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Closing the Gaps: Understanding and Disrupting Deficit Thinking and Exclusionary Discipline Practices in a Latinx School

Edgar Ivan Alcaraz
San Jose State University

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CLOSING THE GAPS: UNDERSTANDING AND DISRUPTING DEFICIT THINKING AND
EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE PRACTICES IN A LATINX SCHOOL

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Educational Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirement for the Degree

Doctor in Education

by

Edgar Ivan Alcaraz

August 2021

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The Designated Dissertation Committee Approves the Dissertation Titled

CLOSING THE GAPS: UNDERSTANDING AND DISRUPTING DEFICIT THINKING AND
EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE PRACTICES IN A LATINX SCHOOL

by

Edgar Ivan Alcaraz

APPROVED FOR THE EDUCATIONAL DOCTORAL PROGRAM IN EDUCATIONAL
LEADERSHIP

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

August 2021

Marcos Pizarro, Ph.D.

Associate Dean, College of Education

Noni Mendoza Reis, Ed.D.

Professor Emerita, College of Education

Joe Jaconette, Ed.D.

Adjunct Professor, Brandman University

ABSTRACT

CLOSING THE GAPS: UNDERSTANDING AND DISRUPTING DEFICIT THINKING AND EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE PRACTICES IN A LATINX SCHOOL

by Edgar Ivan Alcaraz

Improving the academic outcomes for low-income underserved students has become imperative for districts who are committed to equity and justice. School cultures that emphasize college and career readiness for all have been found to improve the academic achievement of low-income students of color. This dissertation explores the efforts of a Latino middle school principal striving to build a college and career readiness culture. Deficit thinking, coupled with exclusionary discipline practices, were the biggest challenges to overcome while promoting a college and career readiness culture. The findings of this study highlight the need to address and disrupt these ideologies as a critical first step in creating a culture that truly supports college and career readiness for all students.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, a strong woman who traveled thousands of miles in search for a better future for her children. With a few personal items, she began a new life in a country that was foreign to her. Fearless, determined, and hungry for a new start, she persevered through poverty, racism, and xenophobia. Her story reminds me that anything is possible. Every day I hear the wise words that she once shared with me: “*todo puede ser difícil, pero nada es imposible*.” Everything can be difficult, but nothing is impossible. I try to live by these words every day.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AYP – annual yearly progress
CAASPP – California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress
CELOT – California English Language Development Test
CRT – critical race theory
EL – English learner
ELD – English language development
ELL – English language learner
ELPAC – English Language Proficiency Assessments for California
ESEA – Elementary and Secondary Education Act
ESSA – Every Student Succeeds Act
NCLB – No Child Left Behind Act
NPSAS – National Postsecondary Student Aid Study
OCDQ – Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire
PBIS – positive behavioral interventions and supports
PLC – professional learning community
RFEP – reclassified to fluent English proficient

Chapter 1: Introduction

Despite numerous initiatives at the state and federal level, the opportunity gap between students of color and their white peers continues to widen disproportionately. From lower high school graduation rates to dismal college attendance and graduation, Black and Latino students continue to fall behind. These well documented findings closely resemble some of the same outcomes that I experienced while navigating high school and the college-going pathway. As a Latino male student, I attended schools that lacked resources and had low levels of academic achievement and high dropout rates. My completion of high school and college was unique and highly dependent on the support of educators who believed in my ability to succeed. Unfortunately, many of my peers did not make it to college despite having the desire to do so. My experience coupled with the historical achievement trends among students of color form the basis of this study.

Unfortunately, research continues to outline a performance gap between students of color and their white peers. The unresolved gaps have caused many researchers to recommend solutions, with many of them suggesting a college and career readiness school culture as the answer. However, literature that describes the obstacles while trying to implement a culture of college and career readiness for all students, in a school that serves predominantly working class students of color, is limited. Similarly, the voices of educational leaders of color are also missing in the literature. As such, the purpose of this qualitative autoethnographic study was to identify the challenges and obstacles that one can encounter while trying to reach a college and career ready school culture. Furthermore, narratives were used to describe my experiences as a first-year principal, as a way to represent a voice that is missing in the literature.

Background of the Study

The literature on academic achievement, college enrollment, and degree attainment patterns continues to highlight substantial differences between ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups. Results from the Nation's Report Card indicate that only 34% of eighth grade students, nationally, were classified as proficient readers, while 34% scored at or above proficient in mathematics (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2019). State-level assessment data confirms that the American educational system is failing our students of color, showing little to no advancement in preparing them for the rigors of college. In California, only 40.85% of Latino students met or exceeded standards in language arts and 28.05% met or exceeded standards in mathematics (California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress, 2019). Of particular concern is the notable inequitable schooling conditions (Howard, 2010; Lipman & Haines, 2007), high dropout rates (Balfanz & Legters, 2004), low levels of academic achievement (McCall et al., 2006; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019), and exclusionary discipline practices (Anyon et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2018) that continue to negatively impact students of color.

Recent studies indicate that the exclusionary discipline practices of out-of-school suspension and expulsion are two common approaches used by school personnel to manage student behavior. Evidence suggests that such exclusionary discipline practices are often ineffective, undermine academic outcomes, and are harmful to students (Anyon et al., 2018; E. P. Jones et al., 2018). For instance, these punitive practices fail to address the root cause of the behavior and often lead to students feeling disconnected from the school (E. P. Jones et al., 2018). Furthermore, extensive research has documented the negative relationship between exclusionary discipline practices and grades. Anyon et al. (2018) argue that high school graduation is less likely for those students who are frequently suspended and

expelled from school, causing additional risk factors such as truancy and involvement in the criminal justice system.

Unfortunately, middle school students of color often get disciplined at much higher rates when compared to their white peers (Anyon et al., 2018; Carter Andrews & Gutwein, 2020; Losen & Martinez, 2020a; Skiba et al., 2002). Nationally, students of color are 3.2 times more likely to be suspended (Nowicki, 2018). In 2018–2019, 54% of African American students in California lost more than 20 days of instructions due to suspension (Losen & Martinez, 2020a). In the same year, only 18% of white students lost more than 20 days of instruction. The highest rates were found among African American students with disabilities, accounting for an average of 114 days lost due to suspension. In turn, these absences cause students to lag behind their peers academically, often two to three grades below.

Consequently, there is a growing consensus on the need to address these gaps. In particular, equipping all students with the skills to be able to think critically, solve real-world problems, and be successful in today's global knowledge-based economy has become an urgent call to action for educational leaders. As such, school cultures that emphasize college and career readiness for all have emerged as a necessity to aid school districts in closing the college and career readiness gaps. Conley (2010) and McClafferty et al. (2002) identified several key elements students need in order to successfully transition to college and several principles that describe what educators can do to achieve a college and career readiness school culture. When members of the school community work together, these studies found that a school culture can be transformed into one that makes college attainment a priority.

Several reforms have been brought forward aimed at improving our school system, with many school districts across the state making college and career readiness for all their goals. In turn, school leaders play the most important role in creating and sustaining school cultures that promote college and career readiness for all, making effective leadership an important element in the culture change process. The role of the school site leader has been noted as one of the most significant factors that influences school culture (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016; Dutta, & Sahney, 2016; Lee & Li, 2015). Consequently, my lens as a school leader was critical in identifying the challenges and obstacles that can be encountered while trying to change a school culture.

Purpose of the Study

There is a need to create school environments that ensure all students are college and career ready. As such, the purpose of this study was to: (a) examine and document my personal experiences as a new principal of a public middle school, as I attempted to establish a college and career readiness culture, (b) document the challenges I faced in trying to change the school culture, and (c) identify the conditions and strategies necessary to establish and sustain a school culture of college and career readiness for all.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What challenges and obstacles are encountered while attempting to implement a culture of college and career readiness for all students, in a school that serves predominantly working class students of color?
2. Under what conditions can a culture of college and career readiness for all prevail, in a school that serves predominantly working class students of color?

Overview of Research Methods

In this dissertation, I use autoethnography to document and analyze my personal experiences as a first-year principal of a public middle school. Autoethnography is a qualitative method that focuses on inquiry and analysis of the personal experiences of the researcher (Ellis et al., 2011). Using this approach, artifacts, journal entries, meeting notes, and other forms of communication with members of the school community were collected and analyzed to answer the research questions. The analysis is presented in a self-narrative format from the perspective of the researcher in an attempt to identify the conditions and strategies necessary to establish and sustain a school culture of college and career readiness for all.

Autoethnography was chosen over other methods because it allowed me as the researcher to: (a) use a self-reflective approach to describe and critique my personal experiences, (b) analyze the interactions between members of the school community through the lens of a school leader, and (c) analyze the complex forces involved in changing a school culture. Additionally, this method provided an opportunity to study the phenomena of culture change as an active participant in the change process, something that is only possible using an autoethnography.

Theoretical Framework

School leaders of color are still significantly underrepresented in the educational system (Chang et al., 2014). As such, their stories are also underrepresented in research, with most of the related literature focused on the need for diversity of leadership in education. Using counter-stories, this dissertation highlights the experiences of a first-year Latino principal of a public middle school through the use of storytelling. According to Baber (1995), “people of color must provide their own perspective” as a means to recover the voices of

marginalized groups. Consequently, using counter-storytelling, this dissertation describes the experiences of the researcher in order to shed light on the social justice issues that continue to exist in America's educational system. The centrality and intersectionality of race and racism was a vital lens for analyzing and understanding broader systems of racism and oppression in education (Rodela & Rodriguez-Mojica, 2020).

According to Taylor et al. (2009), critical race theory (CRT) allows for the analysis of the consequences and manifestations of race, racism, inequity, and the dynamics of power and privilege in education. As it pertains to education and this dissertation, CRT was a useful framework for interpreting the structural and cultural aspects of education that challenged the establishment of a culture of college and career readiness for all students. Additionally, this theoretical framework provided the researcher the opportunity to use storytelling as means to share the challenges and obstacles in this process of changing the school culture. Most importantly, it allowed me, as the researcher, the ability to self-reflect on my challenges as a first-year principal and capture issues involving social justice.

Researcher's Positionality

As an educator for the past eleven years, I have served in various positions and have witnessed the obstacles that many students face while attempting to complete high school. My career as an educator began with an entry-level position as an instructional assistant and has progressed through various positions, leading to my current assignment as a middle school principal. Each job position that led to my current tenure has afforded me the opportunity to work with educationally disadvantaged and low-income students who have high college aspirations but fail to attend college. As an academic counselor, my caseload consisted of students that are commonly referred to as "at-risk." Within this group of students, I came across some who lacked a college course requirement because their

counselor did not enroll them in that course, or students who repeated the same course. Additionally, I found students lacking motivation, and not because they did not believe in themselves, but rather because they were constantly discouraged by others, including some educators. Moreover, my experience as a high school assistant principal provided a broader perspective on some of the systemic barriers to student learning. Poverty, deficit thinking, learning disabilities, and poor or inadequate skills are among a few of the obstacles that I have found to affect student academic success.

The experiences highlighted in my profession closely resemble some of the same events that I experienced while navigating high school and the college-going pathway. Like many Latino male students, I was a victim of education labels, lack of preparation for college level work, and discouraging messages from both peers and teachers. My completion of high school and college were highly dependent on the support that I received from educators who believed in my ability to succeed. My success was unique in that many of my peers did not make it to college. Consequently, the professional experiences coupled with my personal experiences have influenced my desire to identify the conditions needed to create a school culture that supports Latino students through completion of high school and prepares them for the rigors of college. Simultaneously, these experiences have deeply ingrained a desire to improve the educational experiences and attainment of Latino students.

Significance of the Study

Much of the research on college and career readiness has been focused on identifying the skills and dispositions necessary to be successful in college. Researchers have also studied school cultures and have identified the role of school leaders and school environments in preparing students for college and careers. However, limited research is

available on the challenges and obstacles that school leaders face while attempting to create school cultures that emphasize college and career readiness for all students, particularly in communities where the majority of students are disenfranchised. Consequently, this study is important because it documents the challenges and obstacles faced from the lens of a Latino school leader who comes from the community in which the study took place. Additionally, the findings of the study contribute to the existing literature on college and career readiness and serves as the foundation for future research on the conditions for creating and sustaining a college and career readiness culture. Furthermore, this study offers the perspective of a population that has been marginalized and gives voice to a community that is often underrepresented in research. Ultimately, school districts will be able to use the information from this dissertation to begin the process of creating school cultures that prioritizes college readiness for all students.

Summary

The research on academic achievement continues to document the gap that exists between students of color and their white peers. From standardized testing to graduation rates to discipline, our current educational system continues to fail our students of color. The available literature suggests the need to level the playing field for our students of color and thus create school cultures that promote college and career readiness for all. Consequently, this has become a priority for many school leaders, particularly for leaders that work with underserved groups. The topic of college and career readiness will be further explored in Chapter 2. Chapter 2 also outlines the literature on educational policies aimed at closing the achievement gaps, the opportunity gap, deficit thinking, and discipline practices. Chapter 2 ends with a review of the literature on school culture and climate and school leadership. Chapter 3 describes the research methodology used in this study in more

detail. Chapter 4 provides the research findings and Chapter 5 provides a summary of key findings, conclusions, and recommendations for future research. The findings of the study are a helpful insight into the challenges of culture change for other school leaders. School leaders who are attempting to implement a college and career ready culture will be able to identify ways to address the challenges before they occur, leading to a successful culture change.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction

The existing literature on student performance, particularly among underserved students of color, continues to highlight major inequities in the educational system. Despite the efforts to address the achievement and opportunity gaps between students of color and their white peers, achievement disparities continue to prevail in the American educational system. Studies on college enrollment and degree attainment found that many low-income students of color, upon graduation from high school, are the least educated and are often not prepared for college level coursework (Orange & Ramalho, 2013; Roderick et al., 2009; U. S. Department of Education, 2010). While there have been many efforts to increase student achievement among underserved students of color, many of those efforts have failed. Small pockets of success have been noted, but not broad enough to close the achievement and opportunity gaps.

School culture that promotes college and career readiness for all students has become a critical topic to those concerned about educational inequity and opportunity gaps. The review of literature in this chapter will help identify the challenges and obstacles associated with building a college and career readiness culture. To further explore this topic, this chapter provides a review of literature on cultures that promote college and career readiness for all students. This chapter also outlines the literature on educational policies aimed at closing both the achievement and opportunity gaps. Deficit thinking and discipline practices, college enrollment and degree attainment disparities, school culture and climate, and school leadership are among some of the topics explored in this chapter. These topics were selected in order to answer the following research questions:

1. What challenges and obstacles are encountered while attempting to implement a culture of college and career readiness for all students, in a school that serves predominantly working class students of color?
2. Under what conditions can a culture of college and career readiness for all prevail, in a school that serves predominantly working class students of color?

Theoretical Framework

In order to understand the structural and cultural aspects of education that challenge the establishment of a culture of college and career readiness for all students, this study draws from concepts of critical race theory (CRT). CRT offered a critical lens in understanding racial inequities and the resistance in closing the achievement gap. Additionally, CRT was helpful to understanding race, racism, and the oppression that many students of color experience in the American educational system.

Critical race theory emerged in the 1970s in response to the need to combat subtle forms of racism in American law. CRT builds on the insights of critical legal studies and radical feminism movements (Delgado et al., 2012). Bell (1992), Delgado et al. (2012), and other scholars have used CRT strategies to examine how race and power are constructed to maintain racial inequities. Furthermore, CRT scholars assert that racism is permanent and difficult to address because it is not acknowledged (Delgado et al., 2012). CRT holds that race is a product of social construct and serves as an avenue to advance the interest of both white elites and working class caucasians. Moreover, CRT holds that society racializes different minority groups at different times (differential racialization) and that no individual has a unitary identity (intersectionality and anti-essentialism). A final element of CRT concerns the value and power of storytelling from the perspective of people of color.

Although CRT began as a movement in the field of law, many in the field of education have used CRT as a framework to critique educational policies and practices within a historical and cultural context (Amiot et al., 2020; Comeaux et al., 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2005, Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Solorzano (1997) identified five key tenets that guide the analysis of theory, research, pedagogy, curriculum, and policy. These key tenets are: (a) the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism, (b) the challenge to dominant ideology, (c) the commitment to social justice, (d) the centrality of experiential knowledge, and (e) the interdisciplinary perspective. These five themes, or tenets, offer a guiding lens in analyzing and critiquing race and racism. Of particular interest is the idea that Black and Brown writers can recount their lived experiences to communicate matters that others are unlikely to know.

