents and meet with the team, the teacher, and the parent. Some team members questioned the double meeting process, but my experience told me we needed to meet twice. As an assistant principal at another building, I was conducting an I&RS meeting with the parents, and there had been no pre-meeting with just the team and the

teacher prior. In the meeting one of the team members offered an intervention that I was not ultimately authorized to approve. The parents locked on to this suggestion, and the situation soon worsened. From that day forward, I felt it prudent to openly and honestly discuss what we could and could not recommend and why. By being as transparent as possible with the team and the teachers, I hoped to avoid a potential foot-in-mouth situation. Shortening the process seemed like a step back and against my better judgment; instead I focused on meeting more frequently.

As I came to the realization that the I&RS team would have to meet more often, I also developed another concern about how that additional load would impact the team. The team was made up of me the principal, school nurse, two basic skills teachers, speech teacher, special education inclusion teacher, the school counselor, and the school social worker. These were all key individuals that already had very important "full time" jobs. Every additional meeting had an effect on the teams' other duties. In addition, some of the members were not able to accommodate the new schedule, and the meetings had to be held with a reduced team. At this point there was little I could do about the effects of additional meetings; they had to be scheduled, and we had to do the best we could. The team started meeting two to three times per week during the months of January 2011, February 2011, and March 2011. I certainly felt the pain of the other team members. I fell behind in my own duties as principal and fell far short of the required teacher classroom observations for which I was responsible. Also as our annual pre-school and kindergarten screenings of new students came up in the March of 2011, I made several scheduling errors that were very uncharacteristic of me. Looking back I felt that I was definitely burning the candle at both ends, and I probably also lit it in the middle.

Analysis of Results

      Through the analysis required for chapter six (cycle two), I learned several

approaches to avoid when trying to determine program effectiveness. The notion that the

more hours of tutoring a student receives equates with greater academic achievement is

one I chose not pursue for data analysis in this cycle. There are so many factors that lead

to academic achievement that a simple correlation between two of these variables can be

inconclusive and frustrating. Contributing to the problematic analysis of program

effectiveness is the shotgun approach already under way to help each child do their best

in school. Once a student was recognized as needing tutoring after school, they had

already been given as much additional help as possible by the school and usually at

home. During every I&RS meeting, prior to tutoring, the team emphasized the

importance of working with the child at home and gave resources to the parents to use.

We usually gave the parents books, worksheets, and internet log-on information to

programs that were beneficial such as Reading A to Z .com. Also, every student that was

signed up for tutoring was already signed up for basic skills support in class. This

dictated that a teacher came into the classroom every day and worked with that child

individually, in small group or supported them in whole class situations. By the time a

child came to tutoring, a cavalcade of intervention strategies were already in place. To

imply that 10, 20, or even 30 hours of after-school tutoring was the sole reason for

improvement was not good research practice and could also be insulting to the others

who were concurrently working hard day in and day out with that student. I was very

careful in trying not to make individual examples where I insinuated that the after-school

tutoring program had pushed an individual student to the next level. I was especially

cautious when the after-school tutor and the regular classroom teacher were not the same individual.

Unable to isolate and control variables both from a logistical view but also an ethical one, I instead focused on overall performance and school wide retention rates. For example, one tutoring student who attended infrequently still showed growth in rhyme recognition, beginning sound recognition, word recognition, and letter naming from the time period between April 5, 2011 and May 24, 2011. While the growth was not conclusively reflective of the tutoring program, it was however reflective of school in general and also parent/home involvement. A clear limitation of this study was that isolating the vehicle of growth was very difficult and inconclusive.

In another approach I looked at individual students and their growth. I looked at all anecdotal records, testing, work samples, and DRA reading levels for every one of the 26 students that were tutored. In every single situation, the students showed growth of some sort. Not all students however showed the same level of growth or consistency of growth. After reviewing all the records it was now clearer to me than ever the meaning of the old saying "every child grows at their own rate." This reminded me of something Paula Mulvenna would say to the parents when we would meet with them in the I&RS meetings. She said she had two children of her own. Her daughter walked before the age of one, and her son walked after the age of one. They are both excellent walkers now in adulthood, but each had to learn at their own pace, and any attempt to dramatically speed them up would have ended in frustration. In this case all students showed growth, but not all showed enough for the teachers involved to give up the consideration of retention.

After looking at all the students and trying to make broad generalizations without success, I then focused on looking at two students closely who had some similarities and who were also tutored by the same teacher. The teacher involved was tutoring two kindergarten male students. The students started the tutoring the exact same time, and student A had 24 hours of tutoring, and student B had 28 hours of tutoring. Both students were offered the same amount of tutoring. The difference in hours provided, was reflective of the parents of child A needing him to come home for family business on several occasions and also some absences due to illness. Both student A and student B were offered the same strategies and assignments and worked together frequently in class. The students were friendly with each other both during the regular day and during after-school tutoring. Both students started the tutoring at level A which is a very beginning level and considered pre-reading. By the end of the tutoring in May of 2011, student A had a reading level of three, and student B had a reading level of two. The benchmark for kindergarten moving into first grade is at least a level three. Teachers most often cite reading levels at the beginning and the end of the year as their main reason for retention (Bonvin, Bless, & Schuebach, 2008). Student A was recommended to move into first grade and student B was recommended for retention. Here were two very similar students, who received similar services, and they both showed wonderful growth, but ultimately student B did not reach benchmarks for moving to the next grade. As an aside, student B did come to summer school in 2011 and as a result of summer school was consequently recommended for advancement to first grade.

While individual student analysis or case study analysis was not a fruitful avenue of data analysis, whole group analysis did offer some very eye-opening and exciting

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results. Every year since I had been principal at Billingsport, we had tracked the number of teacher recommendations for grade retention as indicated during the last week of school in June. The numbers of recommendations over the last four years are indicated in chart 5.


