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THE EFFECTS OF POLICIES, PRACTICES, AND LEADERSHIP STRUCTURES ON THE NARROWED RACIAL ACHIEVEMENT GAP IN SELECTED MILITARY-SERVING SCHOOLS IN THE UNITED STATES

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The Effects of Policies, Practices, and Leadership Structures on the Narrowed Racial Achievement Gap in Selected Military-Serving Schools in the United States

Abstract

The relationship between race and academic achievement has been studied extensively for years (Gibson & Ogbu, 1991). However, school districts across the United States continue to be challenged with the racial achievement gap. In fact, the achievement gaps, along with its contributing factors and its possible solutions, have become the most publicized topic in educational literature (Uhlengberg & Brown, 2002). Many researchers have provided recommendations on how to fix the racial achievement gap by selecting a single contributing factor and addressing it in isolation. However, there have been very few studies that have devoted attention to districts/systems that have been able to narrow the racial achievement gap by simultaneously addressing several factors.

This study identifies the policies, practices, and leadership structures that have allowed military-serving schools to produce a narrower racial achievement gap between its ethnic minority and majority students for over the past decade. Moreover, the findings provide implications for educators in producing effective strategies to teach minorities. The research examines the perceptions of 4 administrators and 49 teachers from four schools within the midwestern U.S. A mixed method approach was used to collect the data. The results of this study highlight that military-serving schools are implementing best practices in the classrooms, are establishing policies that encourage constant professional growth for employees, and has a supportive leadership structure that paves the way for great instruction and give minorities a positive platform and a chance to succeed.

Introduction

The achievement gaps, along with its contributing factors and its possible solutions, have become the most precarious publicized topic in educational literature and assemblages (Uhlengberg & Brown, 2002). Research studies have documented the large test score gap between students who are Black or Hispanic, and those who are White (Jencks & Phillips, 1998 & Talbert-Johnson, 2004).

The most widely accepted explanations for the racial achievement gap to date include assumptions about such issues as poverty, academic coursework and instruction, peer pressure, student attendance and mobility rates, disparities in resources, parenting, preschool, teacher quality and attitudes, stereotype threat, teacher expectations, television, test bias, and genetics

(Williams, 1996). Another explanation of why the racial achievement gap continues to exist was found in what Valencia (1997) called “deficit thinking,” which asserts that academic inadequacy is due to internal deficiencies within the student.

The purpose of this study is to identify the policies, practices, and leadership structures that have allowed the military-serving school system to consistently and successfully produce a smaller racial achievement gap over the past decade. Additionally, this research will examine the perceptions of administrators and teachers regarding the policies, practices and leadership structures in military-serving schools. It is important to note that this is not a comparative study of military and public school systems, but a descriptive study of trends and practices that have produced positive results on the narrowed achievement gap in the military-serving school district.

The theoretical framework utilized in this study consists of the: (a) Focused Equity Practices Theory, and (b) Organizational Learning Disciplines Theory. These theories aided the researcher in discovering how the schools of the study district have been successful in maintaining a narrowed racial achievement gap in K-12 settings on a consistent basis by having a comprehensive practices, policies and tactics for leadership.

In order to have effectively analyzed the performance of the study district, the researcher thoroughly examined the academic performance of the students in two core subjects: Reading and Mathematics, using the test results of the 2011 NAEP. The test results of White, Black, and Hispanic student populations were studied.

Location and Demographics of Military-Serving Schools

The study district serves 86,000 children of military service members and the district’s civilian employees. There are 194 schools in 14 districts, located in 12 foreign countries, seven

states of the United States, Puerto Rico and Guam. More specifically, as of December 2012, the study district reported that the U.S. has military-serving schools in the states of Georgia/Alabama (10 schools), Kentucky (17 schools), North Carolina (18 schools), South Carolina/Fort Stewart/Cuba (9 schools), and Virginia/New York (11 schools). The study district provides education from preschool through the 12th grade.

The demographics of military-serving schools are very diverse. The study district informs that the overall student population consist of 46.7 percent White, and 53.3% minority with 14.7 percent being Black, and 17 percent Hispanic/ Latino. NCES reported that approximately 9 percent of the students have Individualized Education Programs (IEP) and 7.9 percent are enrolled in limited-English proficiency programs. The same report notes that the overall teacher population consist of 82.2 percent White, and 17.8 percent minority. More specifically, 34% of the study district teachers have their Bachelor's degree, 63% hold a Master's degree, and 2.4% have a Doctorate degree.

Research Questions

The study used a mixed research design to address the following questions:

1. What are the perceptions of military-serving school principals and teachers as it relates to: (a) how the policies impact the academic performance of the students; (b) how teaching and administrative practices impact the learning process; and (c) how the leadership structure/behaviors directly and indirectly impacts student achievement to reduce the racial achievement gap that exist among student populations?
2. What focused policy areas have assisted military-serving schools in narrowing the racial achievement gap between ethnic minority and majority students?
3. What practices have assisted military-serving schools in narrowing the racial achievement gap between ethnic minority and majority students?
4. What elements of the leadership structure in military-serving schools are considered essential in the execution for narrowing the racial achievement gap?
5. What are some of the challenges that the military-serving schools may encounter in narrowing the racial achievement gap, and how do teachers and administrators work to overcome these challenges?

