Closing the Achievement Gap: High-Achieving High Schools that Serve Underrepresented Students

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/50j083n9

Author
Ensberg, Philip Martin

Publication Date
2017

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Closing the Achievement Gap: High-Achieving High Schools that Serve Underrepresented Students

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Education in Teaching and Learning

by

Philip Martin Ensberg

Committee in Charge:
Alison Wishard Guerra, Chair
Chris Halter
Hugh Mehan

2017
The Dissertation of Philip Martin Ensberg is approved, and is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Chair

University of California, San Diego

2017
DEDICATION

Dedicated to the memory of my mother, Gloria Elizabeth Ensberg, the daughter of immigrants and the first in her family to graduate from college. Your selflessness and resilience taught me that there is no higher measure of strength than service.
# Table of Contents

**Signature Page** ........................................................................................................... III  
**Dedication** .................................................................................................................... IV  
**Table of Contents** ........................................................................................................ V  
**List of Figures** ............................................................................................................... VIII  
**List of Tables** ............................................................................................................... IX  
**Acknowledgements** ..................................................................................................... XI  
**Vita** ............................................................................................................................... XIII  
**Abstract of the Dissertation** ......................................................................................... XIV  

## Chapter 1: Introduction ............................................................................................... 1  
- Hierarchy in Society ........................................................................................................ 1  
- Reproduction in Schools ............................................................................................... 3  
- On The Current State of the Achievement Gap ........................................................... 4  
- On Importance of Reducing/Eliminating the Achievement Gap .................................. 6  
- On Mediation-Countering Reproduction Theory ......................................................... 7  
- Theoretical Framework ................................................................................................. 9  
  - Ecocultural Systems Theory ....................................................................................... 9  
  - Bronfenbrenner as a Model of School Development ............................................... 10  
  - Organizational Learning Theory ............................................................................... 14  
- Research Questions ....................................................................................................... 16  

## Chapter 2: Literature Review ...................................................................................... 17  
- The Achievement Gap: 1970 to the Present .................................................................. 17  
- Common Core State Standards Reform ....................................................................... 19  
- Charter School Reform ................................................................................................. 19  
- School Context ............................................................................................................. 25  
- Culturally Relevant Schools ......................................................................................... 29  
- Teacher Beliefs ............................................................................................................. 32  
- Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 33  

## Chapter 3: Methodology ............................................................................................. 35  
- The District Context ..................................................................................................... 37  
  - Positionality ............................................................................................................... 37  
  - Research Design ........................................................................................................ 38  
  - Phase One: Identification of Participant Schools ....................................................... 38  
  - Phase Two: Survey Dissemination ............................................................................. 39  
  - Phase Three: Interviews ............................................................................................ 41  
  - Participant Demographics ....................................................................................... 42  
  - Analytic Plan ............................................................................................................. 43  

## Chapter 4: Findings ..................................................................................................... 46
APPENDIX B: HIGH SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR SURVEY .......................................................... 124
APPENDIX C: HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER SURVEY .......................................................... 126
APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL ............................................................................. 128
APPENDIX E: CONSENT FORMS ..................................................................................... 130
REFERENCES .................................................................................................................... 132
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. A Bronfenbrenner-based conceptual model of nested contexts influencing teaching and learning in schools ................................................................. 13

Figure 2. Rates of participants who identified Oakes’ (2003) seven critical conditions as important to their students’ success ......................................................... 50

Figure 3. Who most controls teacher curriculum ................................................................. 98

Figure 4. Who most controls teacher pedagogy ................................................................. 98

Figure 5. A conceptual model of organizational learning theory in a school site ............... 102

Figure 6. Conditions and features that foster high achievement among underrepresented students in a Bronfenbrenner-based model of teaching and learning .......... 108
**LIST OF TABLES**

Table 1. Highest- and Lowest-Performing High Schools in Blue Ridge County .............. 39

Table 2. Interview Participant Demographics ........................................................................ 43

Table 3. Respondents Who Identified Safety as Important to Students’ Success ............... 51

Table 4. Suspension Rates for Grades 9-12 in 2016-17 ..................................................... 52

Table 5. Respondents Who Identified a College-Oriented Culture as Important to Students’ Success ............................................................................................................ 54

Table 6. Respondents Who Identified Rigorous College-Preparatory Course Offerings as Important to Students’ Success .................................................................................. 58

Table 7. Respondents Who Identified High Teacher Quality as Important to Students’ Success .............................................................................................................................. 60