Recommended Retentions
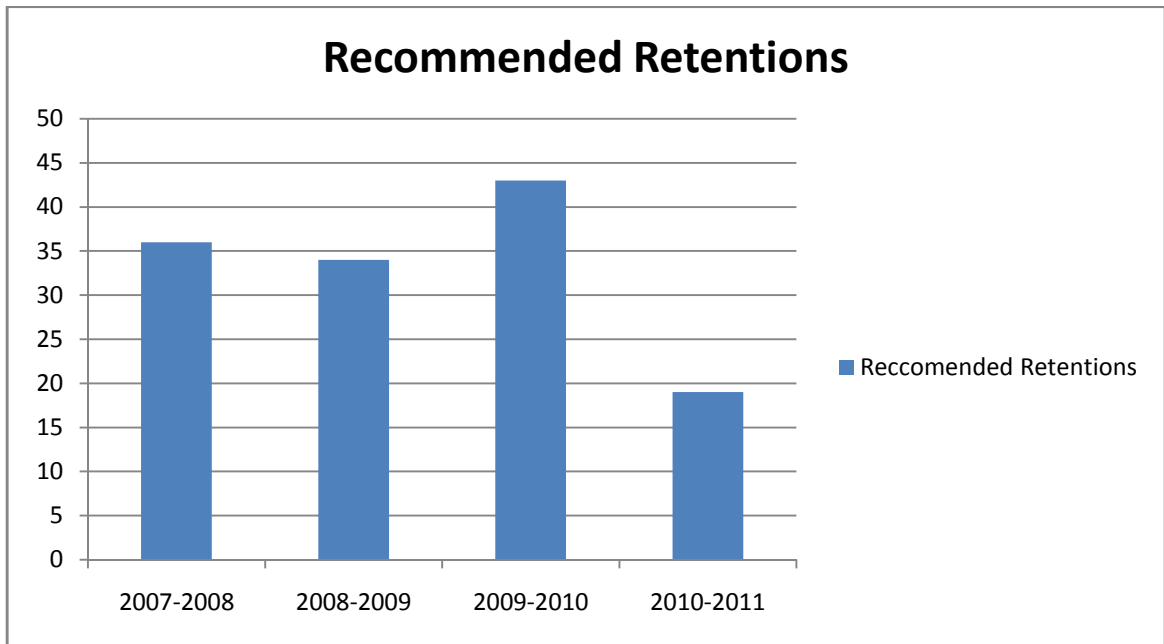
Figure 5   Recommended Retentions Over Time

The number of students recommended for retention in the 2007-2008 school year was 36, for the 2008-2009 school year it was 34, for the 2009-2010 school year it was 43, and for the 2010-2011 school year it was 19. Although the number of students recommended for retention fluctuated somewhat, the 2010-2011 school year saw a dramatic drop. The data showed a 56% drop in retentions from one year to the next. As the principal and instructional leader at Billingsport Elementary School, I believed the main contributing factor was the added interventions as a result of the work done for this action research project. The summer program of 2010 and the tutoring program for the 2010-2011 school year were the only major changes in services or programs. Here I had

found another homerun, and this information was quickly passed up the chain of command and publicized at our last faculty meeting in June. As mentioned earlier, I advertised this big win as a collective one and reemphasized that this was a great example of a team effort. Transformational leaders move followership to meaningful action and this meaningful action required extra effort, a genuine investment, and shared with all stakeholders (Evans, 1996).

Reflection

The data analysis of cycle two (summer program) was an impetus for the approval of cycle four (after-school tutoring program). There were many obstacles that hindered the planning and implementing of the after-school program. One particular obstacle was the unsettled teachers' union contract that was beyond my control. In this case I was frustrated with the fact that I received approval for a program I knew would help students but was unable to get started because of political issues (Bolman & Deal, 2008). I was especially frustrated because nothing I did changed the situation; I was only able to wait until the teachers' contract was settled before teachers showed interest in working the after-school tutoring program.

Once initiated the after-school tutoring program grew exponentially. The I&RS team was responsible for referral to the tutoring program and the I&RS team's meeting process required an investment in time that strained the members, myself included. Overall, the strain was a good thing, the increased volume of referrals for tutoring meant that the teachers bought into the program and were eager to try alternatives to retention. In addition, the original idea to develop an after-school tutoring program emerged from the interviews with the staff themselves, this was their idea put into action, and the

administration sought input from the teachers and put their plan into action. In this manner, we were sensitive to the teachers' needs, saw current problems as opportunities, and built a vision to address them together (Evans, 1996).

During the 2010-2011 school year 26 students received after-school tutoring at Billingsport School. This program was the first of its kind at Billingsport, there had never been an after-school tutoring program aimed at the kindergarten, first, and second grade levels. As a result of this program 546 hours of tutoring were provided in addition to the normal school day. In this manner, below level students were given something additional, above and beyond what their on-level peers received. At the end of the 2010-2011 school year the teachers at Billingsport Elementary School collectively recommended nineteen students for grade retention. The previous school year, a year prior to implementation of the after-school tutoring program, the teachers at Billingsport recommended 43 students for grade retention. Overall, we experienced a 56% decrease in recommended retentions after the first year of after-school tutoring. This was something I was very proud of, and I shared my pride with the teachers at Billingsport at our final faculty meeting in June of 2011. We all clapped and cheered as we celebrated the dedication and hard work of the students and the teachers who took part in the after-school tutoring program.