According to Solorzano (1997), CRT recognizes that the stories and narratives of Black and brown writers “are legitimate [and] appropriate” and views this knowledge as a strength in the process of understanding race and racism (p. 70). Solorzano and Yosso (2002) argue that most of the stories about white privilege and racisms come from the perspective of those who are white, male, within the middle and/or upper class, and heterosexual. In turn, this lack of diversity in the narratives distorts the experiences of people of color. In response, Solorzano and Yosso (2002) offer counter-storytelling as a tool “for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege” and a way to “challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform” (p. 32). Williams (2004) contends that counter-storytelling has the power to reveal gaps in dominant cultural perspectives and provides an opportunity for a new narrative that has the potential of altering those dominant perspectives. As such, storytelling has

become a prominent tool in providing context to further understand and transform established belief systems (Solorzano, & Bernal, 2001).

Background: Educational Policies

Over the last decade, several reforms have been brought forward aimed at improving our school system and ameliorating the opportunity gap. The academic achievement gap and the success of public schools has become a leading electoral issue due to the concern that our educational system is still failing our students of color. Both state and federal government leaders have increased their involvement in educational policy and established policies that directly impact students. For instance, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was enacted in an effort to close the opportunity gap between white middle-income children and children of color along with those from low-income households. By requiring all public schools to implement statewide assessments, NCLB was intended to ensure that no group was in fact “left behind.” These initiatives were a commitment of the federal government to put an end to the inequalities and injustices that have long existed in the public educational system. Most recently, the reauthorization by the federal government of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires that all students be taught with high academic standards, and an emphasis on college and career readiness (Beach et al., 2015).

In contrast to NLCB, the reauthorization marked a great shift in decision making from the federal government to state and local authorities. President Obama’s reauthorization created flexibility and new hopes for states (Beach et al., 2015). Under the new changes, states are required to develop an accountability system that ensures the success of all students. According to the United States Department of Education, the law:

...maintains an expectation that there will be accountability and action to effect positive change in our lowest-performing schools, where groups of students are

not making progress, and where graduation rates are low over extended periods of time. (United States Department of Education, 2015)

While the changes still require state testing, the new law moves towards a more holistic approach to accountability. ESSA eliminated the Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) and replaced it with a system that expanded beyond academic achievement. By requiring states to include indicators on school quality, ESSA has school climate factors that impact student learning. The idea that schools should focus on preparing students for a life after high school also calls for state intervention when districts and schools are not making adequate progress. Consequently, school leaders are responsible for implementing and creating a system that monitors students' progress and ensures the success of all students.

Extensive literature has documented the inequitable schooling conditions, high dropout rates, low levels of academic achievement, and segregation that students of color experience while in the public educational system (Lipman & Haines, 2007; Nichols, 2016; Rosiek, 2019). According to Lipman and Haines (2007), low reading and math levels among African American, Latino, and low-income students are indicators of the deep inequities in “resources, opportunities to learn, and teachers’ ideologies, cultural disconnections in curriculum and instruction, social contexts of the school, or strengths children bring to the school setting” (p. 479). Unfortunately, “policies that are crafted to mitigate racial and economic inequalities often fail to achieve their stated aim” (Nichols, 2016, p. 8). Policies like NCLB and “Race to the Top” have not been able to address the deep inequities. On the contrary, they continue to encourage a system of ranking and sorting that is primarily dependent on high stakes testing. In turn, this form of accountability only promotes a culture of competition which widens the achievement disparities.

Disparities in Academic Achievement and The Opportunity Gap

Defined as the differences in academic performance between groups of students based on ethnicity, racial, gender, and income status, the gap in academic achievement has persisted despite policies that were intended to close it (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Historically, substantial gaps in standardized test scores have been noted for minority students, particularly for low-income Latino students. For instance, the 2017 reading and mathematics national assessment score for Latino students was lower when compared to their white peers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). On average, white students scored 20 points higher on the reading assessment and 33 points higher on the mathematics assessment. Consistent with these findings, the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) data, indicates that 54.23% of white students who took the state exam in 2018 met or exceeded standards in mathematics, while only 28.05% of Latino students and 20.55% of African American students who took the exam met or exceeded the standards. Similar results were found in Language Arts, with 65.64% of white students meeting or exceeding standards, while only 40.81% of Latino students did so. Worse results for African American students were found with only 32.48% meeting or exceeding standards.

Similarly, results from the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) assessment for both mathematics and reading were not measurably different between 1990 and 2017 test scores (McFarland et al., 2019). Consistent with these findings, McCall et al. (2006) and Northwest Evaluation Association (2006) noted an achievement gap between White students, African American and Latino students at every grade level that took the Northwest Evaluation test. The difference in the mean score on the Northwest Evaluation test was so large that “almost any difference would reach commonly used levels of

statistical significance” (p. 8). Furthermore, differences in mean scores were noted regardless of the students’ socioeconomic status.

Although Latino students are considered the majority in California’s public education system, they are the least educated (Gandara, 2010; Nettles, 2017). The National Center for Education Statistics (2019) indicates that nationally approximately 2.1 million students, each year, do not graduate from high school, with more than half of them being minority students. For instance, in 2017 Latino students accounted for 8.2% while African American students accounted for 6.5% of the total dropouts. Dropout rates were much lower for white students, accounting for 4.3% of the total dropouts. Balfanz and Legters (2004) found that nearly half of the nation’s African American and Latino students attend a high school in which graduation from high school is not an expectation. The study also revealed that high schools with a high percentage of minority students are 5 times more likely to have higher dropout rates when compared to a majority white school. The highest number of high school dropout rates were found in Arizona, California, Georgia, Florida, Illinois, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Texas, collectively totaling nearly 80% of the nation’s dropout rate (Balfanz & Letgers, 2004). Coincidentally, some of these states have the highest percentage of Latino and African American student populations.

These differences in academic achievement are a direct result of the disparities that arise from unequal access to resources, and they create what researchers refer to as the opportunity gap (Carter & Welner, 2013). According to Howard (2010), impoverished schools and schools with high percentages of low-income students often lack experienced teachers and lack preschools. Research also suggests that many students with low socioeconomic status are less likely to participate in school activities and programs that

support the overall development and success of a student (Richmond & Sibthorp, 2019). McClellan et al. (2018) argue that such marginalized student populations lack access to highly-qualified teachers, are rarely recommended to advanced courses, and receive more discipline referrals. Comparable findings were noted by Wakefield and Fajardo (2004) who found that Latino and African American students experienced racial discrimination in the classroom, by school-based police, and were denied college information based on their race.

Deficit Thinking

The documented disparities in academic achievement are exacerbated by the deficit ideologies that persist in schools that serve low-income students of color. According to Valencia and Black (2002), deficit thinking is deeply rooted in the idea that students fail in school because of their internal deficits or deficiencies. Moreover, deficit thinking reflects the belief that student's fail in school because "students enter school without the normative cultural knowledge and skills; and parents neither value nor support their child's education" (Yosso, 2005, p. 75). Limited intellectual abilities, lack of motivation to learn, and linguistic shortcomings are among other reasons wrongly attributed as the cause of student failure. Valencia (2010) argues that deficit thinking is a type of oppression that stems from blaming the victim and ignores historical and systemic forces as possible contributors to student failure.

While deficit thinking is harmful, many researchers have documented the presence of deficit thinking among educators in Title 1 schools (Keefer, 2017; Schweitzer & Hughes, 2019; Valencia & Black, 2002; Yosso, 2005). For instance, Keefer's (2017) study revealed a teacher focus on the negative consequences of living in poverty. Limited time with parents, single parent households, and lack of food, shelter, and resources were some of the perceived deficits noted by the teachers. There was no understanding among the teachers of

the strengths or the funds of knowledge that the students brought to the classroom. Consistent with these findings, Schweitzer and Hughes (2019) found deficit thinking among educators in early education programs. The educators perceived Latino parents to be resistant, uninformed, and placing low value on education. The teachers also tended to have negative ideologies suggesting parents were lacking in awareness or did not value the education their children were receiving. These unfounded perspectives only negatively impacted school engagement and student success for students of color.

Discipline Practices

According to Osher et al. (2010), the goal of school discipline is to address student misbehavior through a broad prevention and intervention approach. Yet schools often respond to student misbehavior with punitive and exclusionary discipline practices such as office referrals, out-of-school suspension, and expulsion. Unfortunately, these punitive and exclusionary discipline practices are directly connected to deficit thinking. For instance, Baker (2019) argues that deficit thinking frames how educators perceive student behavior, which in turn influences how educators respond to discipline. Furthermore, Baker (2019) asserts that deficit thinking “places a singular possibility for changing behavior within the individual who is failing to meet the school’s expectations” (p. 107). Through this lens of “blaming the victim,” educators neglect to acknowledge that the behavior could be in response to systemic forces. Consequently, many researchers claim that such punitive and exclusionary practices are ineffective and harmful for students, particularly students of color (Dutil, 2020; E. P. Jones et al., 2018; Osher et al., 2010)

Despite the large body of literature documenting the negative impact of exclusionary discipline, discipline practices such as out-of-school suspension and expulsion continue to be the most common disciplinary approaches in our nation’s schools (Nese et al., 2020;

Skiba et al., 2014). According to Nese et al. (2020) and Skiba et al. (2014), there is a strong correlation between the use of exclusionary discipline practices and lower academic achievement. Researchers have also found that students who experience out-of-school suspension or expulsion are more likely to drop out of school and less likely to graduate on time (Anyon et al., 2018). Even more troubling, students who are suspended or expelled are also found to be 3 times more likely to be in contact with the juvenile justice system (Fabelo et al., 2011). E. P. Jones et al. (2018) argue that such practices are ineffective and continue to harm students because they fail to address the root cause of the behavior.

Although exclusionary discipline practices were intended to address severe behaviors, the use of these practices has been commonly applied to less disruptive behaviors and minor infractions (Skiba et al., 2014). In a study of 142 schools with 32,544 out-of-school suspension records, Raffaele Mendez et al. (2002) found that the vast majority of the suspensions were applied to less severe infractions such as disobedience (20%), disruptive behavior (13%), inappropriate behavior (11%), and non-compliance with assigned discipline (7%). The more severe infractions such as weapon possession and the possession of a controlled substance only accounted for 1% of the total suspensions. Similar findings were noted by Skiba et al. (2011) who found high rates of out-of-school suspension for incidents related to defiance and non-compliance. Unfortunately, in some cases, out-of-school suspensions have been used by administrators as a means to push students out of the school environment and transfer them to an alternative school (Raffaele Mendez et al., 2002).

It is important to note that safety and school culture are both reinforced through equitable and fair discipline practices on campus. However, several studies have shown significant patterns of disproportionality in school discipline (Carer Andrews & Gutwein,

2020; Skiba et al., 2002). According to Losen and Martinez (2020b) low-income students of color are often suspended and expelled at much higher rates than their white peers. Nationally, Fobelo et al. (2011) and Nowicki (2018) found that students of color are three times more likely to be suspended. Furthermore, while African American students only represent 8% of student enrollment in the country, they account for the highest percentage (25%) of students who receive an out-of-school suspension (Gopalan, 2019). In addition, Raffaele Mendez et al. (2011) found large disparities in suspensions incidents across gender and race. The majority of African American male (48.9%) and Latino male (33.95%) middle school students experienced a suspension. In contrast, only 25% of the white male students in the middle school experienced a suspension.

Consistent with these findings, Skiba et al. (2014) highlighted race as a predictor of increased out-of-school suspension rates. In their study that included 730 schools and 104,445 incident records, Skiba et al. (2014) noted African American students as being overrepresented in a variety of discipline outcomes. In fact, African American students accounted for 23.7% of the suspension incidents, despite only accounting for 12% of the total sample in the study. These findings are comparable to those outlined by Gopalan (2019), Ritter and Anderson (2018), and Skiba et al. (2002). On average, secondary students of color lose 82 more days of instruction due to an out-of-school suspension consequence than their white peers (Losen & Martinez, 2020a). Consequently, these absences cause students to lag behind their peers academically, often two to three grades below. These findings have an important implication on the number of Latino and African American students who are not prepared for postsecondary education and the low college enrollment rates among these students.

College Enrollment and Degree Attainment Gaps

Millions of students are leaving the public high school system unprepared to take college level coursework, with many of them designated as not college ready (McFarland et al., 2019; Orange & Ramalho, 2013; Roderick et al., 2009). According to Chen (2016), 68% of first-time 2-year college students and 40% of 4-year college students were required to take at least one remedial course during their enrollment between 2003 and 2009. When comparing ethnic groups, higher incidents of remedial course enrollment among Latino students was found. Moreover, those that do take remedial coursework are less likely to persist through college, and struggle to attain a degree. As a result, significantly lower rates were found in two-year and four-year enrollment and degree attainment among Latino students compared to their white peers (Carnevale et al., 2013; Nettles, 2017).

As the economy continues to evolve, postsecondary education is becoming the minimum requirement to access the middle class. Between 1973 and 2008, the number of U. S. jobs that required a college degree increased from 28% to 59%, and it is projected to increase to 63% over the next decade (Carnevale et al., 2013). With the nation's growing demand for postsecondary education and training, America's colleges and universities will need to increase the number of degrees they confer by 10% annually (Carnevale et al., 2013). Furthermore, in 2009, the federal government set a college degree attainment target of 60% by 2020 (Nettles, 2017). However, degree attainment rates are not growing at the pace needed to meet such goals (Carnevale et al., 2013; Nettles, 2017). For instance, between 2000 and 2017, the number of Latino students who enrolled in a two- or four-year institution increased by 4% from 32% to 36% (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). In 2017, the overall college enrollment rate for white students was 41%, compared to 36% for both Latino and African American students.

Similar findings were also reported by Nettles (2017) who found that 42.3% of the overall U. S. population had earned at least an associate or bachelor's degree in 2014. When comparing ethnic groups, Nettles (2017) found that only 29% of the African American population had earned a college degree and less than 22% of Latino population had earned a degree. The overall degree attainment for the white population was double the rate of the African American population and nearly 3 times more than that of the Latino population. Several differences in terms of two-year and four-year degree attainment were also found among these two groups. Associate degrees accounted for the large share of degrees obtained among African American and Latino populations. When disaggregating college enrollment by ethnicity, Nettles (2017) found that approximately 31% of U. S. white students enrolled in a two-year institution while more than half (51.7%) of Latino students enrolled in a two-year institution. It is worth noting that only one-fifth of students enrolled in a two-year institution successfully transfer to a four-year institution (Wassmer et al., 2004).

In a study conducted by the U. S. Department of Education (2010) generated from the 2007-2008 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), a high rate of remedial course enrollment among students of color was noted. In 2008, approximately 33% of the students who identified as white reported taking a remedial course, while 45% of Latino students reported completing a remedial course (United States Department of Education, 2010). The data also indicated a high number of African American and American Indian students taking remedial courses, 47% and 44% respectively. According to Radford et al., (2012), students who enroll in remedial courses are more likely to drop out of college, thus contributing to the widening of the attainment gap. Consequently, there has been a large

interest in understanding how to address the lack of preparedness before the student enrolls in a postsecondary institution.

College Readiness for All

College and career readiness for all students has become a critical issue to those concerned about educational inequity and the opportunity gaps highlighted throughout this chapter. However, the concept of college readiness is complex and college preparation is multidimensional. Internal variables such as self-efficacy influence college readiness, while external variables such as family income, parent education level, and school environment have often been linked to postsecondary education preparation. Additionally, the literature on deficit thinking and exclusionary discipline practices has provided an important insight to college readiness. In fact, when both of these factors are present in a school, college preparation and career readiness is stifled. Despite these findings, college readiness continues to be a measurement of student success for many schools with a growing emphasis on the need to prepare *all* students (Conley, 2010). Ensuring that all students have the knowledge to make an informed decision about their future has become the goal for many school districts. Consequently, the research on how to get more students college and career ready must be considered.

Conley (2010) is among the various researchers who have studied the concept of college and career readiness. Conley (2010) identifies four key elements to determine how prepared students are for college and careers. This college readiness model consists of four interactional components: key cognitive strategies, key content knowledge, academic behaviors, and contextual skills and awareness. Conley (2012) describes each element as the following:

- Cognitive strategies represent the thinking skills needed to “formulate hypotheses and develop problem solving strategies, identify sources and collect information, analyze and evaluate findings or conflicting viewpoints, organize and construct work products in a variety of formats, and monitor and confirm the precision and accuracy of all work produced” (p. 2).
- Key content knowledge refers to the “big ideas” of each content area that all students need to know well. They include “the technical knowledge and skills associated with career aspirations, the ways in which students interact with content knowledge, its perceived value to them and the effort they are willing to expend to learn necessary content, and their explanations of why they succeed or fail in mastering this knowledge” (p. 2).
- Academic behaviors consist of student ownership of learning which include “goal setting, persistence, self-awareness, motivation, progress monitoring, help seeking, and self efficacy” (p. 2). These behaviors require mastery of specific learning techniques such as “time management, study skills, strategic reading, memorization techniques, collaborative learning, technology skills, and self monitoring” (p. 2).
- Contextual skills and awareness highlights the importance of understanding how the postsecondary system operates and the skills needed to successfully navigate the transition to life post high school. This includes “knowing which courses to take in high school in order to be admitted to an appropriate postsecondary program, understanding financial aid options and procedures, being focused on a career pathway or major, understanding college-level and workforce norms and

expectations, and knowing how to be a self advocate within the institutional framework of postsecondary programs” (p. 2).