Table 8. Highest Degree Earned in Addition to Teaching Credential Among School Faculty 61

Table 9. Average Years of Service in 2016-17 .................................................................... 62

Table 10. Rates of Teachers Credentialed and Teaching in the Subject Area for which They Are Credentialed ............................................................................................................. 62

Table 11. Respondents Who Identified the Importance of Academic and Emotional Support Services for Students .............................................................................................................. 68

Table 12. Respondents Who Addressed the Importance of Giving Students Opportunities to Develop a Multi-Cultural College-Going Identity ................................................................. 71

Table 13. Respondents Who Identified Family– Neighborhood–School Connections as Important to Students’ Success ........................................................................................................ 75

Table 14. Educator Beliefs Regarding Features Key to Student Success .............................. 83

Table 15. Respondents Who Identified Student–Teacher Rapport as Important to Students’ Success .............................................................................................................................. 86

Table 16. Respondents Who Identified Specific Teaching Strategies as Important to Students’ Success .............................................................................................................................. 88

Table 17. Respondents Who Believe Faculty High Expectations Are Important to Students’ Success .............................................................................................................................. 91

Table 18. Respondents Who Believe Course Offerings Are Important to Students’ Success . 94
Table 19. Respondents Who Believe Teacher Collaboration is Important to Students’ Success
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the many people whose incredible support made this project possible.

First, thank you to my wonderful wife Kerry who in all these years never complained once about the extra work and who encouraged me and reassured me that I could do this, and thank you to my children Annie and Joey who every day inspire me to be my best.

Thank you to my father Earl Ensberg, a lifelong model of excellence in scholarship.

Thank you to my brother Dave Ensberg and his wonderful family for your constant support, guidance, and encouragement.

To Doris and Joe, thank you for your mentorship and your help with so many things, and thank you to the entire Alvarez family for your great support, puns excluded.

Thank you to my many doctoral cohort members—especially Elena, Myette, Mimi, Sharon, Wendy, and Marina—who provided wonderful feedback and ideas, and kept me motivated when my energy ran low.

Thank you to the wonderful community at my school, the best faculty and staff any teacher could hope for.

Thank you to the broader community of the UCSD EDS faculty for modeling what you teach. Special thanks to Paula and Jim for your support over more than a decade during many masters and doctoral courses. Also a giant thank you to my brilliant committee members, Alison, Bud, and Chris, for your insights, humor, creativity, and encouragement.

Thank you to the participants in my study schools and the district who contributed their time—your contributions helped improve the literature on reducing the achievement gap and facilitate progress towards a more fair and meritocratic school system.
And thank you to my chair Alison Wishard Guerra who has been a mentor, a friend, a
sounding board, and many times the voice reassuring me that I could do this when I wasn’t so
sure.

To all of you, I am forever indebted to you for your many gifts of kindness.
VITA

Education

University of California, San Diego
Doctor of Education in Teaching and Learning • December 2017

University of California, San Diego
Master of Arts in Teaching and Learning • September 2003

University of San Diego
Single-Subject Teaching Credential in English • June 1993

California Lutheran University
Bachelor of Arts in English Literature • June 1991

Professional Experience

August 2000 to Present
The Preuss School UCSD, La Jolla, CA
Teacher

September 1996 to June 2000
San Diego Unified School District
Teacher

Professional Experience

Mentored new teachers through beginning teacher induction.

2008-Present Distinguished Educator Advisory Panel
Collaborated with neuroscientists and cognitive scientists as part of the Temporal Dynamics of Learning Center through UCSD.
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Closing the Achievement Gap: High-Achieving High Schools that Serve Underrepresented Students

by

Philip Martin Ensberg

Doctor of Education in Teaching and Learning

University of California, San Diego, 2017

Alison Wishard Guerra, Chair

The persistence of the achievement gap poses a challenge to a merit-based school system. Its existence supports social scientists’ assertions that schools inevitably recreate or reproduce the existing social hierarchy. Growing evidence counters this view, however, showing that particular school features and conditions can act as mediations that help reduce the achievement gap. This study examines four southern California high schools with proven success in reducing the achievement gap to better understand which school features and conditions are most important to improving achievement among underrepresented students. Findings support Oakes’ (2003) Seven Critical Conditions for College Access and suggest seven additional features: strong student–teacher rapport, effective teaching strategies (especially cooperative learning and differentiation), combination schools (combining high
schools with middle and elementary schools), smaller schools, high expectations, rigorous and accessible course offerings, and time for teachers to plan together. A contrast of traditional schools and charter schools suggests that there are a few advantages for each school model: traditional schools offer have more resources and more course choices; charter schools offer greater flexibility over school structure, more teacher autonomy over pedagogy and curriculum, and more local control over hiring and firing school personnel.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In every measure of school success—reading proficiency, high school completion, college participation, college completion rates—affluent, predominantly white and Asian students consistently outscore less affluent, predominantly black and Latino students (Mehan, 2008). This gap in average scores between more affluent white/Asian students and less affluent black/Latino students is termed the academic achievement gap, and it has existed for at least a half century in the United States.