Chapter 9

Project Impact

This project had significant impact on student achievement, relationship building, my leadership, and my position within the Paulsboro School District. Like ripples in a pond, this action research project continues to have effects long after project completion. The student achievement associated with my action research project was significant when measured in terms of the reduction in the number of students recommended by their teachers for grade retention. A 56% reduction in the number of teacher recommended grade retentions between the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 school years was a significant decrease. As one teacher mentioned at the end of the year faculty meeting in June 2011, "We now have options." In terms of relationship building, I felt we established trust with the parents and teachers through proof of a sincere commitment to a shared vision (Evans, 1996). My leadership theories in use have evolved from a servant model to a moral leadership model through my exposure to social justice. As a result of the coursework taken at Rowan University in pursuit of my studies in educational leadership, I have come to realize that servant leadership is nothing without a moral compass. Social justice must pervade all leadership decisions if the social reproduction cycle is to be broken (Dantley & Tillman, 2010; Freire, 1970). In terms of my position within the district, as of July 1, 2011 I was appointed to a district wide position of Director of Curriculum and Instruction. My sphere of influence grew from one school to three schools; two of those schools are classified by the New Jersey Department of Education as "schools in need of improvement." I continued to monitor sustainability of the after-school tutoring program and the summer program through my position as Director of

Curriculum and Instruction. The summer program continued during the summer of 2011, and the after-school tutoring program continued during the 2011-2012 school year. Both programs continued after I left Billingsport School as principal. I was very proud of this work and looking back on my years as an educator; this project was the most rewarding experience to date.

Reflection on Research Questions

What were the initial perceptions of grade retention among the faculty at Billingsport Elementary School?

Every participant interviewed mentioned academic concerns as the cornerstone of the multiple indicators necessary before a retention decision was reached. One participant said, "You cannot build a house on a weak foundation..." The selection of academic indicators listed included math skills, reading levels, test scores, readiness skills, grades, and the ability to read. During the 2007-2008 school year, I was having a casual conversation with a first grade teacher about his recommended grade retention candidates, and the teacher said, "What else can I do if the child can't read?" I could sense an air of feeling guilty and defensive in his tone. At that time I was not able to give him an alternative, and I also felt somewhat guilty. Now as the 2011-2012 school year approaches my answer would have included the after-school tutoring program and the summer program. The additional programs have shown that this leadership initiative has been successful so far and may lead to a shift in paradigm for grade retention alternatives. This bottom up shift started with teachers' suggestions on developing best practice alternatives to grade retention and have started to affect second order change (Fullan, 2001, 2007).

How was the current retention model improved?

Student centered interventions require the schools to provide something additional or extra for the students that are struggling. If the interventions are provided during the regular school day, a decision as to what the student is pulled out of must be made. The school day is already completely accounted for with no built-in free time. One might think that recess is a time that could be taken from underachieving students, but it is not ideal. Obesity rates among children are at all time highs, and inactivity is more the norm than the rare occurrence. With that in mind, recess takes on a new importance and is needed to meet the state requirements for physical education mandates as well. Developing interventions that take place during the regular school day can be problematic to say the least. If a student is pulled out of a class to make up basic skills, then they are missing the content that the rest of the class is receiving, and the cycle continues. In order break the cycle, the children need to be offered something in addition to all that the on level peers are receiving. By offering additional services outside of the regular school day, it is possible to move children faster than they would otherwise progress (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). Through intensive small group instruction this study has shown significant reading growth and dramatically reduced retention rates. Teachers and administration now have some viable options to retention, and if retention is still needed at least more has been done in attempt to avoid it. The parents indicated that their children had improved because of the after-school tutoring program. Responding on a tutoring parent survey (Appendix J) one parent commented, "I think everything about the tutoring program has really helped my daughter. I think we should continue." Parents were also asked specifically if they thought their child improved in reading, math, writing, attitude towards school, and overall benefit as shown in chart 7. The y axis

indicates the number of parent responses, while the x axis lists the areas impacted by the tutoring.
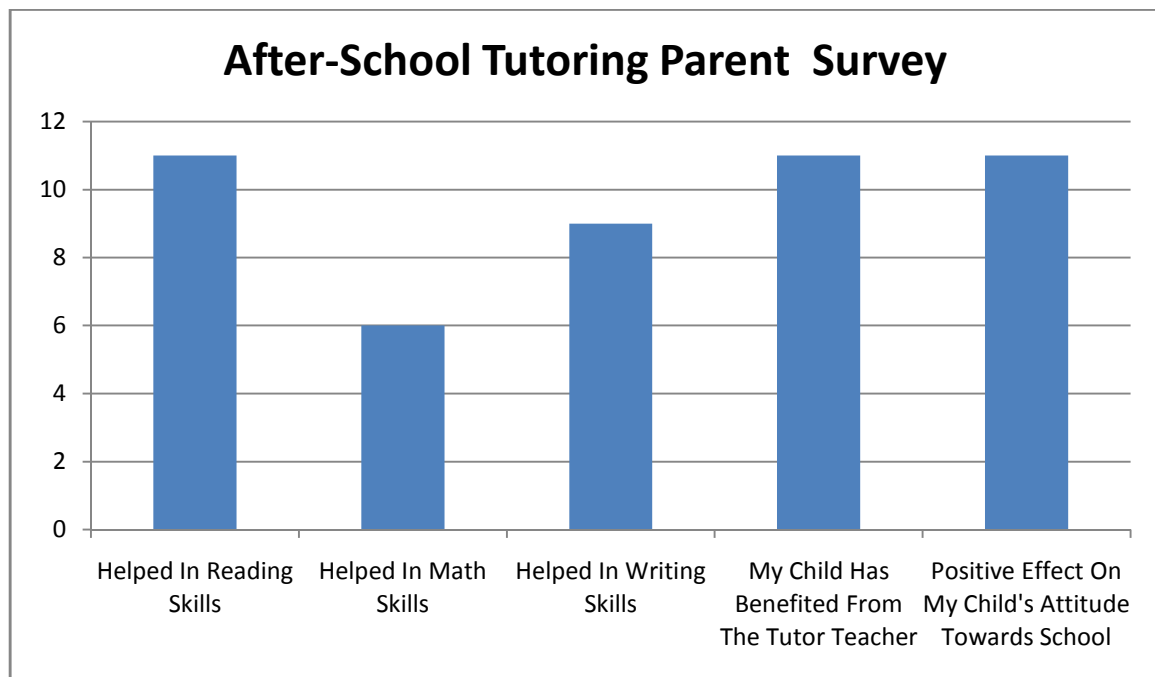
Figure 6 Parent Perceptions About After-School Tutoring

What steps were implemented to improve communication between all stake holders, parents, teachers and administration?