Description of Military-Serving Schools

The study district's schools were established shortly after the end of World War II. The United States military decided to establish schools for the children of its service men and women stationed in Europe and the Pacific. Schools for children of military members stationed at various bases in the United States were already well established. First administered by the military branches they served, the growing number of schools was soon transferred to civilian managers, then organized into two separate but parallel systems. In 1994 the two systems were brought together under one umbrella agency.

Bridglall & Gordon (2003) note that the sizes of the military-serving schools are typically small. The average school has fewer than 350 elementary students, 600 middle school students, and 900 high school students, which enables positive teacher/student interaction. Approximately 50% of all military serving school students are eligible for free or reduced –priced lunch, which reflects the low pay scales in the military for junior enlisted ranks. The amount of low-income students can vary from school to school because housing on military installations is based on rank. The school attendance areas are geographically determined just as public school districts are (Bridglall, & Gordon, 2003).

Although the academic achievement levels for students in the military schools tend to excel, 80% of military population have parents with no more than a high school education. However, the education level of the parents does not dictate the education attainment levels of the students. Bridglall & Gordon comment that the teachers view themselves as personally accountable for their student's achievement and all stakeholders possess high expectations. In fact, the culture of order, discipline, education, and training in the military community creates ideal conditions for schools with high expectations (Bridglall & Gordon, 2003).

A supportive environment is critical to child dependents of military personnel because they face unique challenges to their educational attainment. For example, Harrison & Vannest (2008) reported that military children move more frequently than typical students (35% mobility rate), which hinder long-term relationships with peers, and often times create feelings of isolation. Teachman & Tedrow (2008) highlighted that many military children experience broken relationships in the home because of the high divorce rates and deployments. In fact 6.2 percent of military families include single parent households. Additionally, Harrison & Vannest (2008) noted that with the large number of military personnel being deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, both military parents and their child's teacher have to cope with behavioral and emotional difficulties from the student during these deployments. Because of these challenges, the study district schools have to provide an environment that can embrace the unique adversities.

Military-Serving Schools Academic Performance and Assessments.

The study district instructional program provides a comprehensive prekindergarten through 12th grade curriculum that is dedicated to attaining the highest student achievement for all students. As of 2009, 100% of the study district schools were accredited and in good standing with their regional accrediting agency. The study district measures student progress with multiple performance-based assessments. The study district administers the TerraNova examination to all students in grades 3-11, except those approved for an alternate assessment and the students also take the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which provides comparisons of student achievement in reading, writing, math, and science. The military-serving school students consistently achieve high scores on the NAEP test, and score above the national average on standardized assessments. The races/ethnicity of students included in this analysis are

White, Black, and Hispanic. The following tables will highlight the performances between the three races both nationally and in the study district in grades 4 & 8 in the subjects of Reading and Mathematics.

Fourth Grade NAEP Reading Results.

Table 1
4th Grade NAEP Reading Results

Race/Ethnicity	Performance	1998	2000	2002	2003	2005	2007	2008	2009	2011
White	National	226	224	229	229	229	231	228	230	230
	Study district	227	-----	230	230	232	235	-----	234	233
Black	National	193	190	199	198	200	203	204	205	205
	Study district	209	-----	215	214	218	218	-----	218	222
Hispanic	National	195	190	201	200	203	205	207	205	205
	Study district	212	-----	222	218	219	223	-----	223	226

Note. Black includes African American, and Hispanic includes Latino. Score gaps are calculated based on differences between unrounded average scores. Scale score of 0-500. Basic=208-237, Proficient=238-265, Advanced=268-500.

-----Indicates there was no test administered during that year/reporting standards not met (sample size was insufficient to permit a reliable estimate).

Fourth Grade NAEP Math Results.

Table 2
4th Grade NAEP Math Results

Race/Ethnicity	Performance	1992	1996	2000	2003	2005	2007	2008	2009	2011
White	National	227	231	234	243	246	248	250	248	249
	Study district	-----	231	233	242	245	246	-----	245	246
Black	National	193	199	203	216	220	222	224	222	224
	Study district	-----	209	213	227	227	227	-----	229	228
Hispanic	National	202	207	208	222	226	227	234	227	229
	Study district	-----	214	192	234	235	233	-----	235	236

Note. Black includes African American, and Hispanic includes Latino. Score gaps are calculated based on differences between unrounded average scores. Scale score of 0-500. Basic=217-245, Proficient=249-279, Advanced=282-500.

-----Indicates there was no test administered during that year/reporting standards not met (sample size was insufficient to permit a reliable estimate).

Eighth Grade NAEP Reading Results.

Table 3
8th Grade NAEP Reading Results

Race/Ethnicity	Performance	1998	2002	2003	2005	2007	2008	2009	2011
White	National	271	272	272	271	272	268	273	272
	Study district	276	278	278	276	278	-----	278	277
Black	National	244	245	244	243	245	247	246	248
	Study district	254	262	258	258	259	-----	262	263
Hispanic	National	245	247	245	246	247	242	249	251
	Study district	269	270	268	268	273	-----	269	268

Note. Black includes African American, and Hispanic includes Latino. Score gaps are calculated based on differences between unrounded average scores. Scale score of 0-500. Basic=243-279, Proficient=281-321, Advanced=323-500.

-----Indicates there was no test administered during that year/reporting standards not met (sample size was insufficient to permit a reliable estimate).

Eighth Grade NAEP Math Results.