These capabilities, skills, knowledge, and behaviors represent what students need in order to successfully complete credit-bearing college level coursework. According to Conley (2012), this model is designed to be actionable and can be applied to a broad range of learning settings.

In addition to the four key elements, Conley (2010) identified several key principles that describe what educators and administrators should do in order to achieve a greater than expected number of students who are deemed ready for college. The seven principles are:

- “Create and maintain a college going culture at the school” (p. 105).
- “Create a core academic program aligned with and leading to college readiness by the end of twelfth grade” (p.109).
- “Teach key self-management skills and academic behaviors and expect students to use them” (p. 114).
- “Make college and careers real by helping students manage the complexity of preparing for and applying to postsecondary education” (p. 117).
- “Create assignments and grading policies that more closely approximate college expectations each successive year of high school” (p. 121).
- “Make the senior year meaningful and appropriately challenging” (p. 125).
- “Build partnerships with and connections to postsecondary programs and institutions” (p.128).

These principles represent the findings of a study of 38 high schools that outperformed similar schools in preparing students for college. These strategies were particularly successful with first generation college students.

Similar studies have been conducted by other researchers with many of them noting comparable findings. For instance, in a study conducted by McClafferty et al. (2002), the researchers identified a set of conditions that are consistent with the creation of college-going culture. The action research project included 24 schools in Los Angeles (two high schools, four middle schools, and 18 elementary schools) where college-going rates were far from equitable across ethnic groups and income categories. Over the project's 4 years, it became apparent that in order to achieve the goal of preparing all students for postsecondary education, the following conditions needed to be present: "...[a] school leadership is committed to building a college culture, all school personnel provide a consistent message to students that supports their quest for a college preparatory K-12 experience, all counselors are college counselors, and counselors, teachers, and parents are partners in preparing students for college" (McClafferty et al., 2002, p. 11).

While these four conditions are important, McClafferty et al. (2002) recognized that these conditions do not offer the sufficient guide for schools to achieve a culture of college and career readiness for all. Consequently, the authors outline nine principles that can help schools assess their own culture and guide the school in creating a college-bound culture.

The nine principles are:

- College Talk—consistent and “ongoing communication with students about what it takes to get into college so that they understand what is required and expected of them if they want to stay on a college path” (p. 12).

- Clear Expectations—teachers and staff need to have college expectations for all students and communicate those expectations in a clear manner.
- Information and Resources—students need to have access to college-related information and resources.
- Comprehensive Counseling Model—all counselors are knowledgeable about the college-going process and all of their actions are made with a postsecondary education option in mind.
- Testing and Curriculum—schools need to offer course options that prepare students for college entrance exams and eliminate any barriers to access (testing and curriculum).
- Faculty Involvement—staff needs to take an active role in creating and maintaining a college-going culture and must be knowledgeable about the college admissions process.
- Family Involvement—parents need to become aware of the college-going process.
- College Partnerships—the school needs to establish active partnerships with local colleges or universities.
- Articulation—college messaging is continuous from Kindergarten through 12th grade.

The four conditions along with the nine principles offer a framework for transforming the school culture to one that makes college attainment a priority.

Corwin and Tierney (2007) argue that building a college culture can be challenging even for the best schools in low-income neighborhoods. Low expectations from staff, administrators, and the community can be an obstacle for achieving a culture that

prioritizes college. Most notably, Corwin and Tierney (2007) noted isolated college services and a lack of school wide support for college as the two major obstacles that can hinder schools from creating and maintaining a college culture. In response, Corwin and Tierney (2007) outline six ways that schools can strengthen their college culture: involve the whole school in creating a clear vision for a school culture, sustain and consistently reinforce college messages, coordinate services and widely communicate goals and college activities, create and support a strong academic program, provide quality guidance, and foster relationships with community colleges and universities. According to Corwin and Tierney (2007) these strategies and action items can serve as the basis for the development of an action plan.

The various studies outlined above operate on the premise that a school culture can be changed to one that prioritizes postsecondary education as an option for all students and that a college culture can increase access to postsecondary options for all students. It is worth noting that recent literature on school climate and culture suggests that culture plays a significant role in the student's decision to pursue a postsecondary education (Conley, 2010; McClafferty et al., 2002; McDonough, 1998). In fact, McDonough (1991, 1997) has written extensively about the relationship between college access and school culture. In those studies, McDonough (1991, 1997, 1998) documents how school cultures are linked to students' college choice decision making and thereby impact college attainment patterns. Furthermore, McDonough (1991, 1997, 1998) highlights the need to develop a college culture in order to improve the college access opportunities for students who are low-income, first generation college bound, and underrepresented minorities. As such, there is a need to understand college access and attainment from a school culture approach.

School Culture

It is nearly impossible to discuss the concept of school culture without first acknowledging the abstract concept of culture. Researchers have argued that the concept of culture can help explain the interactions between individuals within an organization and decipher the underlying forces that operate in any organization (Frost, 1991; Peterson et al., 2011; Schein, 2010). However, while culture has been studied for many years, there is no consensus on a definition (Freiberg 1999; Frost, 1991; Gonder & Hymes, 1994; Schein, 2010). Peterson et al. (2001) argue that even anthropologists have not been able to reach an agreement on a definition. For instance, Freiberg (1999) defines culture as the belief, values, and habits that are shared among members of an organization or institution, while Gonder & Hymes (1994) define culture as the group's shared understanding of how things are traditionally done and the norms that members of the organization follow when interacting with each other.

The following definition encompasses the various interpretations of what culture is:

The culture of a group can now be defined as a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (Schein, 2010, p. 18)

Culture as an abstract concept incorporates the observable behavioral regularities when people interact with each other, the climate, and the shared cognitive frames that guide the perceptions and language used by its members. Furthermore, culture encompasses the policies and ideological principles that orients the organization and the implicit and unwritten rules that guide new members of the organization (Schein, 2010). All of these elements help predict social behavior, maintain social order, and form rules that all members of the organization must abide by.

Schein (2010) further expands on the concept of culture by proposing a model that incorporates both observable events and underlying forces. Schein (2010) identifies three levels of culture:

- artifacts: “includes all the phenomena that you would see, hear, and feel when you encounter a new group with an unfamiliar culture” (p.23). This includes the physical environment, language, clothing, manners of address, emotional displays, published list of values, and observable rituals and ceremonies.
- espoused values: “values, norms, and rules that provide the day-to-day operating principles by which the members of the group guide their behaviors” (p. 25). This includes the strategies, goals, philosophies, rationalizations, and ideologies of the organization.
- basic assumptions and values: are unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs and values.

It is also important to note that culture can evolve based on shared experiences and can be influenced by the members’ own behavior (Gonder & Hymes, 1994). It is constructed and shaped through interactions with others and becomes a guide for how members of the organization behave. According to Schein (2010), the concept of culture can help “explain some of the more seemingly incomprehensible and irrational aspects of what goes on in groups, occupations, organizations, and any other kind of social units that have common histories” (p. 21).

Culture has the power to influence the outcomes of any organization and thus becomes an important aspect of any school. The term school culture is used as an umbrella concept that incorporates the cultural and symbolic aspects in a school setting (Peterson et al., 2011). Like other organizations, culture in an educational setting constitutes the values,

traditions, habits, beliefs, principles, and norms that are developed by members of the school community and generally followed by all members. While difficult to change, the culture of a school determines what is important to that environment and sets the tone for how staff interact with each other, students, administration, and parents. As such, these interactions can directly influence policies and procedures for interactions with students, ultimately impacting their academic success.

Researchers have noted the importance of having a positive school culture in order to foster success (Freiberg, 1999; Gonder & Hymes, 1994; Schein, 2010). Yet, many schools with a high percentage of underserved students continue to have cultures that alienate and exclude students of color. Notably, many of these schools fail to develop structures to combat deficit thinking and exclusionary discipline practices (Aldana, 2016). Consequently, these practices cause disengagement and a lack of between students, teachers, and staff, which in turn makes it challenging for any school leader to successfully implement a college and career readiness culture for all students. Furthermore, punitive discipline practices further alienate and damage the fragile relationships that exist, leading to an endless cycle of repression.

School Climate

School climate is closely connected to school culture and has the ability to influence a school's culture. While culture and climate may appear to be the same, there are differences to be noted (Freiberg, 1999; Gonder & Hymes, 1994; Hoy et al., 1991). According to Gonder and Hymes (1994), climate focuses on the atmosphere of the organization and how the members of that organization feel about the organization. Furthermore, climate refers to the quality of the environment and how well the environment helps create a sense of belonging and personal worth. As such, each school campus develops its own culture that

shapes the climate, which in turn influences how members of the school feel. According to Freiberg (1999), “school climate is the heart and soul of a school” and the essence that makes people want to be there every day (p. 11). Hoy et al. (1991) summarizes the difference between the two by defining culture as the shared assumptions and ideologies and climate as the shared perceptions of behavior.

The concept of organizational climate can be traced as early as the 1950s and 1960s from the well-recognized work of Halpin and Croft (1963). Halpin and Croft (1963) constructed an Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire (OCDQ) to investigate the organizational climate of 71 elementary schools. The study revealed that each school had characteristics and qualities that made it unique and that schools varied considerably in their organizational climate. They maintained that organizational climate can be constructed as the personality of the school, and identified six school climates: the open climate, the autonomous climate, the controlled climate, the familiar climate, the paternal climate, and the closed climate. Halpin and Croft (1963) noted relatively high esprit scores, scores that measure satisfaction and sense of accomplishment, for open climates and autonomous climates. High esprit scores were also noted on controlled climates but resulted in achievement at the expense of the social needs satisfaction. Low esprit scores were found among familiar climates, paternal climate, and closed climate.

Using a revised version of Halpin and Croft’s (1963) Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire (OCDQ), Hoy et al. (1991) developed a typology of school climate using the concept of opened and closed climates, specifically relating to the openness and closedness of building principal and teacher behavior. A total of six dimensions, three describing principal behavior and three describing teacher behavior, were used as part of the measurement. The following is a brief description of each dimension:

- Supportive principal behavior reflects interest and concern for teachers. The principal listens, is open to teacher suggestions, and genuinely concerned for the personal wellbeing of a teacher. They frequently praise staff and respect teacher competence.
- Directive principal behavior is rigid, firm, and controlling. The principal monitors and controls all teacher and school activities.
- Restrictive principal behavior is behavior that hinders the ability for teachers to fulfil their teaching responsibility. Teachers are burdened with paperwork, committee requirements, routine duties, and other demands.
- Collegial teacher behavior fosters professional interactions among teachers. Teachers are respectful towards their colleagues, enjoy working with them, and are both accepting and enthusiastic.
- Intimate teacher behavior describes strong social relations among teachers. Teachers socialize together regularly and provide strong social support for each other.
- Disengaged teacher behavior “signifies a lack of meaning and focus to professional activities” (p. 27). Teachers do not have common goals, and are unproductive. Teacher behavior is often negative, they are not engaged in the learning, and often criticize their colleagues and the school.

Using this concept of open and closed principal and teacher behavior, Hoy et al. (1991) identified four types of school climate: open climate, engaged climate, disengaged climate, and closed climate. According to Hoy et al. (1991) an open climate is one that is cooperative and respectful. There is openness within the staff, and between the staff and the principal.

The principal is respectful of teacher feedback and gives constant genuine praises. There is teacher autonomy and teachers are committed to the profession. In general, the behavior of both the principal and teachers are classified as genuine and open. Engaged climate is marked by the ineffective attempts of the principal to lead but recognizes the high professional performance of the staff. The principal is authoritarian and disregards the professional expertise of the staff. Teachers ignore the principal's unsuccessful attempts to control but conduct themselves professionally and come together to fulfil their teaching responsibility. They respect and support each other and are proud of their school. In this climate, the teachers are productive despite the weak principal leadership.

In contrast, a disengaged climate is marked by the principal's strong leadership behavior, supportive, and concerned attitude. The principal listens to and is open to teacher feedback, gives teachers the autonomy to act on the basis of their professional knowledge, and the focus is away from paperwork. However, the staff ignores the initiatives of the principal and actively works towards sabotaging the principal's leadership. Teachers dislike the principal and do not have respect for each other. A closed climate is one that is toxic, unsupportive, inflexible, hindering, and controlling. The staff is divisive, apathetic, intolerant, and disingenuous. The principal and teachers are not engaged, with the principal stressing unnecessary busywork and teachers exhibiting little commitment to the tasks at hand. The principal is seen as controlling and unresponsive. In general, there is a lack of respect among the staff and the site leadership.

It is clear that a school's climate is highly dependent on the interactions that take place between staff and their colleagues, and the exchange between staff and site leadership. Gonder and Hymes (1994) classify school climate as either positive or negative, with positive school climates leading members of the school community to feel safe, respected,

and valued. If the climate of the school is one in which people feel safe, respected, and valued, then the culture of the school will be positive. Engels et al. (2008) describe a positive school culture as one “in which professional learning and commitment to enhanced student learning are valued: a shared sense of purposes and values, norms of continuous learning and improvement, collaborative collegial relationships and opportunities for collective problem-solving and sharing experiences” (p. 160). Additionally, staff motivation and their commitment to fulfilling their teaching responsibility is an essential component of a positive climate (Khan, 2019). This climate is difficult to achieve when staff lack commitment, have deficit ideologies, and continue to use discipline practices that are exclusionary and punitive.

Climate and Academic Achievement

By the late 1970s, researchers began to study the relationship between school climate and academic achievement (Brookover & Lezotte, 1979). Widodo (2019) argues that school climate is a factor that affects the quality of a school’s culture and is a determinant of academic success. Research also suggests that when Latino students are provided with the right intervention and are given the necessary support, their academic outcomes improve, and thus the achievement gap is reduced (Gandara, 2010). For instance, research has shown a relationship between school climate and student achievement (Haynes et al., 1997; Khan, 2019). As noted by Haynes et al. (1997), students achieve well in school environments in which interpersonal interactions between members of the school community are positive. Freiberg (1999) has advanced the research on school climate and student achievement. In Freiberg’s book, *School Climate: Measuring, Improving and Sustaining Healthy Learning Environments*, the author defines each concept and integrates both of them to develop a model for climate factors in educational effectiveness.

In this model, Freiberg (1999), categorized effectiveness factors in three interactional concepts: quality, time for learning, and opportunity to learn. Quality refers to the quality of instruction, the curriculum, the procedures that are applied at the classroom level, and teacher behavior. Time and opportunity addresses the rules about time usage and curriculum implementation. At the micro level, Freiberg (1999) defines school climate as: the physical environment of the class, the social system, an orderly classroom environment, and teacher expectations about students. More specifically, Freiberg (1999) focused on the size and location of the school (physical environment), the relationships and interactions between students and their teachers (social system), the arrangement and functionality of the class (classroom environment), and what teachers expect of students and their professional attitude (teacher expectations). At the school level, Freiberg argues that school climate includes: the school buildings, the relationship and interactions between other teachers, and the expectations for teacher behavior. When quality, time, opportunity, and climate are aligned, student achievement is much higher.

The climate factors in the educational effectiveness model can help schools achieve high outcomes. In a study of 86 middle schools, Hoy & Hannum (1997) found a positive relationship between healthy climate and student achievement. The study found a positive correlation between a positive school climate and student achievement in mathematics, reading, and writing. The multiple regression analysis revealed that a positive school climate explained 75% of the variance in mathematics achievement and 71% of the variance in reading. Bulach et al. (1995) reported similar findings in their study that included 27 elementary schools. The participants in the study were carefully chosen to include schools from diverse geographic areas. More than half of the schools in the study were schools that came from low and middle socioeconomic status (65%). The results of the

study revealed a significant relationship between school climate and student achievement. Most importantly, the study noted a stronger relationship between school climate and student achievement than the relationship between student socioeconomic status and student achievement.