Top down communication has been improved through the data collection completed for cycle one. During cycle one every teacher at Billingsport Elementary school was interviewed by me on their ideas about grade retention. This afforded every teacher a chance to discuss their ideas about decreasing retention and other associated topics and begin to make shifts in their own mental models (Senge, 1990) Frequently since the interviews were conducted in the fall of 2009, teachers have subsequently engaged me in ongoing conversations about their perceptions of grade retention. In other words my research has been a catalyst for others at Billingsport to challenge the norm and look outside the box for alternatives. I have been very transparent in my leadership

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approach and also very transparent in my dissertation research approach from the start of my involvement with the Rowan program.

Another additional communication improvement came in an unexpected way. Pick-up time for after-school tutoring was 4:00 pm. The Billingsport school secretary finished work at 3:30 pm. Although she worked late on many occasions, she was rarely still at her desk at 4:00 pm. The only access into the building is through the main door after a buzzer is activated. The door can only be unlocked from a station at the secretary's desk. Upon entering the school, the parent waiting area is located directly outside the secretary's office. Since I was the only person still in the office at that time of day, I sat at the secretary's desk every day starting at 3:40 pm and let parents in the door so they could wait for the 4:00 pm pick-up. This afforded the parents and me some great opportunities to informally discuss many topics including the academic performance of their children. In addition to my increased communication with parents, the teachers also spoke to the parents every day. None of the teachers had more than three tutored students per day and could easily touch base with all of them every day. This soon became the best time of my day, watching the students and teacher walking down the hall usually smiling and then hearing the teacher conference briefly with the parents. The parents of the tutored students were surveyed (Appendix J) and the results in chart 8 shows the various ways the after-school tutor was using to communicate with them. All 26 parents involved received the survey and there was a 42% return rate. All eleven parents that returned their survey indicated that they spoke to the teacher at the 4:00 pm pick-up. The y axis indicates the number of parent responses. The x axis indicates the format of parent-teacher communications.

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Parent Contacts After-School Tutoring
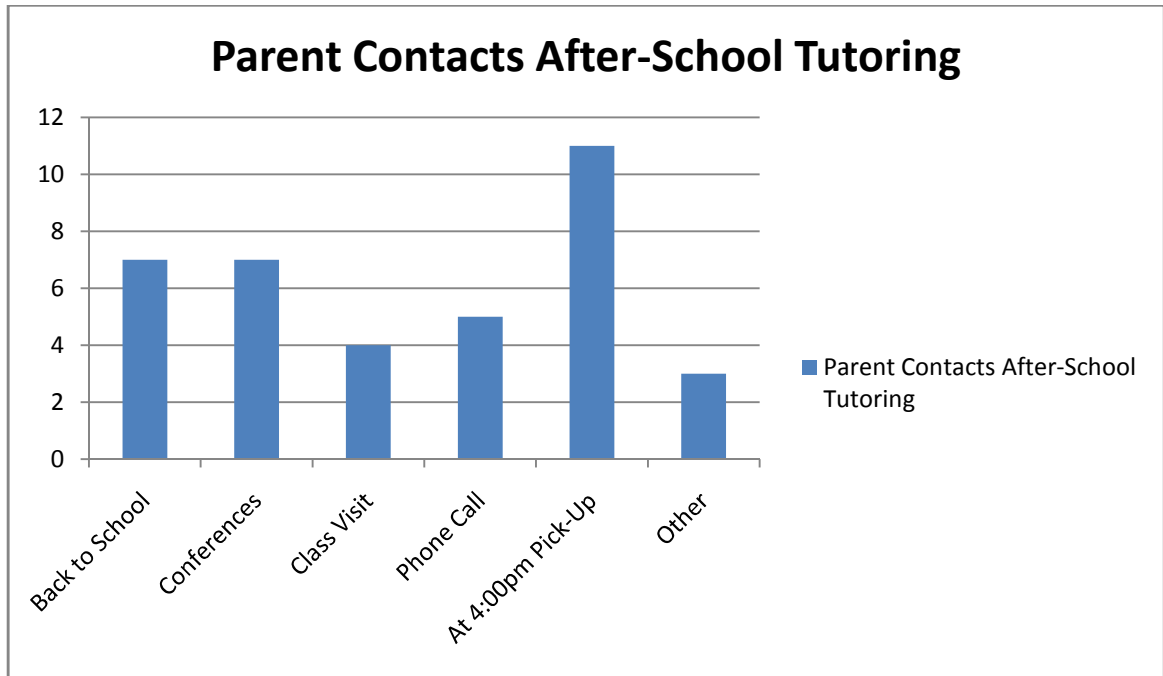
Figure 7   Level of Parent Contact During After-School Tutoring

How was my leadership model changed as a result of this action research project?

At the start of this educational leadership journey, I most closely related my leadership to servant. However, as I have moved through the program I feel that servant leadership does not encapsulate an extreme sense of urgency and activism that I feel social justice and moral leadership do. In Dantley and Tillman's *Social Justice and Moral Transformative Leadership* (2010), MacLeod's *Ain't No Making It: Leveled Aspirations in a Low-Income Neighborhood* (1987), and Neumann's *The "Why's" and "How's" of Being a Social Justice Ally* (2009), all authors attempt to define social justice and describe the complex relationship between social justice and educational leadership. MacLeod (1987) examines the theories of social reproduction, how these theories apply to schools and educational leadership, and ultimately how these theories are

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interconnected with social justice. Neumann (2009) takes the discussion of social justice to the next level by explaining how leaders must go beyond teaching diversity and actually become social justice allies.

Many argue that socially just leadership includes both conceptualizations as well as practice (Dantley & Tillmann, 2010). This in particular resonated with me, as educational staff are often handed academic research that is grounded in conceptualizations. Action-based research within the school setting was frowned upon by the academic communities for years, as it was consider subjective and flawed. All along educators were well aware that we are dealing with the business of humans; therefore, any effective research will be affected by myriad variables and is qualitative in nature.