Table 4
8th Grade NAEP Math Results

Race/Ethnicity	Performance	1996	2000	2003	2005	2007	2008	2009	2011
White	National	281	284	288	289	291	290	293	293
	Study district	282	286	293	292	291	-----	294	295
Black	National	242	244	252	255	260	262	261	262
	Study district	254	259	270	267	272	-----	269	274
Hispanic	National	251	253	259	262	265	268	266	269
	Study district	267	267	278	280	282	-----	281	282

Note. Black includes African American, and Hispanic includes Latino. Score gaps are calculated based on differences between unrounded average scores. Scale score of 0-500. Basic=262-296, Proficient=299-329, Advanced=334-500

-----Indicates there was no test administered during that year/reporting standards not met (sample size was insufficient to permit a reliable estimate).

In conclusion, the racial achievement gap is a national problem that must be solved.

Ethnic minority students deserve the same quality of education as their counterparts. Although

there are many contributing factors that exist, there is evidence that the gap can be decreased or narrowed, if the appropriate practices and policies are implemented.

Methodology

The researcher used a focused case study that comprised of four schools within the Midwestern region of the U.S.: one elementary school, two intermediate schools, and one middle school. The four schools selected consisted of 50% of the total military-serving schools in that area. Out of the eight schools in the area, four schools agreed to participate in the study.

The researcher collected data over a three-week time period and utilized a mixed method approach, which incorporated both quantitative and qualitative designs. The qualitative component of this study consisted of open-ended interviews, observations and field notes, and document analysis and the quantitative portion consisted of completing an online questionnaire.

In the qualitative portion of this research, the researcher used purposive sampling and self-selection to obtain participants. The intent was to gather information regarding systemic reform efforts that have resulted in the narrowing of the racial achievement gap between student groups during the past eight years. Interviews were held with both administrators and teachers. There were 4 administrators interviewed (one from each school) and 8 teachers (two from each school), totaling 12 interviewees. The recorded responses were transcribed, coded, and grouped, according to similar characteristics with the use of qualitative analysis software, NVivo 8. Coding was done by levels-level 1 to level 3- in steps that involve specific content coding. At level 3, emerging themes were identified.

Two classroom teachers from each school were observed, and field notes were taken. The observed teachers were selected from a list of all instructional teachers who volunteered to be observed in the school. A total of eight classroom teachers were observed. The grade levels of

the classrooms observed were: one 2nd grade, one 3rd grade, two 4th grade, two 6th grade, and two 7th grade. All teachers were highly qualified. During the observations, a checklist was used to provide protocol. Specific areas under investigation guided the researcher to areas that needed to be monitored and checked for best practices. The pinpointed topics were class organization, methods and materials, teacher-student interaction, and content. Field notes were also taken during the day. Lastly, the document analysis consisted of gathering memos, newsletters, etc. to gather more data about the overall themes of each of the four schools studied.

The quantitative component of the study consisted of an online questionnaire that 49 staff members completed, which provided an average return rate of 80%. The questionnaire consisted of 80 questions and took no more than 20 minutes to complete. (see Appendix B). “The Achievement Gap Questionnaire,” adopted from “The California School Climate Survey,” produced by California Department of Education and West Ed 2008, was determined to be instrumentally suitable with modifications for this research study. Data from returned questionnaires were entered into SPSS 18.0. and descriptive statistics were computed for variables of interest, which included the means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages for each categorical variable. Descriptive statistics were also conducted on demographic data, which was gathered from the first part of the questionnaire and other questionnaire responses. The data gathered from this study was verified by crosschecking it through administrators and educators.

Findings

The following information provides an overview of the participants that completed the questionnaire in the study and the student populations of each of the four schools studied. Overall, forty-nine individuals completed the *Achievement Gap Questionnaire*. The majority of participants were White teachers in grades 5 or above, and had worked in military-serving school district for more than 10 years. Also, the majority of the questionnaire participants ($n = 43$, 87.8%) held master's degrees and had at least 10 years of teaching experience. The district's website highlights their salaries as \$55,957, while the salary of a teacher that has been teaching 14 years in the local public school system with a master's degree salary would be \$55,080, which is a difference of \$877.

Student Demographics.

Information gathered from each of the four schools profile documents provided the student demographics. According to each of the School Profiles, every school has a very diverse student population. At School # 1, 61% of the population is White, 24% African American, and 18% Hispanic or Latino. Thirty nine percent of the population is minority, which includes Pacific Islanders, Native Americans, Asians, multiracial, and unknown student populations. The socioeconomic status of the students was determined to be 48% free or reduced lunch, with the 2008-2009 school year showing a slight increase in the number of students receiving free or reduced lunch.

School #2 also has a diverse racial and ethnic population. The student enrollment is two hundred five students (205) of which 66% are White and 34% minority. 14% are African American, 4% are Asian, 5% Native American, 1% Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 5% multi-race. Four percent declined to state. Forty-seven percent of the student population receives free/reduced breakfast and lunch; twelve percent receives special education services.

School #3 has a varied racial/ethnic student population. According to the School Profile document, of the 189 students, 17% are African American, 67.6% are White, 12% are Hispanic, 8% are multi-racial, 1.6% are American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 0.5% are Asian. The majority of the families are in the enlisted ranks of E1 - E6's, with incomes ranging from \$15,288 for an E1 to \$33,252 for an E-6. This young parent population is at the lower end of the socio-economic scale. The family mobility rate is 31%; there are a significant number of third graders who have been at School #3 two years or less. Eighty-two percent of the students receive free or reduced price lunches. Ten to eighteen percent of the students are enrolled in the special education program.