Recent literature on school climate and student achievement has focused on examining the impact of specific school climate dimensions and their impact on student achievement measures (Brand et al., 2008; Ross et al., 2007; Wang & Degol, 2016). Tschannen-Moran et al. (2006) studied the impact of school climate factors such as teacher professionalism and community engagement on state standardized testing in mathematics and English. Their study found a strong relationship between a positive climate and student achievement. A positive correlation was found between a positive climate and middle school assessments in English, math, and writing (English=.92, math=.88, writing=.82). In contrast, Wang and Degol (2016) analyzed factors such as quality of instruction, site leadership skills, and interpersonal relationships between students and staff. The findings of their study highlighted the importance of having high academic standards, strong interpersonal relationships, and effective principal leadership. This has led to an interest in identifying the role of the school leader as it pertains to school climate and student achievement (Allen et al., 2015). In fact, schools that are in the improvement process often examine the role of the leader in the process of improving school climate.

School Culture and Leadership

Several theories have emerged to try to explain the importance of leadership in education, and the role of the site leader as it pertains to school culture and climate. Despite its importance, no single definition of leadership exists in the literature (Gumus et al., 2018;

Jackson et al., 2015). Over the years, the definitions of leadership have evolved, but some of the most recent definitions include:

- “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2019, p. 6)
- “a complex moral relationship between people, based on trust, obligation, commitment, emotion, and a shared vision of the good” (Ciulla, 2004, p. xv)
- an individual who is “inspiring and engaging followers as the means to attain organizational goals largely by connecting such goals to the followers’ own ambitions” (Winston & Fields, 2015, p. 414)
- an individual who “influences individuals and groups within an organization, helps them to establish goals, and guides them toward achievement of those goals, thereby allowing them to be effective” (Preston-Cunningham et al., 2017, p. 135)
- “mobilize others to want to get to extraordinary things done in the organization” (Kouzes & Posner, 2012, p. xi)

According to Leithwood and Riehl (2003), there are two functions that define leadership: providing direction and exercising influence. Therefore, in an educational setting, leadership refers to the ability to influence others to achieve the school’s shared intentions and goals (Gumus et al., 2018; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003).

The role of the school leader has emerged as one of the most significant factors that influences school culture (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016; Dutta, & Sahney, 2016; Lee & Li, 2015). For instance, Pepper and Thomas (2002) note how one school leader was able to reach a positive school climate. According to Pepper and Thomas (2002) the new principal reached a positive school climate through the establishment of a positive learning environment, self-

reflection, and employing transformational leadership. Engeles et al. (2008) also conducted a study to identify the strategies that are implemented by the building leader in schools where the culture is positive. The study included 56 primary schools, 46 principals, and 700 teachers. High achievement orientation and a focus on creating a flexible, stimulating, participative, and supportive environment were some of the leader traits found in schools with a positive culture. The study also revealed that leaders who identify with the roles of mentor and innovator had often created positive school cultures. Leaders who motivated and supported (mentor) their employees and were creative and prepared to take risks (innovator) appeared to be more successful at creating climates where staff reported job satisfaction and job enthusiasm.

In a study of 263 teachers, counselors, and staff members, McKinney et al. (2015) found that the academic and social connection between the building leader and teacher was influential in the overall environment and success of the school. Holding teachers to high expectations and motivating them in a positive manner are the traits that a building leader needs to achieve a positive school culture. According to McKinney et al. (2015), in order to lead effectively and reach a positive culture, the leader must possess “tact, approachability, caring, sensitive to the needs of others, personal and professional knowledge of teachers and staff members, respect for subordinates, the ability to listen, the ability to learn from others and a willingness to seek out new and innovative teaching and learning techniques” (p. 164). Additionally, school leaders need to lead by example and influence the staff to believe in his or her vision. The results of the study suggest that leaders invest time in building rapport with the teachers and reinforce common academic and social goals within teacher teams. This is critical in the development of a positive school culture that values academic growth and student success.

A leadership theory that has been associated with the traits listed above is transformational leadership (Engles et al., 2008). As cited by Bass and Riggio (2010) transformational leadership was first introduced by James MacGregor Burns in 1978 in his analysis of political leaders and their behaviors but was then formalized by Bass in 1985. Transformational leadership then became an integral part of the full range leadership model in with the work of Avolio and Bass (1996). According to Stone et al. (2004), both researchers and practitioners have gravitated towards this theory. In fact, transformational leadership theory has been applied to a wide range of organizational settings, including education (Gumus et al., 2018; Kwan, 2020; Thomas et al., 2020). In a study that reviewed leadership models in education research from 1980 to 2014, Gumus et al. (2018) found growing interest in transformational leadership theory and noted a shift from a single person approach to a more collective performance leadership approach. Consequently, the present study explores transformational leadership because it emphasizes the ability of the leader to inspire and motivate their followers and work as a team to reach the success of the organization.

Transformational leadership differs from other leadership theories in that it focuses on convincing followers to engage in and support the achievement of the organization's goal (Stone et al., 2004). According to Avolio and Bass (1996), transformational leadership is seen when leaders:

“(1) stimulate interest among colleagues and followers to view their work from new perspectives, (2) generate awareness of the mission or vision of the team or organization, (3) develop colleague and followers to higher levels of ability and potential, and (4) motivate colleagues and followers to look beyond their own interest towards those that will benefit the group.” (p. 2)

Avolio et al. (1991) identified four behaviors that constitute transformational leadership. The following summary describes the characteristics of each behavior:

- Idealized influence: The leader is charismatic, he or she becomes a role model who is admired and respected. The leader is perceived to be confident and followers trust the leaders (Antonakis et al., 2003; Stone et al., 2004).
- Inspirational motivation: The leader inspires and motivates others by depicting a future that is desirable to pursue (Avolio & Bass, 1996; Stone et al., 2004). The leader builds relationships with followers through communication and leads them towards a common goal (Antonakis et al., 2003; Thomas et al., 2020).
- Intellectual stimulation: The leader challenges followers to think in new ways in order to solve problems and mistakes are not publicly criticized (Avolio & Bass, 2002; Stone et al., 2004). Leaders are supportive and encourage followers to move towards the organization's goal (Antonakis et al., 2003).
- Individualized consideration: The leader responds to the individual needs of followers and contributes to follower satisfaction by acting as a mentor or coach. The leader becomes an active listener and focuses on helping followers reach their full potential (Antonakis et al., 2003; Stone et al., 2004).

The consistent need for improvement in today's schools has created a need for leaders to apply a transformational leadership approach in order to achieve a positive school culture. In fact, Lucas and Valentine (2002) argue that transformational leadership impacts school culture "by raising teachers' level of awareness of developing valuable outcomes as well as strategies for accomplishing those outcomes. This is done by inspiring faculty to transcend their own limited self-interests to work for the greater good of the school as a whole" (p. 23). As such, Lucas and Valentine (2002) affirm that leaders in today's schools

are expected to set goals for the organization, motivate followers to achieve those goals, and understand the environmental contexts in which the school is located.

Culturally Relevant Leadership

Over the last few decades, student populations in United States schools have drastically evolved to be more racially, culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse. In some cases, the significant demographic differences have caused cultural conflict and racial incongruences (Horsford et al., 2011; T. B. Jones et al., 2016). As such, school leaders must prepare to serve communities that are multiracial, multicultural, and multilingual. Furthermore, this requires them to meet the unique needs of students who represent underserved racial, ethnic, and cultural groups, while also building an environment where these communities can collaborate (Horsford et al., 2011). According to Horsford et al. (2011), successful leadership in a diverse educational context is highly dependent on four domains: the political context, a pedagogical approach, a personal journey, and professional duty. These domains are fundamental in developing leaders who are culturally relevant.

Each domain is described below:

- **Political context:** This domain centers on the idea that educational leaders must be astute in their ability to recognize and negotiate the political forces that influence federal, state, district, and school-based policies and procedures. Horsford et al., (2011) argue that educational leaders should be “equipped to discern and analyze the educational ideologies, philosophical assumptions, and political perspectives that both underlie and frame such policies and practices” (p. 595).
- **Pedagogical approach:** This domain draws from culturally relevant pedagogy theory and refers to the ability of educational leaders to integrate the pedagogical approaches of culturally relevant and antiracist education. This entails assisting

teachers in developing a culture that values students' diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. More specifically, helping teachers create opportunities for students from different ethnic backgrounds to contribute and share their experiences during the teaching and learning process.

- **Personal journey:** This domain refers to the ability for educational leaders to interrogate the self about their deeply held beliefs and assumptions concerning students who represent backgrounds or life experiences different from their own. This requires the ability to self-reflect and recognize how policies and procedures may create barriers for excluded and underserved students. Culturally relevant leaders are also prepared to address the resistance they might face as they seek to dismantle oppression and reveal the privilege and entitlement that exists in their organization.
- **Professional duty:** This domain refers to culturally relevant leaders establishing a culture that values equity and diversity, promotes social justice, and fosters understanding and appreciation of the cultural and social backgrounds of the community. According to Horsford et al. (2011), professional duty entails the ability to “successfully monitor and mediate cultural conflict by modeling cross-cultural communication,” and the ability “to navigate and negotiate opposing cultural perspectives and conflict through dialogue and mediation” (p. 599).

According to T. B. Jones et al. (2016), this culturally relevant leadership framework can help promote educational equity, engagement, and excellence.

Summary

The literature on academic achievement and the opportunity gap continues to highlight large disparities between students of color and their white peers (Lipman & Haines, 2007;

McCall et al., 2006; McFarland et al., 2019). Historically, both Latino and African American students have continued to fall behind academically, often performing 2 to 3 years below grade level. Researchers argue that such differences in academic achievement are a direct result of the disparities that arise from unequal access to resources, inequitable schooling conditions, and negative schooling experiences that many underserved students face (Carter & Welner, 2013; Howard, 2010; Wakefield & Fajardo, 2004). Other researchers have also argued that both deficit thinking and exclusionary discipline practices exacerbate low student achievement because schools and educators fail to recognize systemic variables as possible contributors to student failure (Valencia & Black, 2002; Yosso, 2005). Consequently, there has been a high interest among educators and researchers to try to find ways to address these systemic issues.

While many policies and procedures have been adopted to combat these systemic issues, they have failed to address the deep inequities in our educational system (Nichols, 2016). In response, researchers have suggested frameworks and strategies that could potentially be used by school leaders to address them. Studies on school culture and leadership have found a strong relationship between positive school culture and academic achievement (Freiberg, 1999; Gonder & Hymes, 1994; Schein, 2010), as well as the role of the school leader in influencing a positive school culture (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016; Dutta, & Sahney, 2016; Lee & Li, 2015). In fact, the role of the school leader has emerged as a significant influencer of school culture.

School culture that focuses on college and career preparation for all students, including students of color, has been identified as a possible intervention. Conly (2010) and McClafferty et al. (2002) are among the researchers who have studied the concept of college and career readiness and have identified elements needed to help prepare students for

postsecondary education. Creating and maintaining a college and career culture was one of the strategies the researchers found that was successful with first generation college students. According to McDonough (1991, 1997, 1998), a college culture can help improve the college access opportunities for students who are low-income and underrepresented minorities.

Despite the research suggesting that a college and career readiness culture is the solution to addressing the achievement disparities, many of the studies have failed to identify the challenges that school leaders might encounter while trying to establish such culture. Few studies are available on this topic, with the available literature suggesting that low expectations from staff and school leaders, deficit thinking, and exclusionary discipline practices are a potential challenge in building positive school culture and climate (Corwin & Tierney, 2007). As such, the purpose of this study is to identify those potential challenges and obstacles that leaders might encounter while attempting to implement a culture of college and career readiness for all students. Additionally, identifying the conditions needed for a culture of college and career readiness to be sustained is needed.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

Introduction

This chapter summarizes the research methodology and procedures that were used in this study. Autoethnography was chosen as the method to understand the challenges and obstacles that a school leader can encounter while attempting to implement a culture of college and career readiness. The applicability of autoethnography to this dissertation is further discussed in this chapter. The chapter also includes statement of the purpose, research questions, autoethnography as a research design, researcher's background, confidentiality, where the study took place, and a description of the data collection, processing, analysis, and interpretation.

Statement of the Purpose

There is a need to create school environments that ensure all students are college and career ready, particularly historically underserved students of color. As such, the purpose of this study was to: (a) examine and document my personal experiences as a first-year principal of a public middle school, as I attempted to establish a college and career readiness culture, (b) document the challenges I faced in trying to change the culture, and (c) identify the conditions and strategies necessary to establish and sustain a school culture of college and career readiness for all.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What challenges and obstacles are encountered while attempting to implement a culture of college and career readiness for all students, in a school that serves predominantly working-class students of color?

2. Under what conditions can a culture of college and career readiness for all prevail, in a school that serves predominantly working-class students of color?

Positionality

My family is among the many immigrants that left, and leave, their home country in hopes of a “better” future. For many years, and to this day, my family has belonged to the low-income working class. Consequently, I knew that being born into a family history of poverty posed challenges while I attempted to educate myself in the schools I would later work in as an educator. However, I also knew that education would be my only ticket to a better economic future. With determination, I began my education in a school district that served primarily low-income Latino students.

My K-12 educational experience was not easy because, like most students whose primary language is one other than English, I was classified as an English language learner (ELL). This label carried great significance not only for me but for my peers and my teachers as well. Despite starting my education in the U.S., I was always expected to participate in various intervention programs because I was not fluent in the English language. Although I was a student who often received good marks, I still recall having self-esteem issues because of the label. I never really understood why I was considered an ELL student. At home, I was the translator and possessed the reading, writing, and speaking skills needed to help my family navigate just about any issue. According to Yosso (2005), this form of cultural wealth and knowledge is very valuable, yet it does not carry the same value in a formal education context. Fortunately, my seventh grade California English Language Development Test (CELDT) scores were high enough to reclassify me as a full English learner. However, the English language learner label never left me, and for the rest of my education I would be considered a student who “reclassified to fluent English proficient”

(RFEP). This essentially meant I was a student who for the rest of his public education would be considered “at risk” and in need of monitoring.

Despite my negative experiences in school, I managed to maintain a good academic standing. During my senior year, I became very involved with a university outreach program and sought the support of my teachers. Through them, I learned about the college admissions process and began to see college as a possibility. College field trips, academic advising, and mentorship were some of the services offered. Bernal and Aleman (2016) found “mentors and role models to be a transformative rupture that sends a powerful message of ethnic/racial and academic affirmation” to students (p. 37). As a result, and with the support of mentors and the outreach counselor, I applied to college. I was admitted to several state and private universities, but ultimately decided to pursue a degree at the university that was closest to home. My decision to attend a local campus was highly influenced by my economic circumstance. I knew that I would face financial challenges but also knew that if needed, I could commute from home.

My transition from high school to college life was not easy, as I quickly encountered barriers to my learning. It did not take long before I realized that I was one of the few Latinos on campus. Out of the 13,669 undergraduate students enrolled, I was one of 453 Latino students on campus. This soon became an obstacle for me because I began to feel out of place and felt that school was not for me. I began to feel like an imposter and an outcast. Despite meeting college admissions eligibility requirements, I was among the many first generation, low-income Latino students who were not prepared to take college level coursework and were required to take remedial courses in English and mathematics. On several occasions, I felt like giving up and dropping out. However, my college counselor continued to encourage me along the way and recommended that I seek a writing tutor.

Through their mentorship and the extra support, I was able to maintain a full-time course load in addition to 32 hours of work per week. I knew there was no turning back and I persevered through this seemingly insurmountable obstacle, ultimately earning a bachelor's degree.

After successfully obtaining my bachelor's degree, I decided to return to my community and serve as a role model, inspire change, and help other students who undergo similar pressures. For the past eleven years, I have worked in the district that once educated me, and have served in various capacities. Each position, whether it was counseling or administration, has afforded me the opportunity to work with talented students and has helped shape my values as an educator. As an educator and school leader I believe that:

- Staff must have high expectations for all students.
- Staff must provide students access to a rigorous curriculum.
- Staff must be compassionate and patient with our students.
- Staff must never give up on students.
- All members of the school community must work together to create an environment where everyone feels valued, safe, and part of the group.
- Staff can make a difference in the lives of our students.

These principles have influenced my practice as an educator and have guided every decision made as a site leader.

Research Setting

The school in this study was a public middle school located in a rural community in the state of California. The following sections provide a description of the school, the district, and the community where the school was located.

Hope Middle School

The school in this study was a public middle school located in a rural community in the state of California. Hope Middle School is one of six public middle schools in the community with a student population of 652, sixth through eighth grade students. According to the California Dashboard (2019), 94.6% of the students are eligible for free or reduced lunch or have a parent/guardian that did not receive a high school diploma. The student body is comprised of 92.5% Hispanic, 5.5% White, 1.4% Filipino, 0.3% Asian, and 0.3% African American students. Furthermore, 48% of the students are labeled English language learners, and 20% of the students have a learning disability. Given the wide range of learners, the campus has responded by establishing a program that supports recent immigrants, as well as a special education program that supports emotionally disturbed students (ED). Both programs are unique to Hope Middle School and are not available at the other middle schools. In fact, the school attracts students from other middle schools who need these supports.