The existence of the achievement gap most vividly came to national attention with the publication of the Coleman Report (Coleman, et al., 1966), which focused especially on the relationship between family socioeconomic status (SES) and student achievement (Coleman et al., 1966). According to Reardon (2011), in the fifty years since the publication of the Coleman report, the achievement gap has remained “one of the most robust patterns in educational scholarship.” Efforts to reduce this gap have met with limited success, but overall the gap remains, and in some ways it is growing (Reardon, 2011, p. 92).

Hierarchy in Society

However, Mehan (2008) asserts that the achievement gap can be reduced or eliminated if students are given the right opportunities to learn. He contrasts the traditional view of schooling as a “meritocratic sorting device” with the view that schools (either wittingly or unwittingly) serve to “reproduce the existing hierarchies of privilege” (p. 42).

Mehan (2008) notes that society, in general, may be depicted as a system of positions that are roughly equivalent to occupations. These positions have a hierarchical order in terms of their importance within the society, with generally those occupations requiring special, often abstract skills for their performance being ranked highest and being bestowed with the
most prestige and rewards. The lowest-ranked positions in society are associated with jobs requiring only manual skills and are accorded fewer rewards and less prestige (Mehan, 2008).

Given this hierarchy, a society operates more effectively when the most important occupations are performed by the most qualified people. These positions should therefore not be filled on the basis of social inheritance, as that would waste the talent of other, potentially more qualified candidates. Societies, therefore, must have a method for selecting and sorting people into their best-fit positions. This function in industrialized, capitalist societies is most conspicuously fulfilled by schools (Mehan, 2008). Theoretically, therefore, the ideal schools offer all students equal opportunity, and sort students entirely on the basis of their talent and effort, and not on the basis of any ascribed characteristics, such as socioeconomic status (SES), race, or gender (Mehan, 2008). This creates the best chance for matching students’ talents to the demands of jobs at all levels of society and the skills that people acquire through schooling and on-the-job training. Therefore, schools should help to select the most able and competent candidates for preparation for leadership positions within the society, based upon the hard work, effort, and merit of each student (Mehan, 2008).

This belief in achievement on the basis of hard work, effort, and merit is intrinsic to the "American egalitarian credo" which Mehan calls America’s "achievement ideology" (2008, p. 43). To fulfill this achievement ideology, schools must provide children with an equal opportunity to learn (OTL), since educational attainment is closely associated with higher SES (Mehan, 2008) and "income and class status have become increasingly determined by educational success" (Harris & Herrington, 2006, p. 210).

However, there is disagreement about whether American schools do, in fact, provide equal opportunities for all students to achieve at the highest levels based solely on the basis of
hard work, effort, and merit. Bourdieu (1991), for example, posits that schools must inevitably reproduce the disparity between those at the highest and lowest levels of society.

**Reproduction in Schools**

Bourdieu (1991), a prominent proponent of the reproductionist school of thought within sociology, argues that schools, wittingly or unwittingly, reproduce the existing social stratifications. Children of those members of society who attain higher levels in the social hierarchy generally move on to careers in the higher levels themselves, while those from families at the lower levels remain at the lower levels (Mehan, 2008). Bourdieu first framed this reproduction in terms of a link between linguistics and hegemony in a fixed system of "cultural capital" that favors some for advancement and disfavors others. He asserts that "language, and social capital in general, tracks inevitably" (paraphrased in Woolard, 1985, p. 743). Social mechanisms reproduce knowledge of legitimate language unequally among children, reproducing language patterns according to parents’ position in the social hierarchy. Thus, linguistics acts as a gatekeeper of this disparity (Bourdieu, 1991).

The existence of the achievement gap runs contrary to the meritocratic ideal of the achievement ideology, and reinforces the notions of the reproduction theorists. Coleman et al. (1966) assert that indeed schools do tend to reproduce social levels, finding that differences in schools and classrooms mattered less in students' achievement than did their race and the social standing of their parents.