The School Profile for School #4 also highlights the diverse racial and ethnic population. There are two hundred seventy-six (276) students of which 62% are White, 23% are African American, 0.7 % are Asian, 0.7% are Native American, 1% are Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 8% are multi-racial. Fifty eight percent of the student population receives free/reduced breakfast and lunch, and 13% have IEP's. Forty-five students are assigned to the Read 180 Program.

Research Question 1

What are the perceptions of military-serving school principals and teachers as it relates to: (a) how the policies impact the academic performance of students; (b) how teaching and administrative practices impact the learning process; and (c) how the leadership structure/behavior directly and indirectly impacts student achievement to reduce the racial achievement gap that exist among student populations?

The information gathered to answer research question 1 derived from interviews with twelve study participants: four principals and eight teachers. The researcher found that both

principal and teacher perceptions on how policies, practices, and leadership structures affects student achievement parallel closely.

Policies.

In the area of policies, two themes emerged. Both principals and teachers directly related the policies of mandatory professional development and data driven instruction as having an impact on the academic performance of students. The principals and teachers believed that student test scores continue to increase and the achievement gap among the varying student groups continues to decrease because teachers are expected to continue learning. Teachers constantly use best practices and implement the latest evidence-based strategies learned during weekly professional development meetings. The Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), Friday Morning Focus training, Connection Time, etc. all provide higher learning for the entire staff, which later is practiced in the classroom (Minutes of professional development meeting from School #1).

In regards to the policy of mandatory weekly professional development, teachers and principals use a collection of data assessments, which contributes to increased student achievement. They constantly review data to implement mastery-learning techniques in the classroom. The educators use data to assign struggling students to available special academic programs, and use data to guide their daily lessons. On a larger scale, the district provides professional development workshops and seminars. Everything is done in-house. The model is train one employee and that employee trains many, which cuts down on financial costs of travel, lodging, and meals for several employees. Principal #3 comments that if there is a need for additional professional development he has to request training in the specific area from headquarters and they will assign a trainer to come out and provide the instruction for his

teachers (personal interview with Principal #3). All in all, many of the teachers believe that students grades are good, and test scores produce a smaller racial achievement gap because the data allows them to know exactly where each student is, thus permitting teachers to differentiate instruction to accommodate the learning needs of individual students (personal interviews with teacher #1-8). The professional development does not only provide teachers with new information, the teacher's knowledge is enhanced creating a more professional educator in the classroom.

Practices.

In the area of practices, both levels of professional educators believed it is the practices of the teachers in the classroom that most directly affects student achievement. When the principals and teachers were questioned about practices, three themes emerged. Both teachers and principals responded that implementing differentiated instruction in the classroom, assessing students using a variety of local assessments (Terra Nova, Scholastic Reading Inventory, Directed Reading Activity, NAEP, and common math and reading assessment), and providing programs to cater to low and high performing students (Read 180, Seminar Class, After School tutoring, Reading Counts, & Gifted) all contribute to the higher performance of the military-serving schools and the narrowing of the racial achievement gap that exists among their varying student populations. The teachers believed that spending the extra time to exercise these three practices has affected the academic performance of students in several areas.

For example, School #2 developed a "Gap Committee" to target their low performing minority students especially Black Males. According to Principal #2, the Gap Committee was designed to help the staff identify students that were not achieving and provide interventions through an individual learning plan for those students. The school noticed the need for such a

committee through analyzing individual student achievement data for the past three years, which showed trends of minority students not performing as well as their counterparts. In the first year of implementation, 17 minority students were below the 50th percentile in math and reading. After the interventions and constant monitoring of those students, eleven of the students raised their achievement levels by three stanines.

Leadership Structure/ Behaviors.

In the area of leadership structure/behaviors, two themes emerged, which are credited with directly affecting student achievement. Both principals and teachers believed that their students perform well because the principals are actively involved in their role as administrators and perform as visionary leaders. The responses from the interviews noted that the principals were involved as instructional leaders by providing hands-on-training, such as co-teaching and modeling lessons for teachers. Most importantly, the military-serving school principals did not only hold the title of leader, but also performed as effective leaders. Many of the teachers believed that the principals indirectly effect student achievement through motivating and encouraging the teachers to give their best everyday. Several teachers commented about the comfort level that they experience while working in their schools and they comment that it is because the principals allow them to take risks in the classroom.

Overall, according to the responses given in the personal interviews with principals and teachers, seven of twelve participants agreed that practices were the most important variable in the entire study. One of twelve participants believed that leadership alone is the most important variable in education. Three of twelve participants interviewed believed it is a combination of administrative practices and leadership structure/behavior that impacts the academic performance of students. Lastly, one of twelve interviewees believed it a combination of all three

components, policies, practices, and leadership structure that makes the difference in student achievement success.

Research Question 2

What focused policy areas have assisted military-serving schools in narrowing the racial achievement gap between ethnic minority and majority students?