In July of 2019, I accepted the principal assignment, only 3 weeks before the start of the new academic year. The previous administrator served as the principal for 15 years and had received a promotion. Members of the community often categorized the school as a low performing school where limited learning took place. The analysis of the standardized testing data confirmed a decline in the number of students who were meeting or exceeding state standards in both English language arts and mathematics. Table 1 provides an overview of the school's academic performance data for the last 4 years.

Table 1

California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress Four Year Data for Hope Middle School

Testing Year	Percent of Students in English Language Arts		Percent of Students in Mathematics	
	Standard Met (Level 3)	Standard Exceeded (Level 4)	Standard Met (Level 3)	Standard Exceeded (Level 4)
15-16	26.00%	4.00%	11.00%	3.00%
16-17	23.14%	3.31%	10.00%	2.33%
17-18	16.64%	4.85%	8.60%	2.76%
18-19	16.64%	3.62%	7.50%	2.71%

In addition to standardized testing, the site utilizes various other assessments to measure student performance. The most recent assessment information indicates comparable findings to those of the state standardized assessment.

The School District

The enrollment data for the district was 17,968 students across Kindergarten through 12th grade. The student population included 80.5% Hispanic, 16.8% White non-Hispanic, 0.8% Asian, 0.7% Filipino, 0.4% African American, 0.1% American Indian, and 0.5% who indicated two or more races. The district reported 78.1% of the students qualifying for free or reduced lunch, 42.9% English language learners, and 13.4% students with a learning disability. There are three comprehensive high schools and six middle schools that draw from different geographical areas, causing some tension between the regions. This is primarily due to the disparity in socioeconomic status between the “north zone” schools and the “south zone” schools.

The school district had recently experienced a change in their top leadership team. The superintendent of the district was hired in 2016, while two out of the three assistant superintendents were hired in 2018 and 2019. Since the superintendent's arrival, the district has adopted a district vision and mission that state that all high school students will graduate college and career ready. The district's mission demonstrates a commitment to supporting all learners in reaching their highest potential and preparing students for the future. In 2017, the district partnered with The Education Trust West and conducted an educational opportunity audit. The findings of the audit highlighted four critical areas: (a) curriculum and instruction, (b) interventions and supports, (c) college bound systems, and (d) professional development that will help ensure students have access to college and career ready curriculum. These four areas were used to develop a 3-year action plan that included a college and career ready roadmap to ensure that all students graduate college and career ready. All district principals were expected to work with their respective sites to ensure the implementation and follow-through of the action items outlined in the action plan.

La Villa Community

La Villa is a community of approximately 54,000 individuals where 81.7% of the population identifies as Hispanic or Latino. However, historical data from the United States Census Bureau indicates a steep increase of the Hispanic or Latino population from 61% in 1990, to 75.6% in 2000, to 81.2% in 2019. The city's demographics are similar to that of other rural migrant communities in California. Approximately 11.4% of those who are 25 years of age or older have a bachelor's degree, with the vast majority of the community working in agriculture (U.S Census Bureau, 2019). The city relies on immigrant workers to meet the labor demands of low skilled agricultural jobs.

La Villa City Plaza can be found in the center of the town. The park is commonly known by the local residents as “*la plazita*,” where many residents come together to enjoy a warm summer afternoon. The plaza is also the location where city-sponsored events take place. Friday summer night music, Holiday in the Plaza, end of the harvest celebration, and Cinco de Mayo are among some of the celebrations that take place in the park. These events celebrate the rich culture of the city, including the Latino culture that exists in the city. For many, “*la plazita*” symbolizes the close-knit sense of community that the residents have. In fact, the community has a strong social capital and support system among its residents.

In addition to social capital, the parents in La Villa place a high value on education and consistently reiterate a message of college education as a means to a better economic future. Nava (2012) asserts that parent involvement expectations between educators and families can often differ. In fact, Nava argued that parent engagement in an educational setting is much broader than normative school centric understandings and consists of (a) providing economic support, (b) cultivating agency in their children, (c) making meaningful sacrifices, and (d) modeling academic excellence, all of which can be captured by the concept of *apoyo*. This is true for the community of La Villa, and based on the definition of parent engagement provided by Nava (2012), one could argue that parent involvement for this community is high.

Research Design

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that connects the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political (Ellis, 2004). It is a method of inquiry and analysis (represented by the “graphy” part of “autoethnography”) that focuses on the personal experiences of the researcher (reflected in “auto”) in order to understand cultural experiences (inherent in “ethos”) (Ellis et al., 2011). According to Hughes and Pennington

(2017), autoethnography studies allow researchers to use their personal experiences to engage with others in “ways that are otherwise off-limits to traditional empirical approaches to qualitative research” (p. 14). Adams et al. (2015) argue that autoethnography is a method that “uses deep and careful self-reflection—typically referred to as reflexivity—to name and interrogate the intersection between self and society, the particular and the general, the personal and the political” (p. 2). These reflections are then presented in a self-narrative composed by an insider who aims to engage the reader in “experiencing an experience” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 277).

Although autoethnography as a method is most common in communication studies and anthropology, there is growing use in the educational field (Ellis, 2004; Hughes, 2020). According to Hughes (2020), the latest autoethnography research in education involves studying the problems and possibilities in administrative work in K-12 schools. In education, autoethnography has become a useful tool for the researcher to express their voice through the use of narratives and storytelling. Artifacts, journal entries, field notes, and/or interviews are common data sets that are used in the analysis process and used to develop the story. These stories are often evocative descriptions of personal experiences to facilitate the understanding of a culture for insiders and outsiders. Consequently, this method was chosen over others because of its powerful ability to use a self-reflective approach to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences as a means to convey a message of social justice (Adams et al., 2015).

Using an autoethnography approach, this study explored, analyzed, and described the experiences that I had as a first-year principal of a middle school while attempting to implement a school culture that emphasizes college and career readiness for *all*. This qualitative method was used to describe and critique the cultural beliefs, social context, and

practices of the staff and students at Hope Middle School. The analysis of the artifacts, observations, and the interactions between members of the school community is presented in a personalized narrative developed from recall. The autoethnographic approach allowed me, as the researcher in this setting, to analyze the interactions between members of the school community from the lens of a school leader. In turn, this allowed me to experience first-hand the conditions that resist and/or allow a culture of college and career for *all* to prevail.

Confidentiality

Autoethnography method is unique in that the researcher is the subject. Consequently, as the first-year principal of a public middle school, I was the primary subject of this study. The focus of this study was on my personal experiences while attempting to establish a college and career readiness culture. However, given that staff and students are part of the school culture, staff and students became indirect participants of this study. Pseudonyms were used in order to protect the staff, students, and all of those who were indirectly involved in the study. When pseudonyms were used, I avoided using information that could potentially identify the individual. Documents, emails, images, meeting notes, conversations, and personal journal entries were analyzed to produce the narrative. When possible, images were included as part of the findings. However, in many cases a description of the data was used instead of the image in order to help minimize the potential identification of the participants. Additionally, names appearing in any of the documents were redacted as a means of protecting the individuals' identities. Every attempt was made to divert the focus from the participants to the reflective narratives.

Data Collection and Processing

As a method, autoethnography depends on the collection and use of data about the self. Autoethnographic studies are self-focused; the researcher retroactively writes about past experiences (Hernandez & Chang, 2010). Consequently, I was the primary data source of the study. In the process of writing about my experiences, documents such as sent and received emails, meeting minutes, images, field notes, conversations, and journal entries were collected in order to help with the recall of the events. The journal provided an opportunity to summarize my experiences that I found to be impactful on a weekly basis. Meeting reflections and a checklist of items to be reviewed at a later time were also included in the journal. The external documents allowed me, as the researcher, to re-experience in detail the epiphanies that were used to develop the narratives. More importantly, the external data provided contextual information and helped “gain a deeper understanding of the connectivity between the self and others within the same context” (Hernandez & Chang, 2010, p. 2).

The recollection and writing process required reflection and self-examination. This process is commonly known as reflexivity, a process in which the researcher attempts to understand “both self and others through examining one’s actions and perceptions in reference to and dialogue with those of others” (Anderson, 2006, p. 382). Consequently, I consistently engaged in reflective conversations with individuals that had no vested interest in the study. This allowed for the opportunity to review the documents and artifacts with someone else in order to validate the emotions and thinking that emerged. Furthermore, debriefing conversations with the assistant principal allowed me to develop and refine my understanding of the social system. There were times in which both of us were recipients of

the email or participants of the meeting. To maintain the accuracy of reflexivity, I followed the analytic reflexivity recommendations set by Anderson (2006).

The process for deciding which documents to collect was determined by how relevant the documents and artifacts were to the research questions. Any document pertaining to the phenomena of culture change was considered for this study. This included any school policies, practices, processes, and procedures that contributed to the culture of the school. Additionally, events and situations that reflected the school culture or the work to change the school culture that impacted me as the leader of the school were considered as important experiences. Special emphasis was placed on the factors surrounding the event and the emotions that resulted from the experience. Additionally, I consistently engaged in reflective conversations with my dissertation chair and committee members. These conversations helped identify the documents, artifacts, events, and situations that were important in answering the research questions. The journal entries allowed me to capture these experiences and process the events and situations.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis provides a highly flexible and useful approach for summarizing large data sets and generating unanticipated insights (Nowell et al., 2017). This approach is broad enough to allow the researcher to identify and describe both implicit and explicit ideas within the data (Guest et al., 2012). These ideas are commonly referred to as themes. According to Cap (2014), themes and patterns can come from direct quotes, conversation topics, recurring events, feelings, or observed behaviors, making this approach best suited for an autoethnography. As such, a thematic analysis approach was used for this study.

The first step in thematic analysis was to collect the data and familiarize myself with the data by reading, transcribing, making notes, and highlighting important aspects. Therefore, I

went back and reviewed meeting minutes, email conversations, journal entries, and all of the documents collected. This was followed by coding and labeling the documents and artifacts in relationship to the research questions. The process of coding and labeling allowed for the grouping of documents. The next step involved the classification of data by common categories, themes, and sub-themes. The themes were derived from the identified patterns in the data and were pieced together to form a comprehensive overview of the data. The themes were then defined using the related literature. A short description of each theme made it possible to start writing the narrative. The final step involved writing the narrative.

Within the autoethnographic method, narrative writing attempts to illustrate a new perspective and help facilitate the understanding of an experience within the context of the phenomena under investigation (Ellis et al., 2011). According to Chang (2008), the narrative writing requires the autoethnographer to “review, fracture, categorize, rearrange, probe, select, deselect, and sometimes simply gaze at the data in order to comprehend how ideas, behaviors, and experiences interrelate and what they mean to in relation to others” (p. 127). Using a reflective approach, all of the documents and artifacts were analyzed to produce meaningful narratives that clearly demonstrated the ways in which school culture impacts the experience and opportunities of students and how school culture change might be possible. The categories, themes, and patterns that emerged from the data were analyzed within a social and cultural context in order to identify the challenges and obstacles associated with creating a college and career readiness culture.

Limitations

This dissertation is limited by the use of autoethnography as the primary methodology. According to Lee (2020), autoethnography allows the researcher to “explore and access

their complex inner thoughts and emotions and, thus, develop a more comprehensive understanding of social phenomena” (p. 574). As such, this dissertation focuses on my personal experiences, perspectives, and inner thoughts as a school leader who is attempting to change a school’s culture. As both the researcher and the subject of study, this dissertation relies on my ability to accurately and truthfully interpret events and personal experiences. These interpretations were then presented in a narrative format that include intrinsic bias and can be considered one-faceted. Regular conversations with the assistant principal allowed me to confirm my understanding and interpretation of experiences through another school leader’s lens. Additionally, attempts were made to view the data through the lens of students, parents, and teachers. This strategy allowed me to better understand, from their perspective, the driving forces associated with building a college and career culture.

Summary

This chapter explained the research design, confidentiality, research setting, data collection procedures, and data analysis of this study. An autoethnography approach was used for this study in order to explore, analyze, and describe the experiences that I had as a first-year principal of a middle school. The particular focus was on the process of changing the culture of the school to one that emphasizes college and career readiness for *all*. Using a thematic analysis approach, documents and artifacts were analyzed to answer the research questions. This analysis will be presented in Chapter 4 as a narrative that depicts the school culture and the impacts it had on students as well as the conditions needed to create a college and career readiness culture.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents the findings and results of this qualitative autoethnographic study. The purpose of this study was to examine and document my personal experiences as a first-year principal of a public middle school, as I attempted to establish a college and career readiness culture. Additionally, the purpose was to document the challenges I faced in my attempts to change the school's culture. Specifically, this study's purpose was to identify the conditions and strategies necessary to establish and sustain a school culture of college and career readiness for all. A thematic analysis approach guided the data collection and analysis process, while autoethnography as a method allowed for the findings to be presented in a personalized narrative that describes the forces at work that shape school culture and limit efforts to make change possible. According to Hughes (2020), autoethnography studies allows the researcher to explore, analyze and describe personal experiences as a means to conduct a thoughtful insider analysis of issues that are rarely studied with such depth and complexity. As such, autoethnography as a method guided the construction of the narratives that are presented later in this chapter.

Several artifacts were used for this study: sent and received emails, meeting agendas and minutes, images, field notes, conversations, and journal entries. Such artifacts were analyzed to answer the following research questions:

- RQ 1: What challenges and obstacles are encountered while attempting to implement a culture of college and career readiness for all students, in a school that serves predominantly working-class students of color?
- RQ 2: Under what conditions can a culture of college and career readiness for all prevail, in a school that serves predominantly working-class students of color?

The analysis of the data is presented in a personal narrative followed by a reflection of some of the events.

Introduction of Categories and Themes

The data collection process began by collecting documents such as sent and received emails, meeting minutes, images, field notes, conversations, and journal entries. As a method, autoethnography depends on the researcher retroactively writing about past experiences (Hernandez & Chang, 2010). Consequently, the artifacts collected helped me, as the researcher, re-examine in detail the challenges and lessons learned during my first year as the principal of a middle school. These documented experiences were then used to develop the forthcoming narratives. A list of the artifacts collected and analyzed for this study is listed in Table 2.

Table 2*List of Artifacts Collected*

Artifact	Number of items collected	Date Range
E-mail communication from students, parents, teachers that contained both academic and discipline matters	2,337	August 2019–February 2020
Professional learning communities (PLC) meeting agenda and notes	8	October 2019–February 2020
Department meeting agenda and notes	49	August 2019–February 2020
Grade level meeting agenda and notes	18	August 2019–February 2020
Site leadership meeting agenda and notes	10	September 2019–March 2020
Staff evaluations	36	September 2019–April 2020
Staff discipline letters	10	October 2010–March 2020
Office referrals/student discipline referrals	784	August 2019–March 2020
Bulletin announcements	6	August 2019–December 2020
Site level policies	10	August 2019–March 2020
Staff newsletters	33	August 2019–March 2020
Staff feedback/complaints	6	August 2019–March 2020
Student assessment data	10	August 2019–March 2020
Student survey data	2	August 2019–March 2020
District leadership meeting agenda and notes	9	August 2019–March 2020

In addition to reviewing the items listed in Table 2, I also reviewed my calendar invitations and personal journal entries. This process allowed me to recall the various meetings and conversations that were held between August 2019 and April 2020.

Conversation topics, recurring events, field notes, emails, and all other forms of artifacts were coded and labeled in relation to the research questions. Two recurring categories emerged from reviewing and processing the documents and artifacts: academic and discipline practices. Each category can be defined as follows:

- *Academic practices* included the classroom environment, instructional strategies, learning materials, curriculum, grading practices, professional development related to classroom instruction. It also included the ways in which students interacted with the content and any practice that fostered the thinking skills needed to develop problem-solving abilities. These skills and knowledge represented what students needed in order to be deemed college and career ready (Conley, 2012).
- *Discipline practices* constituted the rules and strategies applied by the school staff to address student behavior. This included school policies such as dress code, the office referral system, intervention programs, and the strategies employed by the teachers to manage student behavior both in and outside of the classroom (Skiba et al., 2014).

A further analysis of the two categories revealed two themes under academic practices: deficit thinking and accountability. Punitive discipline practices also appeared to be a recurrent theme under the discipline practices category. Each theme can be described as follows:

- *Deficit thinking* entailed any academic practice that was rooted in the idea that students fail or are unable to perform at grade level because of internal deficits;

“blame the victim” ideology. Victim blaming is the attitude that suggests that the victim is a fault for the wrongful act, suggesting that a student's academic failure is their fault (Valencia, 2010).