Ultimately being a socially just leader acknowledges not only the need for practice but also the need to recognize the multiple contexts within education and educational leadership. Caring and compassion are the values that hold families and communities together (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Public schools are influenced by race, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and politics, just to name a few. Often this is seen in the form of tracking. Students that have little family support and economic hardships are often at a disadvantage coming in to the school system. Often their skills are below average because these skills are not being reinforced at home. When a school merely puts that child into a remedial track, and does not offer a program to help advance that student, they are not only reproducing inequitable treatment, but they are also committing what MacLeod (1987) describes as social reproduction. In addition, it is imperative to continue to make social justice a component in the doctoral program

because it is not enough to just have an awareness, instead we must engage in actions that serve a greater good (Shaprio & Stefkovich, 2009; Neumann, 2009)

As well-educated educational leaders, we owe it to our students and staff to become social justice allies. We must examine ourselves and be able to look at things from the perspectives of minority groups within the culture. We must attempt to truly understand their needs and concerns as well as the prejudice and injustices they sometimes endure. Only then, when we make ourselves vulnerable and open can we begin to make effective changes as allies. If we are members of the dominant culture, we may still not fully realize what it is like to walk in the minority shoes, but we must try our best to understand as much as we can and develop empathy.

Limitations

Working in the field of education is the most rewarding and challenging endeavor I have ever undertaken. Working in Paulsboro has presented many challenges as well. I have always told the staff at Billingport, "We do a really great job working with our kids," but one of my big concerns was that often times the students moved into and out of the district faster than we could get a handle on them. My evidence for this assertion was found in our New Jersey report card data. The big picture on student mobility was evident in chart 6. This analysis showed the percentage of students as of October 15, 2010 that were in the district less than one year, one to two years, and three or more years. Data driven instruction implies you collect data on all students, analyze it, develop a plan to address the areas of concern, and then reassess to determine effectiveness. When the cohorts are constantly changing due to student transfers, the process becomes increasing challenging.

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Paulsboro School District (10-15-2010)

- In District Less than One Year ■ In District 1-2 Years
- In District 3 or More Years

16%

26%

58%
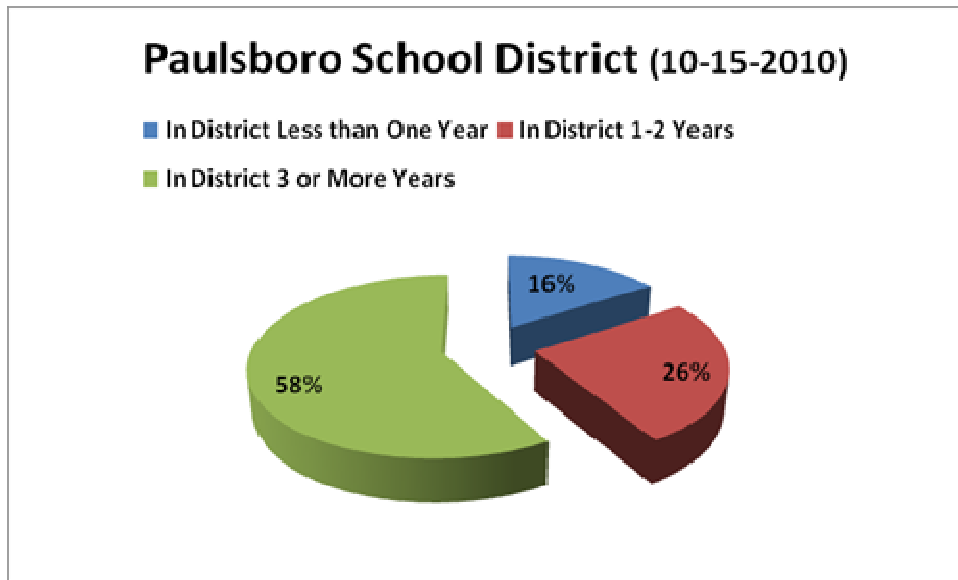
Figure 8   Student Mobility

The yearly student mobility rate as reported on the school report card for 2008-2009 was 23.5%. Taking that a step further and compounding the issue over time, student turn-over becomes more noticeable. The percent of students who were in the district for two or less years in 2010- 2011 was 42% with only 58% of the remaining students in district for three or more years. Change creates confusion and causes conflict; changing schools for children creates a climate for unpredictability as they adjust to the new environment (Evans, 1996). I felt that student mobility was a limitation to this study and contributed to the academic achievement gap in general in the Paulsboro School District.

Another limitation to this study was the concept of positional power. As an action researcher I must acknowledge that my very presence contributed to the complexities of data collection. I enjoyed talking about pedagogy and educational philosophy with my staff. As a result I used interviews and anecdotal data as my preference. However, having a conversation with the "boss" was not the same as talking to another teacher in the

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faculty room. The biggest question I had wasp; "Were the teachers telling me what I wanted to hear or were they telling me how they felt?" I felt the only way to overcome this was to continue to have discussions about teaching and learning at every opportunity so that these conversations became "the new normal." This dialogue is what good leaders do whether or not they are conducting action research or trying to create second order change.

Recommendations for Practice/Further Research

As a result of this action research project several implications for practice have emerged. Tracking retained students long term would give insight into the success or failure of grade retention. Teacher's views on retention are based on personal experience with student success immediately after retention. The perceptions are not usually influenced by scientific study carried out over many years of study. Usually teachers follow the retained student for a short period of time when they determine if the retention was a success. Long term tracking would follow the student through their entire educational experience. Often times the retained students don't experience real difficulty until the high school years. Another aspect of practice that should be reviewed is course offerings. The possibility of a transitional kindergarten or first grade should be investigated. This additional resource could be incorporated into the curriculum which would offer smaller class size and personalized instruction.

Through the data collection process of this action research project many themes were developed. Due to the finite nature of the dissertation process many of the themes were left unexplored. My recommendations for further research would involve revisiting

the data and conducting additional action research projects that would adhere to the data with more fidelity. The areas of interest would involve further research in whole-school reform efforts and family-home interventions.