To examine research question 2, descriptive statistics were conducted to explore participants' perceptions of the educational policy areas that have assisted military-serving schools in decreasing the achievement gap between minority and majority students. To obtain quantitative data, responses from the *Achievement Gap Questionnaire*, Part 3: Policies (items 33-56) were analyzed. Means were ranked ordered from strongly agree (4.0) to strongly disagree (1.0).

The policy areas that participants tended to strongly agree with in their responses (by order of rank) emphasized that the policies in place main focus are towards all students meeting academic standards. The participants believed that the policies correlate with the school mission and vision; foster team learning; encourage positive behavioral support and classroom management; require all staff to analyze data to obtain desired results; reflect closing the racial/ethnic achievement gap as a high priority; and aid in narrowing the achievement gap between white and minority students.

All questionnaire participants tended to strongly disagree in response to two items (by order of rank) including: provides merit pay for performance and establishes strategies to recruit diverse racial, ethnic, or cultural groups as employees. Additionally, all participants except for 67% of School #2 staff disagreed with the statement that the school's policies provides special implications for minority students. 67% of School #2 staff believed that their school policies do

provide special implications for minority students such as the Gap Committee. However, the 67% was only 22% of the total participating population.

In addition to the policy areas that were ranked important from the teachers and staff members on the questionnaire, one other policy that the researcher found to be very significant in producing high achievement results for the study district was the six-year recertification policy for teachers. The recertification policy emphasizes mandatory professional growth for all teachers. The district does not only hire highly qualified educators, but they must continue to learn latest strategies and best practices to remain employed with the district. The policy highlighted on a policy memorandum noted that all educators must be recertified every six years.

The recertification policy speaks to the high level of expectations that the district has for their employees. If achievement is to be at an optimal level in the military-serving schools, the classrooms must be equipped with knowledgeable, effective teachers. Most school systems encourage the teachers to return to school to receive higher pay, however, the overall feelings of teachers in military-schools support the idea that they return to school to be better equipped for the task at hand, which is preparing students to become productive educated citizens (School Profiles/ Belief statements).

Research Question 3

What practices have assisted military-serving schools in narrowing the racial achievement gap between ethnic minority and majority students?

To examine research question 3, descriptive statistics were conducted to explore participants' perceptions of the educational practices that have assisted military-serving schools in decreasing the achievement gap between minority and majority students. The responses from the *Achievement Gap Questionnaire, Part 2: Practices* (items 9-32) were analyzed. In general,

participants tended to agree or strongly agree in responding to all items, with the exception of Item 23, which stated that the practices have staff examine their own cultural biases. On this item, all participants except for 75% of School #2 staff disagreed with the statement. 75% of School #2 staff believed that their school practices do have staff to examine their own cultural biases through professional development or other processes. However, the 67% was only 24% of the total participating population.

The practice items which participants tended to more strongly agree (by order of rank) with included: the practices promote academic success for all students; give all students equal opportunity to participate in classroom; emphasize teaching lessons in ways relevant to students; emphasize helping students academically when they need it; is welcoming to parental involvement; emphasize showing respect for all students' cultural beliefs and practices; and sets high standards for academic performance for all students. Results from the interviews placed emphasis on the fact that military-serving schools practices ensure that administrators hire highly qualified and adequate staffing for their school, each school has a clear vision, mission, and belief system. Practices also ensure that teachers provide productive and conducive learning environments, implements wide use of data and collection instruments and develop committees to improve student achievement. Lastly, teachers are charged with the task of providing unique student activities and clubs that will capture student's attention and provide activities that encourage community and parental involvement.

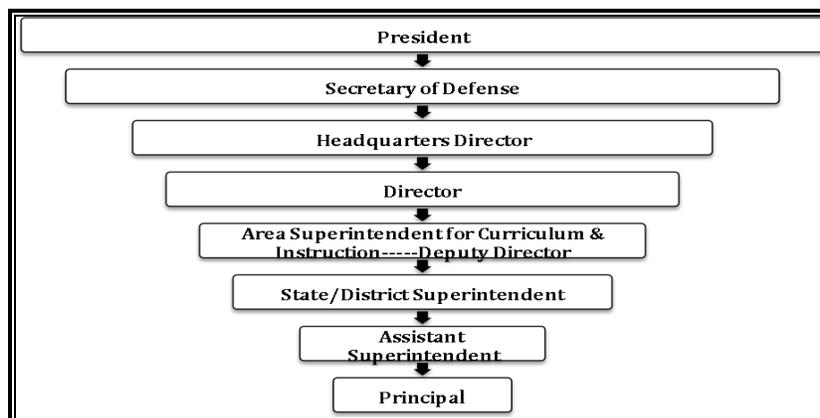
Research Question 4

What elements of the leadership structure in military-serving schools are considered essential in the execution of narrowing the racial achievement gap?

To examine research question 4, descriptive statistics were conducted to explore participants' perceptions of the elements of leadership structure in military-serving schools that are considered essential in the execution of narrowing the achievement gap. Questionnaire responses from the *Achievement Gap Survey*, Part 4: Leadership Structure (items 57-80) was analyzed. Again, the results from the questionnaire show that in general, participants tended to agree or strongly agree to all items, with the exception of Item 70, which states that the leadership structure has staff examine their own cultural biases. On this item, all participants except for 76% of School #2 staff disagreed with the statement. 76% of School #2 staff believed that their school leadership does have staff examine their own cultural biases. However, the 76% was only 26% of the total participating population.