- *Lack of accountability* refers to the lack of oversight by the previous school administration, including administration not holding teachers accountable and ensuring that they are operating in tandem with district and state mandates. This included holding teachers accountable for using the district adopted curriculum, attendance to mandated professional development, following district behavior and intervention system protocols, and all other initiatives set forth by the district.
- *Punitive and exclusionary practices* included practices that were shaming, exclusionary, and punished students for specific behaviors, many of which were considered minor offenses. These practices included detention, suspension, and other consequences that mirror the treatment of suspected and convicted criminals in the justice system (Fabelo et al., 2011; Nese et al., 2020; Skiba et al., 2014).

Artifact examples for each category were organized with respect to each research question. Table 3 lists of some of the artifact examples for academic practices that emerged during the review process for RQ1, which reads:

- What challenges and obstacles are encountered while attempting to implement a culture of college and career readiness for all students, in a school that serves predominantly working-class students of color?

Table 3*List of Academic Practices Artifact Samples by Categories for RQ1*

Category	Artifact Examples
Classroom Environment Artifacts	<p>Staff was expected to follow behavior management guidelines that were locally developed and agreed upon by the staff. Such guidelines used the acronym S.T.O.I.C., which translated to Structure, Teach, Observe and Monitor, Interact, Correct.</p> <p>Local site student survey data revealed that only 67% of the student population felt safe in the classroom while only 44% felt the classroom discipline practices were fair.</p> <p>Parent complaints and notes from parent meeting conversations highlighted loud classrooms, lack of communication between teachers and parents, and unfair treatment among students who often misbehaved.</p> <p>There were several emails from staff reporting that other teachers on campus were having students wait outside the classroom for long periods of time, sometimes for an entire period.</p>
Curriculum Artifacts	<p>Almost all content areas had an adopted district-wide curriculum. In the courses in which no curriculum was adopted, staff had the autonomy to create their own lessons using a variety of resources.</p> <p>There were recent curriculum adoptions for social studies, the designated English language development (ELD) course, special education courses, and pilot curriculum in science. Teachers expressed not being content with the adopted curriculum and the process the district followed when the curriculum was adopted.</p> <p>Emails, department meeting notes, and site-level observation data indicated curriculum modification as common practice among several of the teachers. In some cases, the adopted curriculum was not being used by the classroom teacher.</p>

Instructional Strategies	<p>Although many of the teachers on campus were incorporating a learning goal in their lesson, many of them were not aligned to grade level Common Core State Standards. According to the staff, the learning goals were modified because that is what students needed. Most of the lessons were not rigorous or challenging for students.</p> <p>Site level student survey data indicated that 60% of the students felt that the work they did in class made them really think and only 55% felt the assignments from their teachers helped them learn.</p>
Professional Development	<p>Professional development was consistently made available for staff, particularly for those content areas that had a new curriculum. Additionally, all language arts and mathematics teachers were released for a full day once a month. The goal of this time was to work as a department to review students assessment data, align lesson plans, and understand the curriculum. Staff complaints, emails, and staff feedback highlighted reluctance and trepidation regarding professional development opportunities.</p> <p>When participation in professional development was made optional, it almost always resulted in dismal participation. Professional development participation data provided by district level staff indicated poor attendance to the professional development sessions offered by both district level curriculum coaches and trainers.</p>

Table 4 lists artifacts for the discipline practice artifact examples for RQ1.

Table 4

List of Discipline Practices Artifact Samples by Categories for RQ1

Category	Artifact Examples
School Policies	<p>The dress code policy targeted specific clothing items. Clothing brands such South Pole, Nor-Cal, or sports team shirts/jackets/sweatshirts were listed as not being permitted. Belt buckles with initials, red or blue crucifixes, and any combination of white long sleeve shirt with a black short sleeve shirt were not allowed on school per the dress code.</p> <p>Students were expected to stay inside certain boundaries during the break and lunch hour.</p> <p>Only a few student activities were noted and some students were excluded from participating based on academic performance, attendance, and behavior.</p>
Discipline Referral System	<p>Grade level team notes indicated several student behavior concerns, yet no corresponding strategies for redirecting that behavior.</p> <p>Similarly, the office referral data indicated that teachers were identifying the behavior but had no corresponding interventions prior to removing the students from the class. Additionally, the referral data indicated a high number of students being referred to the office for classroom disruption and defiance. It is worth noting that the vast majority of the referrals were for a small cluster of students and came from a small group of teachers. In general, the discipline referral system artifacts revealed the absence of behavior interventions within the classroom to effectively manage student behavior.</p>

Behavior Intervention Programs	<p>Three behavior interventions were identified. Saturday school, lunch and after school detention, and suspension were the strategies used to intervene when students were sent to the office. Several of the artifacts from Saturday school, detention, and suspension revealed archaic practices and the absence of restorative practices to help address student behavior. Having students sit in silence and asking them to rewrite a sentence 100 times were practices followed during detention. Similarly, students who were sent to Saturday school were excluded from sport-related activities or what students understood as the “fun” activities.</p> <p>Sending students home without proper documentation was also a common practice. Several suspension notifications that were signed by parents and students were never reported on the school’s disciplinary tracking system.</p>
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Table 5 lists artifacts samples for RQ2, which reads:

- Under what conditions can a culture of college and career readiness for all prevail, in a school that serves predominantly working class students of color?

Table 5

List of Artifact Samples by Categories for RQ2

Theme	Artifact Examples
Academic Practices	<p>The campus developed a newcomer program called the International Academy to support newly arrived students from a different country.</p> <p>Students within the International Academy participated in two college field trips.</p> <p>The GEAR UP program was providing services to the seventh and eighth grade cohorts. College counseling, field trips, and college awareness presentations were some of the services they provided.</p> <p>The campus implemented student-led conferences as a means to encourage students to take ownership of their own learning.</p> <p>The campus had a partnership with a local business that sponsored a summer math academy program. The academy was intended to help 30 students accelerate in math during the summer.</p> <p>Several staff members invited guest speakers to their classrooms to enhance the learning.</p>
Discipline Practices	<p>Teachers communicated with parents when discipline issues came up and met with the families to identify the root of the discipline problem.</p>

The items in Tables 3, 4 and 5 are the primary sources utilized for analysis. However, the following narratives impart key insights into the challenges and obstacles that were present while attempting to change the campus culture.

Academic Practices Narrative

Upon being hired, I was very interested in learning about the academic practices on our campus. I made it a point to schedule individual meetings with all site department chairs,

district office department directors, and my immediate supervisor. The meetings revealed a deep level of concern from district administration and a disconnect between what our site department chairs believed was the current academic progress of the campus. On one end of the spectrum, our district administration expressed concern about the lack of academic progress the campus had shown over the last few years, particularly in language arts and mathematics. Given the lack of adequate progress, our site had received a low-performing student block grant. The grant was awarded to help improve evidence-based services for low-performing students and thus increase academic achievement. Furthermore, the meeting with my immediate supervisor revealed that all middle schools in our district would be focusing on building professional learning communities in order to help improve instruction on our campuses. We were also expected to join the district level initiative and establish professional learning communities on our campus for both language arts and mathematics.

Contrary to this opinion, the site department chairs indicated progress in some areas and provided a reason for why progress was not made in other content areas. High turnover rate, long term substitutes, students not performing at grade level when they arrive on our campus, and having a high number of English language learner (EL) students were among some of the reasons listed as to why adequate progress was not made. Although many of the statements were valid, at no point in my conversations with site staff did they take ownership for the lack of academic progress and continued to outline other issues on our campus. In fact, when referencing standardized assessment data, staff often indicated that such data was not valid, arguing that standardized assessment does not account for external factors such as poverty and the home environment. Additionally, they argued that such

assessment data was not indicative of their teaching practices. Consequently, any attempt made to use data as an indicator of academic progress seemed in vain.

Following district expectations, district leadership and site leaders set a plan that would help us build professional learning communities on our campus for the language arts and math department. To help facilitate this process, our district partnered with an organization that would allow us to release teachers from their teaching duty for an entire day to meet as a team. The goal during this time was to review and analyze student assessment data and use that information to plan high quality instruction for students. Unfortunately, I was faced with some resistance from teachers who did not trust that this process would help their instruction. In fact, several of the teachers expressed feeling frustrated about the initiative and the “many changes” that were happening on campus. In a meeting with their site union representative, staff complained about a multitude of items. Some the complaints from the staff included:

- staff being scared over lack of control of students by administration
- lack of control of environment on campus by administration
- high expectations for staff but administration not having the same high expectations for student behavior
- past expectations on the campus not being supported
- positive behavior interventions and support (PBIS) meetings being too late in the day when they should be held during contract hours so more staff are willing to attend
- the current administration not understanding the need for teachers to be “allowed” time in their rooms to plan and work alone.

These teacher complaints were recorded by the site union representation which were then printed and shared with administration. This level of concern and resistance stems from the idea that many of the teachers believed that they were highly effective teachers who had no need to work collaboratively. Their statements also highlighted an appreciation for autonomy and a preference for less administrative oversight. This type of environment can be best described by Hoy et al. (1991) as a disengaged climate, one that is marked by the principal's concerned attitude and staff resistance to change.

Despite some of the resistance, we met monthly as a department team to set department goals, plan highly effective instruction, review student assessment data, and share best practices. As part of this process, as a team we discussed using the adopted district curriculum to develop and deliver grade level, standards-based instruction to our students. The idea of providing access to grade level, standards-based assignments to our students was faced with some concerns. Staff argued that many of our students would not be able to access the grade level curriculum because many of them "could not do it." In fact, several discussions were about how the curriculum was modified to meet students at "their level."

On one occasion, the language arts team was asked to bring forward a seventh grade writing assessment rubric they were using. According to the team, the essay writing rubric had been modified because the textbook rubric was too complex for students to understand. Figure 1 shows the adopted curriculum rubric and Figure 2 shows the teacher-modified rubric.

Figure 1

Original Curriculum Essay Writing Rubric

7th Grade Argument Rubric			
	Focus and Organization	Evidence and Elaboration	Conventions
4	The introduction is engaging and states the claim in a persuasive way.	Details, examples, and quotations from the selections are specific and relevant.	The argument intentionally follows standard English conventions of usage and mechanics.
	The claim is supported by logical reasons and relevant evidence, and opposing claims are addressed.	The style and tone of the argument are formal and objective.	
	Reasons and evidence are logically organized so that the argument is easy to follow.	Words are carefully chosen and suited to purpose and audience.	
	Transitions clearly show the relationship between the claim, reasons, and evidence.		
	The conclusion supports the argument and offers a new insight into the topic.		
3	The introduction is somewhat engaging and states the claim clearly.	Details, examples, and quotations from the selections are relevant.	The argument demonstrates accuracy in standard English conventions of usage and mechanics.
	The claim is supported by reasons and evidence, and opposing claims are acknowledged.	The style and tone of the argument are mostly formal and objective.	
	Reasons and evidence are organized so that the argument is easy to follow.	Words are generally suited to purpose and audience.	
	Transitions show the relationships between the claim, reasons, and evidence.		
	The conclusion supports the argument.		
2	The introduction states the claim.	Some details and examples from the selections are relevant.	The argument demonstrates some accuracy in standard English conventions of usage and mechanics.
	The claim is supported by some reasons and evidence, and opposing claims may be briefly acknowledged.	The style and tone of the argument are occasionally formal and objective.	
	Reasons and evidence are vaguely organized with a few transitions to orient readers.	Words are somewhat suited to purpose and audience.	
	The conclusion relates to the argument.		
1	The claim is not clearly stated.	There is little or no relevant support.	The argument contains mistakes in standard English conventions of usage and mechanics.
	The claim is not supported by reasons and evidence, and opposing claims are not acknowledged.	The style and tone are informal.	
	Reasons and evidence are disorganized and the argument is difficult to follow.	Words are not appropriate to purpose or audience.	
	The conclusion does not include relevant information.		

Note. myPerspective English Language Arts (ELA Curriculum) Essay Rubric.

Figure 2

Modified Essay Writing Rubric

RUBRIC: What You Must Have in Your Essay

ORGANIZATION		
The introduction gets the reader's attention		
The Thesis is supported by evidence, explain, and opinion		
Sentences are organized so that the information is easy to follow		
Sentences clearly show the connection among ideas		
The conclusion supports the information		
EVIDENCE and EXPLAIN		
Evidence is from the text, Explain connects to the evidence, Opinion is about Evidence		
The style and tone are formal		
Words are carefully chosen and suited to purpose and audience		
USING ENGLISH		
The essay is written at a 7th-grade level		

The modified rubric omitted several key words that appear on the curriculum adopted rubric that are considered essential for a well-written argumentative essay. For instance,

under the organization category, the adopted curriculum rubric instructs students to write an introduction that “is engaging and states the claim in a persuasive way,” while the teacher-modified rubric expects students to write an introduction that “gets the reader’s attention.” I was intrigued by the decision to modify the rubric, and so I posed the question to the team as to why the rubric was modified. The teachers responded that they had made the changes to be more “student friendly” and something that the students could “understand” because the adopted curriculum rubric was “too complex” for the students.

Unfortunately, this modification was not an isolated practice. In fact, it was a common belief among the staff that the curriculum needed to be modified for students. Many of them did not favor the district-wide adopted curriculum because staff believed that the adoption was not appropriate for our students. That school year, social studies, English language development, and the special education department had made a transition to a new curriculum. I recall the various conversations about the adopted curriculum that took place in department meetings. Many of the staff expressed not being content with the current adoptions. In particular, the staff was angry at one of the adoptions because they felt that they were not part of the decision-making process. According to the staff, “the district office” selected the curriculum and went against staff recommendations. Moreover, the staff expressed being frustrated with the curriculum because the curriculum lacked several key components needed to promote student growth.

Given the amount of curriculum adoptions and the resistance to using the curriculum, I was instructed by my supervisor to ensure that our staff was using the adopted curriculums. A classroom observation tool was created to help track our classroom visits. Embedded in the tracking tool was a question related to the use of the adopted curriculum. Both the assistant principal and myself were expected to visit the classrooms frequently and

complete the form for our walkthroughs. The assistant principal and I would review our walkthrough data quarterly and used the analysis to develop our next steps. At every quarter, we were concerned by the high number of teachers that were not using the adopted curriculum during our visit. In fact, only 57.6% of our classroom visits last year noted the use of the adopted curriculum. Lack of training, the curriculum being too difficult for students, and having a better way to teach the content were among some of the reasons staff provided when asked why the adopted curriculum was not being used.

Unfortunately, the negative attitude towards the adopted curriculum and resistance to collaboration among staff was common across the campus. Often, teachers believed that students did not have the capacity or the skills necessary to be able to access grade level curriculum. This resulted in curriculum modification as a frequent practice among teachers, which in turn made it challenging to develop a learning experience that was rigorous for students. Additionally, staff failed to recognize that their teaching practices largely contribute to student's academic progress. Although teachers expressed positive intent when modifying the curriculum, the modifications stemmed from a deficit thinking perspective. In fact, modifications were often made to lower standards, subsequently posing a significant challenge in creating college and career ready students.

Discipline Practices Narrative

On my first day as principal, I was greeted at the front gates of the school by the school custodian, an attentive employee that had worked at the site for more than twenty years. After greeting me and confirming I was the new principal, he proceeded to ask if I wanted to take a tour of the campus. Without hesitation, I dropped my belongings in my office and proceeded to follow him out the door. At face value, the campus was relatively clean and in good shape. The campus had recently had a new paint job, a new roof, and up-to-date

furniture in some classrooms. As I continued to tour the campus, I was impressed by a beautiful and colorful mural that adorned one of the hallways. This mural was painted in 1994 with the support of a community artist. Among the images in the mural were two men, one carrying a Mexican flag while the other one was carrying the U.S. flag. Both men face each other, reaching out to cross their flags: a symbol of unity between both cultures.

As I continued with my tour, I began to notice several display glass bulletin boards lining the hallways. I was thrilled with the idea of publicizing academic achievement, perfect attendance, and school accomplishments. However, as I drew near the display cases and read what was being advertised, I was immediately flabbergasted. At each of the boards, there was a letter that read “Final Exclusion List” followed by the following description:

Students are on the exclusion list for bad grades from not turning in work, poor attendance, and/or behavior. Students may not attend activity day. Instead, they will be in a classroom working.

Figure 3 shows this text as it appeared.

Figure 3

Final Exclusion List

Every display bulletin board on campus advertised the list of students by name and grade level that were not allowed to participate in school activities. I was so intrigued by the “Final Exclusion List” that I decided to ask the custodian to share more information. With

confidence he shared that the “exclusion list” was created collectively by teachers to ensure that students received consequences for their poor behavior and poor choices. I was in disbelief that this was an accepted practice at this school. This is when I realized that I had a gargantuan task ahead of me, one that would require a change in the school’s culture. Unfortunately, this was not the only event that exemplified the discipline practices that permeated the campus.