Reflection

Through a transparent shared approach in the development, planning, and implementation of each cycle in this action research project, systemic change has occurred within the Paulsboro School District. The change in retention paradigms occurred because teachers were given options that were developed through a shared vision (Evans, 1996; Fullan, 2001).

The Paulsboro School District continued to struggle fiscally and continuing to keep any new initiative moving forward was a daunting task. In my new position as Director of Curriculum and Instruction, I continued to advocate for these programs and worked to develop new ones. My office as Director of Curriculum and Instruction was located in the Paulsboro District Administration Building, the same office space as the superintendent of schools. The proximity afforded to me by my new position enabled me to meet daily with the superintendent as I continued my efforts to influence policy and procedures that fell in line with my leadership philosophies.

Reflecting upon my own leadership, I felt strong connections to Michael Fullan and Robert Evans. Both authors outline change paradigms that emphasize relationship building. In this manner both authors resonated with me because relationships must be built on respect and that is the corner stone of social justice. The following graphic

representation shows how moral purpose and relationship building are integral in

building internal and external commitment. All viewpoints and cultures need to be

Figure 9 Change Framework   (Fullan, 2001)

respected first before any issues can be addressed. The importance of respecting parents,

regardless of their educational background is the difference between the cultures found in

"moving" districts versus "stuck" districts. Extending this thought further, school

administrators need to respect teachers as well as parents and keep a positive client

orientation (Evans, 1996). Systemic change in schools cannot occur if teachers only

identify with their own classrooms; through a transparent inclusive approach, whole

school success became a shared responsibility at Billingsport School (Fullan, 2007).

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Appendix A: Observation Protocol

Observation Protocol

Retention is embedded in the culture of Billingsport Elementary School. The purpose of my research is to develop a transition process from a culture that endorses retention to a culture that avoids retention through a sustainable process that develops interventions.

My research for this class will take place at Billingsport Elementary School. Billingsport School is located at 441 Nassau Avenue, Paulsboro, New Jersey. The school houses grades pre-kindergarten through second and currently has 367 students. I have chosen this location because I have been the principal and sole administrator there since July 1, 2006.

This sustainable communication effort will create an atmosphere where teachers can openly and honestly contribute to my action research in order to develop interventions which will eliminate or reduce the need for retention. Working with all stake holders to design a process for communication and intervention will influence staff and change practice through second order change. Mixed methods (interviews, observations, and focus groups) will be used for the dissertation; however, for this study a qualitative approach will involve interviews as part of my cycle 1. Purposeful sampling will be used for this study by interviewing one teacher from each grade level kindergarten through second, a basic skills teacher, a school counselor, and the district curriculum coordinator. The interviews will take place in each staff member's classroom or office to avoid any bias associated with being called to the principal's office. In addition, the design of a process that will foster an atmosphere of empowerment will allow

interventions to be developed that will be sustainable and holistic. This process will be

viewed as empowering because all staff at Billingsport Elementary School will be given

an opportunity to give their opinion on how information can best be shared.

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

To collect data as part of cycle one of my research purpose, I will solicit perspectives of K-2 teachers, a school counselor, and the district curriculum coordinator on the topic of student retention. Interviews will be used because they offer a face to face richness critical to developing a sustainable communication process. In addition, this study will be focused on building long-term sustainable change through relationship building which will be enhanced through the interview process in a way not possible with surveys or other means of data collection. Purposeful sampling will be used for this study by interviewing one teacher from each grade level kindergarten through second, a basic skills teacher, a school counselor, and the district curriculum coordinator. With consent the interviews will be tape-recorded and transcribed so that accuracy in reporting is maintained.

1. What grade are you currently teaching?

2. Can you describe the circumstance where you decided to retain a student?

3. How many students have you recommended for retention? Over what span of time?

4. If so, what has been your criterion for making a retention decision?

5. If the sky was the limit and you were able to make any changes you wanted at Billingsport School in order to eliminate the need for retention, could you describe those necessary changes?

6. Can you describe the ideal scenario of a partnership with parents and community that would eliminate the need for retention? If you were given the ability to change or create anything imaginable to help students be successful in school to the point at which retention would be unnecessary, what would those changes include?

7. Under ideal circumstances, could you describe the scenario that provides the strongest school-to-home connection to reduce or eliminate the need for retention?

Appendix C: Consent Form

Dear Ms.

I am a doctorial student at Rowan University. One of my courses requires that I conduct a small qualitative research project in which I am asking you to participate. If you choose not to participate it will in no way effect your employment as involvement in this study is purely voluntary.

I am interested in learning about your perceptions of student retention and why you feel as you do. No individual student or educator will be the focus of this research. Your participation will involve an interview with me about grade retention. With your consent the interviews will be tape-recorded and transcribed so that accuracy in reporting is maintained. The general topic I want to explore in the interviews will be your perspective on student retention.

I will protect the identities of the participants-both yours and the students'- through the use of pseudonyms in this and any future publications or presentations. Participants should understand that they may be quoted directly but their names will not be used in any part of the report. All data will be stored in a secure location. Please understand that you may withdraw from the study at any time, without prejudice.

I appreciate your willingness to give your time to this project to help me learn about student retention and possible interventions. Working together we will continue to find new ways to assist the students of Billingsport Elementary School. If you have any questions concerning this study, please contact me by phone at (856-423-2226) or e-mail me at pneff@paulsboro.k12.nj.us or Dr. Coaxum by phone (856-423-4779) or e-mail him at coaxum@rowan.edu.

I have read the above and discussed it with the researcher. I understand the study and I agree to participate.

_____ (signature of participant)

_____ (date)

_____ (signature of researcher)

_____ (date)

Appendix D: Introduction Letter

Introduction Letter

Dear Dr. Scambia,

My name is Phillip Neff, and I am doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership Program at Rowan University. As part of my studies, I respectfully request your permission to conduct research in the Paulsboro School District. I am interested in studying grade retention and alternatives to retention in the elementary school setting.