The leadership structure items that participants tended to more strongly agree with (by order of rank) included: maintains focus around improved achievement; shows responsibility to improve the school; sets high standards for academic performance for all students; is welcoming to parental involvement; clearly communicates the goals, vision and mission of the school to all; ensures that all students are given equal opportunity to excel; and is flexible and adaptable to new ideas. The leadership structure plays a very significant role in the climate of each of the four military-serving schools studied. Figure 6 provides an organizational flow chart of the leadership structure present in military-serving schools (Personal interview with principal #3).

Figure 6. Leadership Structure in Military-Serving Schools



Research Question 5

What are some of the challenges that military-serving schools may encounter in narrowing the racial achievement gap and how do teachers and administrators work to overcome these challenges?

Through the analysis of information provided in the interviews and documents, three themes emerged from the data as it relates to challenges. The three challenges identified for military-serving schools were coping with highly mobile populations, obtaining more parental involvement, and needing more time to plan, prepare and teach at the beginning of the year and during the school day. These challenges are hindrances not just to military-serving schools, but many public school districts. In order for students to receive a first class education everywhere, these challenges must be addressed and solutions must be rendered.

Discussion

This research has analyzed the reasons behind the narrowed achievement gap in military-serving schools and the challenges that they face while narrowing the gap. Conclusions are made based on the results. Implications and recommendations for this study and suggestions for future research are also provided.

Policies

The policies that are in place in military-serving schools certainly are related to the theoretical framework utilized in this study. The policy focus areas highlight the same practices in the Focused Equity Practice Theory by Scheurich, Skrla, and Johnson, which state the teachers, administrators, and school policies should be responsive to the literature ensuring that “all” students are treated equitably. The theory states that the policies should also maintain focus around improved academic achievement, engage staff in professional development, and involve the collection, interpreting and use of data to monitor progress and to make improvements in the school. Therefore, when examining the military-serving school district policies, the researcher found that military-serving schools are implementing high-quality policies.

While the recertification policy for teachers was found to be unique, another policy that the researcher found to be noteworthy in the study district was a policy for administrators. Administrators also have mandatory requirements in order to stay employed within the district. The requirements are highlighted in the Rotation Policy. The rotation policy was developed to encourage maximum performance of the systems administrators, provide opportunities to share skills with more than one school, and alleviate burn out when placed in hardship areas (personal interview with Principal #2). The principals in the states are also rotated, but the policy is not as formal in terms of the length of rotation. Some may ask, Why is rotation necessary and is it effective? Overall, the rotation policy is significant to many districts that face shortages of effective and qualified principals particularly in high-needs areas. Districts have implemented many strategies to try to solve the problem and enhance overall performance of schools.

Although the recertification policy for teachers and the rotation policy for administrators seem to require a lot from the employees of the study district, the intentions behind the policies

are focused on what is best for the students. These two policies ignite constant professional growth for the teachers and provide administrators with a renewed outlook on the educational system every six years. Often times when procedures are in place and the organization is operating smoothly, it is easy to become complacent. However, the recertification and rotation policy prevent this from happening in the study district.

The agreed upon results from the questionnaire were similar to those which were discussed in the interviews. In fact, most of the policies main focus is towards **all** students meeting academic standards. The policies correlate with the school mission and vision, fosters team learning through professional development, encourages positive behavioral support and classroom management, requires all staff to analyze data to obtain desired results, reflects closing the racial/ethnic achievement gap as a high priority, and aides in narrowing the achievement gap between white and minority students.

The participants tended to strongly disagree in response to three items including: provides merit pay for performance, establishes strategies to recruit diverse racial, ethnic, or cultural groups as employees, and provides special implications for minority students. Once again these results are parallel to the responses given in the interviews. When the interviewees were asked about distinct policies that were geared specifically towards minority students, only one school had special implications for minority students and Black males. Every other school explained that the school's policies were for "all" students. In fact, every aspect of programs, practices, and policies were geared towards "all" students. The schools were very particular about not separating or showing special attention to any one group of students. However, researcher John Ogbu stresses the importance of having educators that are not afraid to acknowledge cultural differences and address cultural biases. The specific race issues were definitely overlooked by

three of four schools. However, equity was there, which has provided all groups of students with an equitable education and has caused military-serving schools to produce a much smaller racial achievement gap than the national average.

Another area on the questionnaire that the staff disagreed with was that the study district policies promote merit pay for teachers. The responses to the questionnaire pointed out that the district does not offer merit pay, which the researcher believes is a great policy. Everyone is expected to do his or her job, without an underlying incentive. The responses from the interviews support that although there is no merit pay, the employees are certainly satisfied with their working environment and would not choose to work anywhere else. Job satisfaction is very high and the staff is beyond highly qualified, so there is no need for merit pay in the study district. This finding proves that as long as the working conditions are acceptable and employees feel supported, the work habits will be commendable, and great results will be produced.

Practices

In the area of practices, the responses to interviews and questionnaires were also similar and also followed aspects of the theoretical framework. Results show that military-serving schools solid foundation is built on their highly qualified and dedicated teachers that are implementing effective practices. The teachers are first class and strive to be the best no matter what it takes. The responses from the questionnaires showed that in general, the practices promotes academic success for “all” students, and gives “all” students equal opportunity to participate in classroom. More specifically, the teachers teach lessons in ways that are relevant to students; provides a variety of assessments to test skills, differentiate instruction for all students, help students academically when they need it; is welcoming to parental involvement; shows

respect for all students' cultural beliefs and practices; and sets high standards for academic performance for "all" students.