Only a few months into the school year, I received a notice from a staff member who was deeply concerned about an incident that she had witnessed during a physical education class. In her email, this staff member described the interaction between four male students and the physical education teacher. I was in disbelief that such an incident had occurred, so much so that I decided to meet with the reporting staff member. During our meeting, the staff member explained that she was conducting hearing exams when she overheard a discipline conversation between the physical education teacher and his students. The hearing exams were being administered in the school’s gym, the same facility that our physical education teachers use from time to time. The only divider between the physical education class and the reporting staff member was the stage curtain. As such, the physical education teacher was unaware that the reporting staff member was within earshot of the conversation.

According to the reporting staff member, the discipline conversation began when the physical education teacher asked his entire class to hold their basketballs and one student let a basketball drop. This led the physical education teacher to hold four students after class, the four male students who he thought were responsible for letting the basketball drop. When asked to transcribe the conversation, the reporting staff member wrote:

He told them a story about being an accomplice to a robbery where they would get 5-20 years in prison. He intimidated each student into an apology while trying to get them to tell on the others. He threatened [to issue] referrals and suspensions and told them they were on the path to prison. The last student was held last because [the teacher] didn't accept that his apology was sincere. He talked in a derogatory stereotypical Hispanic accent to him, mimicking how he would speak to his friends. He then told him he's on track to prison before letting him go.

The reporting staff member indicated that she had decided to audio record the conversation because she was not sure what else to do. She also requested that I not share with the physical education teacher who had reported the incident as she was not sure how that would affect her relationship with him.

Similar events and discipline practices were noted during yard duty supervision. Yard duty supervision is one of the many opportunities for a staff member, including administration, to build rapport with students. In fact, it is one of the few opportunities that staff can engage in a conversation with students, find out what they like, dislike, including interests both inside and outside of the school. I was very curious to find out what break and lunch was like for our students. Is there a club that students like the most? What sport activities do students enjoy the most? What lunch activities do we have for our students? These were just some of the questions that ran through my mind as I pictured the quad full of students laughing and enjoying themselves. However, this was far from what I experienced with yard duty supervision. When the bell rang, I grabbed my radio and headed out the office door. I was greeted at the quad by our campus supervisor who quickly began to talk to me about the rules that students needed to follow during the break and lunch hour. Yellow lines were painted around the quad area, outlining the areas that students needed to adhere to. Students were not allowed to be in groups larger than five students, were not allowed to access the sport fields, and only the well-behaved students were

allowed to be inside the library. Through my conversation with staff, I also learned that our campus instituted lunch detention as a consequence for students who misbehaved during the break and lunch hour. These were some of the draconian practices that were put in place to control student behavior.

When questioned why these rules were in place, many of the staff members indicated that middle school students “do better in a structured environment” and these rules helped them be much more successful. Other staff members argued that such practices were in place because of the previous history of high gang involvement among our students that no longer was present at the school. Despite the absence of gang involvement on our campus, many of the current school policies and procedures stemmed from the fear that gang violence would return to the campus. Many staff members described the time as “awful” and full of physical violence between student groups. In fact, this fear influenced how staff responded to incidents and how they viewed student behavior. For instance, on one occasion, a staff member reported via e-mail a “suspicious” transaction which she personally observed and intervened in.

In her email, the staff member stated she observed the sale of chewing gum between students but interpreted this transaction as a potential sale of a controlled substance.

Following is an excerpt of the teacher’s communique:

I asked if she could tell me the name of the student who was selling gum. She said XXX but that was all she knew. I spoke with XXX about the gum (and confiscated it), and he explained that his friend, XXX, told him he shouldn’t chew it because they could have laced it with something, so XXX threw it away. I find it alarming that students are selling gum to other students, and especially to my 6th graders. I am also shocked that students thought it was a GOOD idea to PAY another student for something that he knows is not allowed on campus. If you get a chance, could you call XXX to make a statement or follow up with this experience via your videos?

In her statement, the teacher expressed a deep level of concern for this situation and confiscated the item.

Similarly, on a different occasion, we had a staff member who reported an incident in which a student had sprayed perfume/cologne in a classroom and interpreted that as a threat. In her email, the staff member explains that she suffers from a severe allergic reaction to perfumes. She goes on to mention that the previous year students who had sprayed cologne or perfume in her classroom would automatically be suspended from school. As such, she was deeply concerned that this new administration was too “casual” with their consequences. In her email she explains the following:

I am seriously concerned with how casual students are being disciplined for threatening my life. In the 10 years that I have been teaching, I have never had students continually threaten my life as they are doing this year with little consequences... The two students who were caught spraying cologne/perfume in my class were given after school detention and wrote me a two sentence apology letter yesterday... If a student were to come into my class and start choking me what would be the consequence then?

I decided to meet with the teacher to discuss our current stance on discipline practices. In my meeting with the teacher, I explained that I deeply cared about the safety of all staff members and that our goal was to help students reflect on their behavior. The after school detention center was being redefined to offer the students the opportunity to reflect on their behavior and the opportunity to repair the damaged relationship by offering students the option of writing an apology letter to staff. Unfortunately, the teacher felt that the apology received from the student was not sincere. She went on to describe a “similar” situation that took place at different site:

At XXX High last year I was told that a teacher with the same allergy was given an epi pen and rushed to the hospital. The administration suspended the student and eventually expelled the student for threatening a teacher's life.

Coincidentally, I was employed as the assistant principal at the site and year in which the alleged situation occurred. As the former assistant principal of that XXX High I do not have any recollection of a student being expelled for threatening a teacher's life nor a teacher being rushed to the hospital for an allergic reaction.

The Outcast Group

In the month of November, I decided that I wanted to schedule a time to meet individually with each staff member on the campus. I felt this would allow me to establish rapport with the staff and learn more about the campus. Over the course of 2-3 weeks, I scheduled 30-minute meeting sessions with each staff member. These meetings were voluntary, informal, and staff could choose to accept the invitation or suggest a different meeting time. I have to admit that I was pleasantly surprised by the positive reaction to the invitation. Almost all of the staff accepted the invitation and expressed interest in having the opportunity to meet with me. The meetings had no agenda and were completely open for a discussion on any topic. Some staff members were prepared with a list of questions, others had an agenda with topic items to discuss, while others just went with the flow.

These meetings revealed a subculture that seemed to be overshadowed by a dominant teacher culture of the campus. For instance, one of the staff members described the change in administration as a much-needed change. They indicated that the previous administration was "absent" and rarely involved in the decision making process of the campus. When asked to elaborate, the staff member indicated that most decisions on the campus were made by a dominant group of teachers on campus. This group of teachers often displayed deficit thinking tendencies, enforced punitive and exclusionary discipline practices, and wanted to remain in control. They decided what policies and site initiatives would be followed and anyone who went against such ideas would be faced with dismissal.

Intrigued by the discovery, I decided to ask a few other staff members how decisions were made on campus. What process did the site follow? Who was involved in the decision making process? How were disagreements between staff dealt with by administration? These were among some of the questions I asked to further understand this subculture. Several other staff members confirmed the absence of leadership in the decision making process and the existence of a group of teachers who dominated conversations and strongly influenced what took place on the campus. Additionally, these meetings revealed the existence of a group of teachers who strongly believed in doing what was right for students but were unable to speak their mind. This is the same group of teachers that often participated in professional development, worked beyond their contract hours, communicated frequently with parents, had positive rapport with students, and were constantly seeking to improve their teaching practices. Some acknowledged that some of the practices on that campus were harming students yet decided to remain in the shadows because they knew that such practices did not exist in their classroom.

Data Analysis

According to Conley (2010), cognitive strategies, content knowledge, academic behaviors, and contextual skills and awareness are the capabilities, skills, knowledge, and behaviors that students need in order to be deemed college and career ready. Such skills are often learned in a classroom setting, making teachers key players in building these skills, knowledge, and behaviors. At times, deficit discourse and practices were an obstacle in reaching such expectations at Hope Middle School. Consistent with Schweitzer et al.'s (2019) and Keefer's (2017) findings, deficit perspectives were present among many of the teachers. In fact, deficit discourse was consistently present in meetings that pertained to classroom instruction and the use of grade level adopted curriculum. Many staff members

perceived the grade level adopted curriculum as “too difficult” for students because the teachers felt the students lacked the skills and ability to grasp the content. Consequently, this resulted in frequent curriculum modifications or the use of other instructional materials that were not at grade level.

Deficit thinking was much more prevalent with students who received special education services, as well as EL students. For instance, students in the special education program rarely had access to the general education courses. Conversation with the assistant principal revealed that only 14.5% of the special education student population were taking a course outside of the special education program, with the vast majority taking physical education. Several special education teachers indicated that students were “not ready” to enroll in general education courses, citing that students did not possess the academic ability to do well in a general education course. Additionally, students in the special education program often participated in physical labor activities that were not related to the curriculum. For instance, they supported the custodial staff by collecting recyclables and maintained the school garden during instructional time. They also participated in trips to local companies to “assist them with the transition from school to work.” There was an emphasis on pre-employment skill development and preparing students for the workforce.

It is important to note that not all teachers shared the same deficit perspective. Approximately 20% of the teachers had high expectations for students, worked extremely hard to close the learning gaps, and encouraged students to try their best. We also had other staff members who consistently implemented, with fidelity, the grade level curriculum even when students were struggling. At times this required staff to work extra hours developing scaffolds to support struggling students. Additionally, a handful of staff members would meet regularly with parents and other support staff to intervene when students were

struggling. These practices are exemplary of the conditions needed for a college and career readiness culture to prevail. However, these examples were far less common than those of the incidents that were previously outlined.

In addition to deficit thinking, the shadow of past practices loomed large over the management of behaviors by staff, and their discipline practices. Furthermore, policies and procedures at the campus level were explicitly written to reflect stereotypical notions of gang affiliation. Given the school's alleged prior prevalence of gang activity, most teachers were constantly on the lookout for any semblance of such activity, or gang paraphernalia. As a result, multiple incidents were reported wherein staff would respond aggressively towards students and any perceived gang affiliation. These findings were consistent with Skiba's et al. (2014) study, which noted the application of severe consequences for minor infractions. In one incident from Hope Middle School, a teacher physically cut off, with scissors, a red colored tag (smaller than a postage stamp) from the jeans of a student. In another situation, a student was publicly shamed in front of his peers by being called a "moron and a punk" by his teacher. These practices, along with prior examples discussed in the narratives, reflect the institutionalized belief that teachers must remain "in control" at all times, no matter the cost. In fact, controlling students seemed to be the central tenet that guided many of the practices at the school.

These practices were considered acceptable by the campus community in part because of the absence of leadership that existed prior to my tenure. Staff operated mostly in a semi-autonomous manner, with minimal oversight by site administration. This autonomy permitted the staff to build their own curriculum, optionally chose to use the adopted district curriculum, and use their best judgement when dealing with student behaviors. The absence of teacher evaluations, records, and documented coaching and feedback sessions

made it abundantly clear that the previous administration was not holding teachers accountable. In fact, my transition meeting with the previous principal lasted only 30 minutes and did not provide any substantive or accurate information on the campus's state of affairs. For instance, when asked about copies of evaluations for staff, the former principal advised that I contact our district's human resources department. I later learned from human resources that no evaluations for tenured staff were completed the previous year, and that the last record on file was from 5 years prior. While these are only a few examples, these serve as a litmus test on the lack of leadership and teacher accountability that existed prior to my arrival. The absence of accountability created the perfect conditions for resistance to the change in leadership.

The overarching theme of punitive and exclusionary discipline practices, coupled with academic deficit thinking are the biggest challenges to overcome while promoting a college and career readiness culture. The constant resistance from staff, along with their disengagement in the change process, were an obstacle that I encountered while attempting to change the culture of the campus. The data also indicated that when students were provided with a welcoming environment, a challenging and rigorous curriculum, and caring, involved teachers, a college and career culture can prevail. This was particularly true when teachers were reflective of their teaching practice, participated in professional development, had a positive relationship with students, and took ownership when students were not progressing adequately. This required staff to work extra hours developing scaffolds to support struggling students, consult with other teachers on best teaching practices, and meet regularly with parents and other support staff to intervene when students were struggling.

Summary

This chapter explored the themes that emerged from an analysis of artifacts that were used for this study. Some of the artifacts included sent and received emails, meeting agendas and minutes, images, field notes, conversations, and journal entries. Two prevailing categories emerged: academic and exclusionary discipline practices, which were used to develop the narratives. The analysis of the data revealed that punitive discipline practices, coupled with academic deficit thinking, were an obstacle to achieving a college and career readiness culture. Additionally, the data revealed that in order to achieve a college and career readiness culture, the following conditions needed to be in place: high expectations for students, a challenging and rigorous curriculum, teachers who continuously seek to improve their teaching practices, and teachers who are caring and engaged with their students.

Chapter 5: Findings, Recommendations, and Conclusion

Over the last several decades, our national education system has undergone several reauthorizations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) aimed at improving student outcomes. From No Child Left Behind to President Obama's Race to the Top to President Trump's push for school choice, these reforms have failed to close the opportunity gap that has long existed between students of color and their white peers. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2019), in 2019:

- Forty-two percent of eighth grade students who identified as white performed at or above proficient on the reading assessment, while only 22% of Latino students, and 15% of African American students scored at or above proficient.
- When compared to their white peers, the average reading score for Latino students was 20 points lower and for African American students it was 28 points lower.
- When compared to their white peers, the average mathematics score for Latino students was 24 points lower and 32 points lower for African American students.
- Forty-four percent of eighth grade students who identified as white performed at or above proficient on the math assessment, while only 20% of Latino students, and 14% of African American students scored at or above proficient.

Such differences in student achievement can also be noted in graduation rates, college enrollment data, remedial course enrollment, and state level standardized testing scores (Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Chen, 2016; McFarland et al., 2019; Radcliffe & Bos, 2013).

Conversations on how to close the opportunity gap and prepare students with the knowledge and skills to navigate modern society have been at the forefront of educational discourse. These conversations have resulted in policies and resource allocations being directed at preparing all students for college and careers, with the hope of closing the

opportunity gap. Researchers who have studied the concept of college and career readiness have suggested elements, principles, and conditions that need to exist in a school in order to achieve college and career readiness for all (Conley, 2010; Corwin & Tierney, 2007; McClafferty et al., 2002). These recommendations offer a framework for transforming the school culture to one that makes college attainment a priority. However, these recommendations were all made under the assumption that a school culture can be changed, making culture change a priority for school site leaders.

Consequently, the role of the school site leader has emerged as a significant factor that influences school culture (Aldridge, & Fraser, 2016; Dutta, & Sahney, 2016; Lee & Li, 2015). Leaders in today's schools are expected to set goals for the school, inspire and motivate their staff, work as a team to maintain continuous improvement, and are oftentimes responsible for shifting school culture on their campuses. Research suggests that site leaders who hold teachers to high expectations, seek out new and innovative teaching techniques are successful at shifting culture. Moreover, leaders who model respect, empathy and a caring attitude are successful in changing school cultures, to promote academic success (Avolio & Bass, 1996; Kurland, 2019; Stone et al., 2004; Thomas et al., 2020). However, there remains high interest amongst researchers to further explore the relationship between leaders and culture change in schools.

In 2019, I was hired as the principal of a middle school that was categorized as a low performing school, with a high number of low-income students of color. The analysis of the site level standardized testing data confirmed a decline in the number of students who were meeting or exceeding state standards in both English language arts and mathematics. The data revealed a decline in students meeting or exceeding standards in English language arts from 21% in 2017-2018, to 20% in 2018-2019. For mathematics, the decline was from 14%

in 2017-2018, to 11% in 2018-2019. Moreover, district level administration had expressed concern about the lack of academic progress the campus had shown over the last few years. Consequently, upon being hired, my conversations with my immediate supervisor were focused on setting a plan to help improve student outcomes. Most importantly, I was asked to help advance the district mission of ensuring that all students graduate high school college and career ready.

As such, the purpose of this study was to: (a) examine and document my personal experiences as a first-year principal of a public middle school, as I attempted to establish a college and career readiness culture, (b) document the challenges I faced in trying to change the culture, and (c) identify the conditions and strategies necessary to establish and sustain a school culture of college and career readiness for all. This chapter summarizes the research methodology and procedures that were used in this study, identifies the major findings, the implications for practice, and concludes with recommendations for future research.

Methodology

According to Chang, Longman, and Franco (2014), school leaders of color are still significantly underrepresented in the educational system. In fact, our stories are often marginalized in the literature, with most of the literature centering on the experiences of white male leaders. Baber (1995) argues that people of color must find ways to share their stories as a means to provide an alternative perspective. Autoethnography has become a useful tool for researchers to express their voices through the use of narratives and storytelling.