The teacher student interface is critical to teaching and learning. The most influential factor in retention decisions is low student academic performance. However, researchers indicate that teacher's factual knowledge of the research on the effects and outcomes of retentions is minimal and consists primarily of assumptions with little or no basis in knowledge. It is also noted that teachers rarely change their opinions based on research, and instead they tend to cling to practical knowledge that they have developed over time based on their teaching experiences. It is my hope that the research findings will expand my knowledge of how teachers construct their individual paradigms related to retention. With your permission I would like to conduct interviews of one teacher from each grade; kindergarten, first, second, a basic skills teacher, the school counselor and the district curriculum coordinator.

I will be the only person, aside from the interviewees, who will know who is participating in the interviews. Any time I use the interview data in my research, I will use pseudonyms to protect identities and ensure confidentiality. All electronic media recorded during the interview process will be stored for three years on a secure hard drive at my residence. All who participated will have the opportunity to discontinue their association with the research project at any time without penalty. If a participant chooses

to leave the research project, all data recorded on them will be destroyed. At no time will

the interviewee be under any form of physical or mental risk.

I would like to thank you for your continued support as I progress in my studies.

Sincerely,

Phillip Neff
Principal Billingsport
Elementary School

Appendix E: Indexing Outline

Transcript Coding

1. What grade are you currently teaching
   - School Social Worker
   - Second Grade
   - First Grade
   - Basic Skills
   - Director of Curriculum
   - Pre-School Disabled

2. Have you ever retained a student
   - Yes as a principal
   - Yes through the IEP process
   - No
   - Yes

3. If so, what do you base a retention decision on

   a. academic
      - Math skills
      - Reading levels
      - Test scores
      - Class performance levels
      - The student struggled all year and cannot work on level
      - Not having parental support at home
      - Needs for readiness skills
      - Ability to read
      - The opinions of all the teachers working with the student

   b. psychological
      - Student frustration level

   c. physical maturity
      - Birth dates
      - Maturity level
      - The student struggled all year and cannot work on level the decision was primarily based on attendance
      - As a principal the process was almost always based on a collaborative decision reached by the teacher and parent with my support
      - The student struggled all year and cannot work on level

    d. Parent input
- Parent request

4. If you could make changes in order to eliminate the need for retention, what would you do

    a. student centered interventions
- Immediately work with students who show any sign of weakness regarding skill development
- We'd be ready to activate a team of resource personnel to carry through with tier 2 and if necessary, tier 3 in a timely manner.
- After-school program (tutoring)
- change basic skill program back to a pull out instead of push in program
- pull students out of special area classes for basic skills

    b. family/home centered interventions
- Make parents responsible to help their children
- Educate the parents
- Incorporate a parent center

    c. school reform interventions
- The building would cater to the needs of 4 to 8 year olds using a tiered approach to interventions but without assigning anyone to a grade
- Smaller class size
- Have our own CST
- Every teacher should have an instructional aide in the classroom

5. Can you describe the ideal scenario of a partnership with parents and community that would eliminate the need for retention

    a. partnership with parents
- Build alliances with the parents
- Increased communication with the parents
- Increased communication with the parents
- Parents read to their children
- Parents taking their children on educational field trips
- Parents complete homework with children

    b. partnership with community

- Local restaurants provide food for kids and families in school

   c. school reform interventions
- Quality afterschool care
- Busses to pick up children
- Do not have grade levels, move kids as they acquire skills
- Each student would have an individual education plan that would be modified yearly
- Technology allowing for off campus learning
- Students would be passed form team to team not grade to grade
- Year-long schooling-no more 2.5 months off

   d. parental accountability
- Increased communication with the parents
- Parents read to their children
- Parents complete homework with children
- Parents taking their children on educational field trips

6. Under ideal circumstances, could you describe the scenario that provides the strongest school-to-home connection to reduce or eliminate the need for retention?

   a. Improved communication
- Constant communication
- Reaching out to parents in non- traditional ways (parent liaisons, school social workers, school-home based contacts, etc.)
- Bring parents into the retention discussion earlier
- One family night a month
- A no blame daily communication system
- Meet the parents and build a relationship with them
- E-boards that parents can check daily

   b. Parent classes
- One family night a month
- Parent shave structured activities for the students
- Parents education classes
- Teach parents how to plan healthy meals

Appendix F: Summer Program Invitation Letter

June 21, 2010

Dear Parents:

Thank you for signing your child up for the summer "Jump Start" basis skills program. The program will run for five weeks, from July 5th to August 5th, 2010. We will offer math, reading and writing classes. The program will start at 8:30 a.m. and end at 11:30 a.m. Monday through Thursday, **no class on Friday**.

The purpose of this "Jump Start" program is to give your child a head start on the new school year and help with needed skills. The program will be funded through the Federal Title I grant. Students will work on individual needs as determined by his/her DRA (Reading Level) Scores, as well as any other assessment results we may have available at that time. **You must provide your own transportation to this program**.

Enclosed please find the emergency form that must be returned the first day of class.

Your child's teacher will be   .

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at 423-2226 ext 202.