On the other hand, item 23 on the questionnaire highlighted that the practices of three out of four schools do not have staff examine their own cultural biases. On this item, responses were in the direction of disagree, which once again points out that race is not something that is emphasized in military-serving schools. The staff believes that as long as equal opportunity is given to each student they are doing their jobs. This practice tends to speak to the idea of color blindness that may be present in military-serving schools. In fact, almost every teacher commented on the fact that they do not see color when they teach their student's, all kids are equal in their eyesight.

Although teachers in military serving schools appear to have great teacher/student relationships without acknowledging race, Hein (2004) comments that race does matter and should be addressed. She calls for teachers to not be color blind, but be culturally responsive. According to Cornel Pewewardy (1998), culturally responsive pedagogy "involves providing the best possible education for children that preserves their own cultural heritage and prepares them for meaningful relationships with other people, and for living productive lives in the present society without sacrificing their own cultural perspective" (pp.69-70). Pulido-Tobiassen & Gonzalez-Mena (1999) emphasize the importance of culturally responsive education for pre-schoolers: "Because young children form ideas about themselves and other people long before they start kindergarten, it is important to begin teaching anti-bias lessons early. If we reinforce these lessons, children will learn to appreciate, rather than fear, differences and to recognize bias and stereotypes when they see them" (p.3). Therefore, race should be acknowledged and cultural biases should be addressed.

Leadership Structure

In the area of leadership structure, military-serving schools excel. One of the tenets in the Focused Equity Practice theory states that leadership is trained and uses authority to make equity decisions about how to acquire, allocate, and align fiscal, human, and material resources to improve learning for “all” students. The theory states that leadership should also create partnerships with the community and various other organizations that will impact classroom instruction.

Results from the interviews and questionnaire responses emphasize that the leadership maintains focus around improved achievement, shows responsibility to improve the school, sets high standards for academic performance for “all” students, is welcoming to parental involvement, clearly communicates the goals, vision and mission of the school to all, ensures that “all” students are given equal opportunity to excel; and is flexible and adaptable to new ideas. The leadership also is actively involved in planning, improving, and providing moral support to teachers.

On the other hand, one area of concern that was highlighted through the questionnaire was the same concern with practices, which is Item 70; three out of four schools share that their leadership does not have staff examine their own cultural biases. Organizational Learning Disciplines Theory by Peter Senge states that the organizations and individuals must be aware of mental models, which may be assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures and images that influence how one understands the world and how one may respond.

Therefore, teachers must be aware of their position as it relates to cultural biases. It is ironic that one of the highest performing schools of the four studied is headed by a minority principal and is the only school that as a whole has directly addressed race. Seventy-five percent

of School #2 staff either agreed or strongly agreed to the statement that acknowledges cultural biases on the questionnaire. In fact, School #2 has an achievement gap committee, which is based solely on race and performance of each group. The principal of School #2 explained that once race was addressed head on and the one size fit all theory was taken away, the student scores began to increase even more and the achievement gap became even smaller amongst minority students and their White counterparts at School #2.

Implications and Recommendations

The results of this study shed light on what kind of policies, practices, and leadership structures produce solid performances in student achievement in military-serving schools. Although practices of the teachers were rated most important to the overall impact of student achievement, each of the variables play a major role and work as a complete unit in systemic reform. Teachers and principals perceived each of these variables (policies, practices and leadership structure) as components that give military-serving schools such a platform. The findings prove that the military serving school district is an organization that is not afraid of restructuring itself periodically to see greater gains. It should be noted that principal and teachers' perceptions in this study provides critical baseline data for other districts.

Policies.

The recertification policy for teachers is a mandate that only provides a win-win situation for both the school and teacher. The policy allows the schools to benefit by having knowledgeable teachers in the classrooms that can make solid decisions about effective instruction. The teacher benefits by earning a higher degree, which will earn him/her a pay raise and will make them more marketable in the job market. Once again, although the teachers are

required to maintain professional growth, and principals are faced with rotating ever so often, the findings prove that as long as the working conditions are acceptable and employees feel supported, their work habits will be commendable, and great results will be produced.

These findings prove that because military employees are satisfied with their current working conditions and environment, military-serving schools will continue to attract and maintain a high rate of highly qualified teachers in the classroom. Therefore, if local school districts would like to compete and obtain the same quality of teachers that the military-serving schools have, the working conditions must be satisfactory. If not, then public schools will continue to struggle with obtaining the best teachers for their students and military-serving schools will continue to house the best professionals.

Practices.

In the areas of practices, it is critical to have a competent staff that is engrossed in professional development, which equips them with the latest best practices. This study proves that teachers are the foundation of an effective instructional program. The practices of the teachers in military-serving schools reflect dedication and motivation. The teachers are not waiting for policies such as merit pay to motivate them to do their jobs. Their love for their students and profession is what drives them to high quality performances. Additionally, although there is no evidence of tenure in the system for educators, which may sometimes be a motivating factor for educators to perform well and obtain higher degrees, the reasons behind the action are minute when compared to the impact of the action. On the other hand, the district fell short in providing special implications for minority students. Therefore, the one size fit all practice could be hindering even greater gains for the study district.

Leadership Structure.