Harris and Herrington (2006) observe that "the inequality of educational achievement across racial and ethnic groups has long troubled those who believe that success should be based on merit and that the educational system should be America's great equalizer" (p. 209). These findings appear to support the views of the reproduction theorists, in that children of
higher-status parents are trained differently than children of lower-status parents, purposefully offering them a differentiated curriculum (Mehan, 2008).

**On The Current State of the Achievement Gap**

The achievement gap in some ways has narrowed, and in other ways has grown. Overall, efforts to close the achievement gap over the last fifty years have at times been more successful than others. Harris and Herrington (2006) found that in the 1980s to mid-1990s, an increased push for more standards-based curricula and stricter course requirements for graduation had the effect of reducing the overall achievement gap. This finding would appear to support Mehan’s view that schools can be made more meritocratic.

However, in the mid-to-late 1990s, there was an increased focus on accountability reforms, led by the passage of the No Child Left Behind act (NCLB) in 2001, which added new consequences for low performance, and over the period between the passage of NCLB and the present, the achievement gap has once again grown. Harris and Herrington (2006) conclude that “specifically, *A Nation at Risk* has important lessons for No Child Left Behind” (p. 209), meaning that the recommendations in the former out-performed those in the latter, at least in relation to the achievement gap. The achievement gap still remains a robust problem.

The mechanisms which are associated with the existence of the achievement gap, and by which children receive “differentiated” training, are complex. Since the publication of the Coleman Report in 1966, a lot of the scholarly research concerning the achievement gap has focused on understanding these mechanisms. Many factors contribute to its existence, including parental educational attainment, family structure, neighborhood conditions, school quality, parental preferences and choice, and investments of resources (Reardon, 2011). When viewed distinctly, these various components of the achievement gap have performed differently over the last half-century.
Affirmative action was one dramatic policy that attempted to ameliorate the achievement gap. Historically denied groups were given special preference in admission to schools and colleges. Affirmative action has been the subject of numerous court cases, and some states, including California, Michigan, and Washington, have made the practice illegal. Major beneficiaries of this controversial program include White women, although Bowen, Bok and Burkhart (1999) argue that this policy helped to create the Black middle class.

Study of the achievement gap has focused on a number of components. The *ethnicity achievement gap* describes the difference in academic achievement between white and Asian students who, on average, out-perform black and Latino students (Mehan, 2008; Reardon, 2011). Another important component in the achievement gap is the *education achievement gap*, in which the average performance between children of more-highly-educated parents is higher than that of children of less-highly-educated parents (Reardon, 2011). However, the single strongest predictor of student achievement in relation to the achievement gap remains that associated with socioeconomic status (SES), sometimes called the *income achievement gap*.

Reardon (2011) defines the income gap as “the income difference between a child from a family at the 90th percentile of the family income distribution and a child from a family at the 10th percentile.” Since 1966, the ethnicity achievement gap between whites and blacks has been shrinking. During this same period, the education achievement gap has stayed more-or-less the same, but the income achievement gap, most recently, has been growing. Fifty years ago, Reardon (2011) writes, the black-white achievement gap was one and a half to two times as large as the income achievement gap. Today, the income achievement gap is nearly twice as large as the black-white achievement gap. Meanwhile, the gap between children with
more-highly- and less-highly-educated parents has remained relatively stable (Reardon, 2011). Reardon (2011) finds, “the achievement gap between children from high- and low-income families is roughly 30-40 percent larger among children born in 2001 than among those born twenty-five years earlier” (p. 91). SES remains the strongest predictor of a student’s academic achievement.

The persistence of the income achievement gap is a special cause for concern because as long as schools consistently sort students in such a way that their academic performance correlates closely with the SES of their parents, then this suggests that schools, willingly or unwillingly, reproduce the parents’ positions in society in their children, in line with the views of the reproduction theorists. The presence of the income achievement gap challenges the traditional view that American schools can truly be called meritocratic. If academic success is not based entirely merit, the democratic process may be to some degree undermined. More privileged children will succeed over their more talented but less privileged peers, resulting in a less equal and less skilled society as a whole. In the future, economic, political, and educational progress will suffer as a result.