Sincerely,

Phillip Neff
Principal

Appendix G: Summer Reading DRA Data

BSI Jump Start Program Summer
2010

Students Name	Teacher	Grade	DRA Score In April 2010	Dra Score in August 2010	Days attended
1	Ms. A	K	1		0
2	Ms. A	K	1		2
3	Ms. A	K	2	4	14
4	Ms. A	K	A		2
5	Ms. A	K	1	2	18
6	Ms. A	K	3	3	13
7	Ms. A	K	A		0
8	Ms. A	K	1		3
9	Ms. A	K	2	4	13
10	Ms. A	1	2		0
11	Ms. A	K	A	2	16
12	Ms. A	K	2	3	16
13	Ms. A	K	A		4
14	Ms. B	1	8	12	16
15	Ms. B	1	3	6	15
16	Ms. B	1	8	14	15
17	Ms. B	K	2	3	14
18	Ms. B	K	3	4	14
19	Ms. B	1	8		6
20	Ms. B	**1**	**3**	**Mom unenrolled as of 7/6/10**	**0**
21	Ms. B	1	3	10	15
22	Ms. B	1	4	12	18
23	Ms. B	1	8	12	18
24	Ms. B	1	3		6
25	Ms. B	1	6		0

26	Ms. B	1	4	12	17
27	Ms. B	1	3		0
28	Ms. B	1	6	6	14
29	Ms. C	1	12		0
30	Ms. C	2	12	14	17
31	Ms. C	1	10	10	8
32	Ms. C	1	14	16	17
33	Ms. C	1	14	16	20
34	Ms. C	1	10	12	19
35	Ms. C	1	12		5
36	Ms. C	2	14	16	15
Students Name	Teacher	Grade	DRA Score		
37	Ms. C	1	14	16	16
38	Ms. C	1	14		8
39	Ms. C	1	10		0
40	Ms. C	1	14	16	15
41	Ms. C	1	14	16	20
42	Ms. C	K	10		0
43	Ms. D	1	16	18	17
44	Ms. D	1	16	16	13
45	Ms. D	2	20	28	17
46	Ms. D	2		18	17
47	Ms. D	2	20	20	15
48	Ms. D	2	20	24	17
49	Ms. D	1	18		4
50	Ms. D	2	16		0
51	Ms. D	2	18		2
52	Ms. D	2	20	20	16
53	Ms. D	1	20	24	17
54	Ms. D	1	20	24	20
55	Ms. D	2	18	18	19

56	Ms. E	2	38	34	14
57	Ms. E	2	28		0
58	Ms. E	2	24		5
59	Ms. E	1	24	24	17
60	Ms. E	2	28	30	9
61	Ms. E	1	30	30	15
62	Ms. E	2	20	28	15
63	Ms. E	2	24		2
64	Ms. E	2	24	28	17
65	Ms. E	2	20		6
66	Ms. E	2	28		1
67	Ms. E	2	24	28	17
68	Ms. E	2	28		3

PAULSBORO SCHOOLS
PROGRESS MONITORING   K - 6   LANGUAGE ARTS

Name: _____   Fall 2010 DRA Score: _____   Start Date: _____

Teacher: _____   Fall 2010 MAP (Lexile Score): _____

EMERGENT LITERACY SURVEY	SPELLING INVENTORY	DRA2
Pre K - Beg 1st	**Mid 1st - 6th**	**Grades K-(**

Date:				Date:			Date:		
Rhyme Recognition				**Letter Name - Alphabetic Stage**			Level:		
Beginning Sound Recognition				Consonants				**Ora**	
Blending onsets and rhymes				Short Vowels			Use of clues		
Concepts of print				Diagraphs			Monitoring / Self		
letter naming				Blends			Correcting		
Word Recognition				**Within Word Pattern**			Accuracy		
Word Writing				Long Vowels				**Com**	
Sentence Dictation				Other Vowels			Previewing		
				Inflected Endings			Retelling		
				Syllables and Affixes			Reflection		
				Syllable Junction			Meta cognition		
				Unaccented Final Sounds			Use of nonfiction text fea		
Writing Sample				**Derivational Relationships**			Making Connections		
Rubric Scored Writing Sample				Harder Suffixes			Summary		
				Bases / Root			Interpretation		

For items that have a rating rubric score: * You may substitute DRA2 Word
1=poor;   2=fair;   3=good;   4=very good   Analysis subskills for post test

<div align="center">**Appendix I: Intervention Protocols**</div>

Intervention Protocols for Tier 3
Language Arts Literacy
Kindergarten: Use the emergent literacy survey (on the progress monitoring form)

               Administer the DRA 2 every 4 to 5 weeks
               Several rubric scored writing samples
1st Grade: Use the emergent literacy survey if needed
               Administer the DRA 2 every 4 to 5 weeks
               Use the spelling inventory starting in February and repeat as needed

               Several rubric scored writing samples
2nd Grade: Administer the DRA 2 every 4 to 5 weeks
               Use the spelling inventory (beginning, middle, end)
               Several rubric scored writing samples
3rd to 6th Grade: Administer the DRA 2 every 6 to 8 weeks
               Use the spelling inventory
               Several rubric scored writing samples
Keep anecdotal notes (use the back of the progress monitoring chart or a separate sheet of paper) for each student.

Math – All grades
Use the progress monitoring chart to record results
Use the "notes" section to record skill development (worked on 2 digit addends, etc.)
Use the back of the progress monitoring chart or a separate sheet of paper for anecdotal notes

Appendix J: After-School Parent Survey
BILLINGSPORT SCHOOL
AFTER SCHOOL TUTORING PARENT SURVEY

Dear Parents:

The 2010-2011 school year is almost complete and during this time your child was provided additional services after school. Please answer the following questions regarding the After School Tutoring Program.

Thank you.

1. Have you met the After School Tutoring teacher during this school year?

Back to School Night	Y___N___	Did not attend___
Conference	Y___N___	Did not attend___
Classroom Visitation	Y___N___	Did not attend___
Phone Contact	Y___N___	
At 4:00pm Pickup	Y___N___	
Other Occasion	Y___N___	

2. Do you feel participation in the After School Tutoring Program has helped?

Reading Skills   Y___N___
Math Skills   Y___N___
Language / Writing Skills   Y___N___

3. My child has benefited from the extra help provided by the After School Tutoring teacher.

Y___N___

4. The After School Tutoring Program has had a positive effect on my child's attitude towards school.

Y___N___

5. My child still needs the greatest support in:

___Vocabulary / Word Recognition   ___Writing Skills
___Phonics / Decoding Skills   ___Math
___Comprehension   ___Spelling
___Speaking

6. Please offer any suggestions you might have regarding the After School Tutoring Program. Use the back if needed.

_____

_____

_____

Thank you for your prompt response. Please return by May 2, 2011.