Findings from this study show that when principals are actively involved using several methods of data to drive instruction in every way, achievement will increase. Although researcher Linda Darling Hammond proclaims the teacher to be the most vital component in the school, the administrators should lead the way to great instruction. This means that the administrator should be one that drives ongoing assessment, encourages the use of best practices such as differentiated instruction, and provides ongoing support to the teachers, which expresses the attitude of “whatever it takes.” Whatever it takes refers to performing those actions that are done to best benefit the school and most importantly the students.

Additionally, in regards to leadership structure, the military-serving schools do not have a School Board that governs them, which sometimes create a more political platform in the educational system, than what is needed. With this in mind, this research points out that the absence of the School Board creates a more freewill and straightforward learning environment for all. Therefore, if there is no need for a Board in military-serving schools and they are doing well, is there really a need for a Board in other systems?

Overall, if the current policies, practices, & leadership structure remains in place, military serving schools will continue to excel in academic achievement, producing an even smaller achievement gap amongst their student populations in years to come.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the military-serving school district establish a standardized curriculum system wide. Although the district has standards based instruction, based on the results from the interviews and questionnaires it is highly recommended that the district begin to create a standardized curriculum for the district, which will include pacing guides and scope and sequencing for all schools at all grade levels. Many of the principals and teachers are working

overtime aligning the informal curriculum vertically and horizontally, which may result in different schools having different alignments.

Next, based on the results of the questionnaires, there is a need to establish strategies to recruit diverse racial, ethnic, or cultural groups as employees, and provides special implications for minority students. Although the system is doing well in providing equity for “all” students, a more specific focus should be placed on individual races to see greater gains similar to School #2. Even though the district has policies that promote diversity in staffing, there is no clear evidence, with 82% of the teachers being White. Because the racial makeup of the school district is so diverse, research provided by Price (2006) highlights the importance of providing a staff that is culturally literate and somewhat mirrors the student body population.

Last but not least, the results from interviews, document analysis, and the questionnaire exposes that military-serving schools face some of the same challenges as public schools, which are low parental involvement depending on socioeconomic status of parents, highly mobile populations due to transitioning, and the need for more time to plan. Duncan & Magnuson (2005) argued that the racial achievement gap exist because parents which are of low socioeconomic standings often have fewer quality opportunities to get involved in their child’s education. Whether low parental involvement is because of busy work schedules, bad school experiences themselves, or intimidation by the teacher, parental involvement is a part of the puzzle that is missing in the education system. The disparity is present in military-serving schools and in public school systems. Therefore, something must be done to begin educating our parents and reaching out to them to make them feel more comfortable to get involved in the education process. Parents should not only be contacted when there is a problem with their child, but should be contacted for positive occurrences also. Schools should implement programs such

as “Parent Enhancement Night” a night dedicated to teaching parents some of the concepts that the students are learning in class, so that parents are more capable of helping their child at home with homework and projects. Parenting classes should also be offered at a time when parents can attend. Innovation is definitely needed to spark action and full participation in this area. Lee & Bowen (2006) noted that the connection between home and school is very significant when it comes to raising student achievement.

Because these issues are so complex, policy makers should develop policies, which will hold parents more accountable, create a more standardized curriculum so that when students move from place to place they will be able to continue with the same topic and unit no matter where they are. Also teachers should return to school earlier in the summer to provide more time for professional development and for preparing for new trends that will be expected in the upcoming year. The school year would be so much better if everything was in place on the first day of school.

Areas for Further Research

The present study has provided an examination of teacher and principal perceptions on the effects of policies, practices, and leadership structure on the narrowed achievement gap in military-serving schools. Although the researcher discussed several areas that military-serving schools are doing well to provide the narrowed racial achievement gap there are still many unanswered questions. Another area of study could focus on: 1) Why would military-serving schools rather utilize the one size fit all philosophy rather than address the disparities amongst specific race populations outwardly? 2) What are the employee’s positions on the 6-year mandatory rotation policy for administrators? and 3) Why are cultural biases not addressed in military-serving schools? This study clearly identified the acknowledgement of cultural biases

being non-existent in every school except the school that was headed by a minority principal. Why is that? This area of concern should be explored in future studies as a means of improving the racial achievement gap.

Limitations

The results of this study are not without limitations, which may affect the conclusions that are made. One limitation, involved the limited sample population of four schools. The four schools selected comprised of 50% of the total military-serving schools in that area. The four schools that were studied were self-selected through principal agreement to participate in the study. Therefore, the schools that volunteered to participate may have been schools that were deemed high performing or schools with the least amount of issues regarding the achievement gap, which may impact findings. Also, the data obtained on military-serving schools do not allow for generalization to every school system. Any attempt to generalize these results to “all” school systems across the United States should be made with the greatest caution.

Conclusion

This research has contributed to the limited body of knowledge on teacher and principal perceptions about the effects of policies, practices, and leadership structures in military-serving schools. Most research on the achievement gap addresses only one component of the overall factors of why the racial achievement gap exists and is mostly examined in public school systems. This study has exposed three elements of how military-serving schools have consistently produced a much narrower racial achievement gap than the national average. This study has allowed exposure of successful strategies that are present in systemic reform in military-serving schools. This study has also made a unique contribution to the current literature

base by examining teacher and principal perceptions about the effects of policies, practices, and leadership structures on the narrowed achievement gap in military-serving schools.

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