Therefore, autoethnographic approach was the ideal method because it allowed for in-depth analysis of the complex forces at work in sharing school culture from the perspective

of a school leader of color and someone who attended schools in the district and worked in the district in multiple capacities. Ultimately, this method allowed me, the insider, to tell my story and share my perspective. In the process of writing about my experiences I collected documents such emails sent and received, meeting minutes, images, field notes, conversations, and journal entries. The external documents allowed me, as the researcher, to carefully analyze my experiences in the school and construct narratives that unpacked the school culture and our efforts to create a school culture that supported high expectations and promoted academic achievement. These narratives provided an insight into the challenges and obstacles that were present during the culture change process.

Using and autoethnography approach, this study explored, analyzed and described the experiences that I had as a first-year principal of a middle school while attempting to implement a school culture that emphasizes college and career readiness for all. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What challenges and obstacles are encountered while attempting to implement a culture of college and career readiness for all students, in a school that serves predominantly working-class students of color?
2. Under what conditions can a culture of college and career readiness for all prevail, in a school that serves predominantly working-class students of color?

Key Findings

Being hired as a principal in the district where I completed my K-12 experience was a dream come true. Unfortunately, my K-12 experience was not easy, which resulted in the desire to increase the academic rigor for other students and thus increase the number of students who are ready for college. With this in mind, I began my appointment eager to learn about the campus and continue to support the areas of strength, while also identifying

how to insert myself in areas that needed to be addressed. With enthusiasm and optimism, I began to meet with staff, parents, and students, in hopes of learning more about the campus culture. The first few conversations with staff revealed to me a deep level of appreciation for high expectations for students. In fact, high expectations for both students and staff was listed as a desired expectation from staff during my first meeting with site department chairs. Staff also indicated high growth in student achievement, indicating strong teaching practices that helped our lowest achieving students reach high academic growth.

Site level academic achievement data and conversations with central office administration revealed that this was not the case. Both interim and summative assessment data for the site indicated low academic growth patterns for our students. Unfortunately, our middle school was not the only middle school in our district with this predicament. The vast majority of the middle schools in our district had similar achievement levels. Consequently, a district initiative for all middle schools had been developed the year prior to my arrival. Implementing PBIS and establishing PLCs at each of the middle schools were among the expectations. Most importantly, we as site leaders were expected to help advance the district mission of ensuring that all students graduate high school college and career ready. With this task in mind, I began my journey as a principal.

What follows are the key findings of this study.

Academic Practices

The commitment to hold students to high expectations that staff had expressed during our introductory meetings was not evident on campus. During several of our collaboration meetings, whether it was a department, grade level, or job alike meeting, staff often expressed concerns about student performance and student inability to meet grade level content and performance expectations. The idea of providing access to grade level,

standards-based assignments was not well received by staff. Staff argued that many of our students would not be able to access the grade level curriculum because our students did not possess the necessary skills to do so. Discussions in meetings were focused on how the curriculum needed to be modified in order to meet students at a lower level. It is worth noting that such practices are contrary to what Conley (2010) and McClafferty et al. (2002) recommend in their respective college and career readiness framework. Creating an academic program and having assignments and grading policies that more closely approximate college expectations are among their recommendations.

Unfortunately, refusal to use the adopted curriculum, modified assignments and rubrics, and teacher resistance to professional development were among some of the common academic practices that resulted from teachers' deficit thinking ideologies. Deficit thinking was also evident with students who received special education services, as well as EL students. Students in special education rarely had access to general education courses, while EL students were often seen as poor readers and writers. Participating in activities that were not related to the adopted curriculum, encouraging students to read elementary level books, and emphasizing pre-employment skill development and a focus on workforce preparation was common. According to Conley (2010) and McClafferty et al. (2002) expecting all students to attend college and communication with students about what it takes to get into college are essential strategies for building a college and career readiness culture. However, conversations about college and postsecondary education readiness were seldom on campus. Furthermore, staff perceived the grade level adopted curriculum to be too difficult for students because they believed that students lacked the skills and ability to grasp the content. Consequently, teachers frequently modified the curriculum to lower standards and/or defaulted to curriculum that was not at grade level.

These academic practices along with deficit thinking beliefs about our students were obstacles that I encountered while attempting to implement a culture of college and career readiness for all students. Prior to my arrival, staff were not expected to utilize the district approved curriculum. Furthermore, the previous administration failed to follow-up on an action plan to do so. This created an accountability vacuum, wherein staff were free to either adopt the district approved curriculum or design their own. Consequently, this created a culture of self-governance and the creation of curriculum that was rarely aligned with state and district objectives.

Breaking through these barriers has not been easy and continues to be a challenge in the face of a deeply entrenched school culture. At face value, the ingenuity that some staff bring in developing a curriculum that is adaptive to student needs is an asset to the school. However, there was a need to redirect these efforts to align with district goals. Unfortunately, most efforts at redirecting staff have consistently been met with resistance and opposition. Some of the examples of the challenges that I faced included dismal professional development participation, low student expectations, and resistance in using the adopted curriculum.

Punitive and Exclusionary Discipline Practices

Discipline practices that were shaming, exclusionary, and punished students for minor behavior offenses were prevalent at Hope Middle School. Policies and procedures at the campus were written in a format that focused on negative behaviors and identifying what students were not allowed to do on campus, rather than creating a culture of support. Some of the archaic practices observed on the campus included a dress code policy that targeted specific clothing items, boundaries within which students needed to remain during break and lunch times, zero tolerance for cell phone use, and preventing students from accessing

the sport fields during the lunch break. Unfortunately, Saturday school, lunch and after school detention, and suspension were the three most common strategies used to intervene when students violated the school's established rules. Additionally, those that failed to follow the rules were excluded from participating in school activities. These practices alienated students, which in turn led students to feel disconnected from the campus (E. P. Jones et al., 2018).

These discipline practices stemmed from the school's alleged prior prevalence of gang activity. This caused most teachers to constantly be on the lookout for any semblance of gang activity. For instance, teachers were constantly looking for any clothing that historically was associated with a gang. This type of profiling often led to teachers responding to discipline more aggressively because of their perceived affiliation. Discipline referral artifacts revealed the absence of behavior interventions within the classroom to effectively manage student behavior. Additionally, multiple incidents were reported wherein staff would respond aggressively towards students and would pursue extreme consequences for minor incidents. Incidents of classroom disruption and defiance were addressed by sending the students to the office and/or removing the students from the classroom. Such practices reflected a hypervigilant school culture where discipline and control were prioritized over fostering a safe, nurturing, and welcoming environment where students were motivated to engage in their classes.

Overall, it was evident that the school's culture was heavily skewed towards controlling student behavior and utilizing punitive discipline practices. These approaches to discipline are not unlike those found in institutional correctional facilities. The literature commonly refers to this resemblance as the school to prison nexus (Cramer et al., 2014; Meiners & Reyes, 2008). What was most disheartening was that staff wholeheartedly believed that a

punitive approach to behavior management was the most ideal for the needs of students in this community. What teachers failed to see was that in many ways, they were reinforcing the very behaviors they most wanted to avoid. Inevitably, learning, student morale, and student engagement all suffered as a result of these antiquated and archaic approaches to discipline.

The inability for staff to reflect on their practices and acknowledge that such approaches to student behavior no longer matched the needs of today's students was a major challenge. Therein lies the greatest challenge of my tenure: how does an administrator change a school's culture to one that prioritizes college and career readiness, over deeply entrenched beliefs and attitudes that staff refuse to acknowledge or abandon? It is worth noting that these types of behaviors and practices are not created overnight. The fifteen years of tenure that the previous administrator had, created the perfect conditions for this harmful culture to exist. Consequently, attempting to shift this deeply rooted culture will take time and persistence.

Implications and Recommendations

Based on the findings from the study, the following recommendations can help ameliorate the aforementioned harmful practices in schools.

Building a Transition

Creating a transition between the exiting and the newly hired site leader is imperative. In this particular situation, the transition meeting between myself and the former principal was short and not informative. Staff strengths, school goals and initiatives, and areas of progress are among some of the topics that any newly hired administrator should know. A new principal should know if there are areas that need growth, staff that need support, or concerns that need to be addressed the first year. This information would allow the newly

hired leader to move forward with the initiatives on the campus that were previously agreed upon while also addressing the areas of concern that need immediate attention during the first year.

Equity Audits

According to Skrla et al. (2004), equity audits assist school leaders and others in the school community in reviewing student data in a clear manner that reveals levels of equity and inequities to the public. Most importantly, equity audits “promote insight into, discussion of, and a substantive response to systemic patterns of inequity in schools and school districts” (p. 141). This strategy was helpful when we as a site looked at the following data set: English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC), Smarter Balanced Assessments, and local discipline student data. Through the use of equity audits, our staff was able to identify patterns in student data and thus an invitation for staff to self-reflect. This was much more critical when reviewing student discipline data. In fact, segregating the data by EL and special education students revealed great concerns about suspension patterns, which in turn forced conversations about the need for a change. These conversations were then transformed into an action plan. The action plan included the following strategies: aligning assessment tools and grading rubrics across all grades, incorporating effective questioning techniques, and providing effective feedback to students.

Student Voices

Consistent with the existing literature, student voice is an essential tool for enhancing the teaching and learning experience (Hall, 2017; Fielding, 2004). Just like this dissertation allowed me to voice my experience, opportunities for students to share their voices should

be provided. When provided the opportunity to share their opinion of school policies, students wrote the following:

- “I think the current Hope Middle School rules need to be updated to better suit the kids of today.”
- “If I can change any rule, it would be the dress code. I think people should be themselves. Not [just] be dressed in black, white, or gray.”
- “I would change the rule about referrals, I would take off the 2 hour detention.”
- “I would change the rules of the exclusion list. Instead of taking away the fun from them, just give them extra work.”

When student statements were part of the conversation, teachers appeared to connect with students in a profound manner, and also appeared to be more self-reflective of their practices. In some cases, student voices allowed the staff to see the topic or issue at hand from the students’ lens. Thus, educational leaders should incorporate student voices to advance dialogue on what is the best way to engage and support students based on their unique experiences and needs. Implementing student surveys, focus groups, and student panels are some of the strategies to help gather student input. Other strategies include individual conferences with students and inviting students to be part of school site decision making committees. This process is possible when leaders foster a culture where students’ needs and insights are valued and at the center of the work. Without this valuable input, administrators are operating in a vacuum that minimizes the intrinsic value found in the opinions of the student body.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

According to Yosso (2006) students of color are often seen as inferior by their teachers yet bring to the classroom cultural assets and community wealth that are essential in

helping them navigate the educational pathway. This asset based approach is what Yosso (2006) refers to as community cultural wealth. This model asserts that communities of color possess aspirational capital, linguistic capital, navigational capital, social capital, familial capital, and resistant capital. As such, through the use of students' culture and history as a teaching resource, teachers can engage their students in ways that are exciting and meaningful to the students. In fact, when teachers acknowledge, respond to, and celebrate the cultural contributions their students bring to the classroom, student achievement can be improved (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This approach to understanding the strength of our students can be helpful in shifting educator's deficit perspectives to an asset based approach.

Without a doubt, both culturally sustaining teaching and community cultural wealth have been helpful in bringing identity and experiences to the forefront of the classroom. More importantly, this approach helps educators understand and mitigate the many educational challenges that students of color face. To this end, Tewell (2020) and Yosso (2006) assert that both culturally sustaining pedagogy and community cultural wealth have been a direct response to deficit models. Thus, school leaders should intentionally lead teachers in the exploration of culturally sustaining pedagogy through readings, conversations, and available webinars. Staff meetings are also a great opportunity to incorporate activities for staff to self-reflect on their attitudes, stereotypes, and beliefs as a necessary first step in developing educators who are critically conscious and culturally competent. In turn, this will also help create a school environment that fosters caring educators.

Caring Educators

Sinner (2004) suggests that a student's ability to learn and a teacher's ability to teach are enhanced with meaningful relationships. Rodríguez-Castro et al. (2016) remind us that "caring" makes a difference in schools because it influences how students are able to perceive themselves as successful students. Educational leaders who are seeking to change school culture must consider ways to help build meaningful relationships between the student and teacher. According to Kurland (2019), some of the teacher behaviors that demonstrate a caring attitude include "listening to the student, asking questions about the student's personal life, the existence of a neatly organized class climate, high expectations from students or staying after school in order to discuss student problems or help them in general" (p. 708). In fact, those teachers who had meaningful relationships with their students and displayed some of these characteristics had fewer discipline referrals, higher standardized test scores, and often had positive comments from students. Teachers who care and place students at the center of the learning process continuously self-reflect on their practices and seek ways to improve their craft. This may include participating in professional development opportunities, having a positive relationship with students, and taking ownership when students are not progressing adequately, with the goal of improving student outcomes.

Consequently, school leaders need to review their hiring practices to glean insight into a candidate's ability to empathize with students and build positive relationships with them. For instance, expecting teachers to teach a lesson or provide a recorded lesson as part of the interview and hiring process will provide an insight to the candidate's ability to connect with students. This ability to connect with students is commonly found among staff who are vested in the community in which they work and in those who come from similar

backgrounds as their students. In response, districts will need to hire more teachers of color and those who are equipped with the knowledge and skills to address the needs of low-income students of color. When new hiring is not possible, educational leaders will need to rely on professional development to foster culturally competent educators.

Recommendations for Future Research

It is recommended that more studies be conducted on the conditions necessary for a college and career readiness culture to prevail. In particular, studies on how to interrupt deficit ideologies and punitive discipline practices is much needed. A case study of a cluster of teachers who have successfully reached a high number of students who are deemed college and career ready can help identify what works. A longitudinal study in which several students are followed from middle to high school to college should also be explored. This could provide helpful insight into the strategies and conditions necessary for such success to take place. Additionally, the perspectives of both students and parents in the change process are needed. Their perspectives are necessary and will provide insight to the challenges and obstacles they encounter daily. Their perspective, in turn, can help educational leaders find ways to address those challenges.

Conclusion

The dissertation process provided a rich opportunity for self-reflection and realization for me as the researcher. My hope is that this dissertation provided the reader and those who are in the field of education insight into some of the issues that persist in our educational system, despite countless educational reforms, legislative mandates, and fluctuations in educational funding. The reality is, students of color and school communities that serve a high percentage of students of color continue to embody exclusionary discipline practices that are harmful. According to Smith (2005) “many educators, through their race

and class biases, have developed low expectations, misconceptions, and false assumptions about students of color and poor students” (p. 24).

Unfortunately, the findings of this study revealed a school culture that was dominated by low expectations, deficit thinking, and exclusionary discipline practices. This led to a less rigorous curriculum and discipline practices that closely resemble those found in the criminal justice system. Such practices create a pathway to the criminal justice system and further alienate students from the path to college, amongst other lifelong detrimental consequences. Whether consciously or unconsciously, these lower expectations, misconceptions, and harmful discipline practices impact the educational achievement of students. Additionally, many of the experiences annotated in the narratives are clear examples of institutional racism. These examples were not always overt, but often manifested in subtle or implicit ways. As such, addressing the ideologies and attitudes of those that make up the school community is an essential first step.

Creating a college and career readiness culture for all students can be challenging for administrators when deficit thinking is deeply entrenched in a campus community. This is evident by the low expectations, exclusionary discipline practices, and resistance to change found at Hope Middle School. All of these factors posed a threat in establishing a college and career readiness culture. Leaders of today will need to create awareness about the negative impact that deficit thinking has on the overall educational experience of students of color and those that are economically disenfranchised.

While difficult to achieve, school leaders can begin by offering a new perspective, creating opportunities for the staff to self-reflect, and interrupting deficit thinking and old practices that harm students. Using accountability systems like equity audits, incorporating student voices, and training teachers to incorporate culturally sustaining practices are

among the strategies that school leaders can use to interrupt deficit thinking and exclusionary discipline practices. Additionally, staff must develop the ability to see through the lens of students, parents, and those they interact with, in order to create a caring environment.

This dissertation helps improve the educational outcomes for students by contributing to the existing literature on college and career readiness. While my leadership experience can be considered unique, it is in fact emblematic of the culture that exists in many schools with deeply entrenched deficit ideologies. The findings of this study have created a foundation of knowledge which school leaders can use to advance a culture of college and career readiness for all students. My goal as an educator has been, and continues to be, advocating for student success no matter the challenges. Most importantly, the self-reflective process that occurred during this dissertation has made me a better school leader and educator by examining my own values and questioning my own biases. Ultimately, it is my hope that this dissertation serves as a resources and inspiration for other school leaders who are tasked with implementing a college and career ready culture in a community of underserved students.

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