**On Importance of Reducing/Eliminating the Achievement Gap**

America’s promise of a land where “all men are equal” and have the right to “the pursuit of happiness” is a cornerstone of American values and politics. The notion that all people have the opportunity to rise through social ranks according to effort and talent is perhaps best encapsulated in the phrase The American Dream. These words, penned in 1931 by James Truslow Adams in *The Epic of America*, defined a land in which life was “better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” (Adams, 1931, p. 4). This land where one's limits for attainment are only limited by what they can do and how hard they try is the foundation of America’s promise as
a country based on meritocracy, where workers assume best-fit positions in their fields, and the best workers attain the highest-status jobs, resulting in a more productive work force and a more beneficial life for all.

However, this ideal of a land where effort and ability determine one’s success runs contrary to the achievement gap. As observed by Jencks and Phillips (1998), if society is to function optimally, then meritocratic-based schools are essential. Children should succeed in school according to their ability and effort. If one accepts that people are created equal, little if any correlation should exist between children and their parents’ income, ethnicity, or education levels. In this ideal state, schools would be truly meritocratic.

On Mediation-Countering Reproduction Theory

Social reproduction theorists might argue that the meritocratic schools cannot exist, that the achievement gap is fixed. They would argue that it can be reduced, but it is an inevitable aspect of any hierarchical society. This assertion is consistent with Bourdieu’s (1991) observations, who believed that movement across social levels will be difficult considering the existence of class-based hierarchies which intentionally or unintentionally hinder the achievement of the lower classes.

The weight of evidence continues to support the views of Bourdieu (1991) and other social reproduction theorists, that schools have not leveled the playing field for underrepresented minority (URM) and low-income youth. However, a growing body of research challenges the reproduction theorist's determinism. Numerous examples of students, classrooms, and schools that interrupt this predetermined sorting are being documented, often touted as schools that are closing the achievement gap. High personal aspirations, for example, were a key difference in the success of “The Brothers,” who were higher-achieving black students, when compared to the “Hallway Hangers,” who were unmotivated, white high
school dropouts (MacLeod, 1987). Although a later edition of MacLeod’s (1987) book found that despite their high aspirations, many of The Brothers fell back into menial jobs (MacLeod, 2008), this may not so much devalue the importance of high personal aspirations as much as suggest the importance of coupling those high aspirations with excellent schooling. Community investments combined with reform-minded charter schools helped students in Harlem’s Children’s Zone (HCZ) to close the black-white achievement gap in math and halve it in English Language Arts (ELA) (Dobbie & Fryer, 2009). In these and many other examples, mediation is the key, whether through peers and family, or on the part of school structures and personnel. Mehan (2008) writes that "cultural processes within peer groups and families can serve as mediators between structural constraints and students' opportunities to learn" (Mehan, 2008, p. 59).

These examples of mediations that reduce the achievement gap are evidenced across many measures of academic achievement, from standardized test scores (Dobbie & Fryer, 2009), to college acceptance rates (Mehan, 2015), to high school graduation rates (McLeod, 1987), and long-term persistence in high school and college (Sass, Zimmer, Gill, & Booker, 2016). These examples provide positive evidence that traditionally low-achieving students can rise to the highest levels of achievement with proper mediations. The successes of these mediations, discussed in greater detail in the Literature Review, counter the determinism of reproduction theorists like Bourdieu (1991).

Despite the persistence of the achievement gap, research suggests that some mediations help increase the academic achievement of underrepresented student populations. Evidence of these isolated successes suggest that more research is needed into what mediations are most fundamental in closing the achievement gap, as well as continued
searching for undiscovered innovations which can help underrepresented students achieve more and counter the determinist perspective. Given that charter schools are the settings for a disproportionate number of successful mediation efforts, research into charter schools with their more autonomous model can contribute to the discussion is an area of need.

This study examines both high-performing and low-performing high schools in relation to the achievement gap in order to answer this overarching question: What features do school faculty at these schools believe are fundamental to their success or lack of success, and why do they believe it is working?

**Theoretical Framework**

The persistence of the achievement gap reinforces the view of some social reproduction theorists who argue that schools inevitably reproduce the social levels of students’ parents, but growing evidence suggests that mediations can change this dynamic. The achievement gap is a complex problem and this study will explore the achievement gap through an ecocultural systems theory of learning, informed by distributed learning theory and organizational learning theory. What these three frameworks share in common is their recognition of the socio/cultural influence on learning and academic achievement. That is, learning in school is affected by many different contexts that impact each student, e.g., the classroom, school site, district, and home. Examinations of successful and unsuccessful mediations must account for this diverse and widespread circle of influence impacting how students learn in schools and how teachers and schools learn from one another.

**Ecocultural Systems Theory**

Ecocultural systems theory refers to the belief that people do not learn in isolation, but instead that our learning—and human development generally—is influenced by the many contexts in which we live and operate (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Bronfenbrenner’s (1994)
Ecocultural systems theory (EST) refers especially to the contextual systems that, within an ecological paradigm of how people learn, influence the learner’s construction of knowledge, including the assimilation of new knowledge into the framework of existing knowledge. Contexts within which learning occurs interact in ways that are fundamental to learning. Examples of contexts most relevant to this study would include schools, homes, communities, county and state policies, and national trends in politics relating to education. To organize these diverse elements I will borrow from Bronfenbrenner’s (1994) ecological models of human development, but I will apply the model to a whole-school setting.

**Bronfenbrenner as a Model of School Development**

The ecological paradigm asserts that learning cannot be understood by only studying the teacher or the student or both. Many factors influence how students learn, e.g., parental influence, district policies, state and national mandates, public opinion, and characteristics unique to each school site and its surrounding communities. This multi-faceted understanding of educational contexts helps to explain why research rarely if ever finds that success or failure in a school site results from any one isolated program or school feature. Rather, academic outcomes are the result of a mixture of many elements. This reflects the views of school sites as multi-faceted entities characterized by Bransford, Darling-Hammond, and
LePage (2005) as “an irreducible complexity that is difficult to understand for those not directly involved” (p. 6).

For the purpose of this study, this “irreducible complexity” will be studied in a nested design taken from Bronfenbrenner’s (1994) ecological models of human development. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological perspective is illustrated in his general ecological model of child development, which captures the diverse influences on a child’s biological and cultural development by placing the child in the center of concentric rings, each of which represents influences that are ever expanding in scope while decreasing in proximity to the child being studied.

Because Bronfenbrenner’s (1994) general ecological model captures the complex contexts in which children develop, it is a useful model to represent the complex contexts within school sites described by ecocultural systems theory. This study applies Bronfenbrenner’s (1994) model to understanding the myriad influences at work in a single school site and how they work together to encourage academic growth. Therefore, the center of the concentric circles in this adapted-Bronfenbrenner (1994) model is not a child but a school (Figure 1).

In this modified general ecological model, the school is in the center of the innermost circle, the microsystem, where the school site—its characteristics, strategies, and policies—develops and grows. This microsystem includes the school and the different people within the school-site context that regularly interact to foster academic achievement, including teachers, students, administrators, and some family members. The mesosystem represents networks of school sites that may influence one another, such as when schools adopt programs from other schools to address a need or conflict. The mesosystem may include schools in close physical
proximity, or in the same district or county. The relevant exosystems include settings in which at least one person interacts directly with the school (e.g., the child), but others in the exosystem do not (e.g., the parents). In this model, exosystems would include students’ homes and surrounding communities. The macrosystem describes the broader physical, financial, and cultural contexts of the region, including state and federal policies. Finally, the chronosystem places the school in time, both in terms of personal growth and in the larger trends at the local, state, and national levels (e.g., Common Core State Standards (CCSS) reform and charter school reform) that may impact a teacher’s professional development and practice.

Bronfenbrenner himself asserts that his model of child development applies as well to adults. As children develop through social interactions to learn, grow, and acclimate into their culture, so do school sites develop within complex systems of communities, other sites, and other educational and political organizations. The nested ecocultural systems within the general ecological model illustrate the multi-layered context teachers operate in as the school site develops, e.g., as teachers and students within a site experience the CCSS reform in California classrooms.
Figure 1. A Bronfenbrenner-based conceptual model of nested contexts influencing teaching and learning in schools

The value of positioning a school site at the center of Bronfenbrenner’s (1994) general ecological model for the purposes of this study is to model the complex contexts in which teachers teach and students learn. It is important to note that a school’s influence may work
outward on the surrounding contextual factors as well, such as the reciprocal relationships among schools that borrow from and inform each other’s development. This conceptualization informs the methodology of this study in terms of what factors to focus on and how best to elicit relevant data from different contexts which ultimately, directly or indirectly, impact teacher development and teacher practice. Because no one school feature or program can explain the causes of or the solution to the achievement gap, the emphasis must be on the school site as a whole, in all of its complexity.

**Organizational Learning Theory**

Understanding that the causes of the achievement gap are many and its mediations are complex is only the first step. Ultimately, schools must learn which mediations fit their many contexts and how they must be implemented to be successful. How this might happen can be explored under the purview of organizational learning theory.

Organizational learning theory asserts that learning within organizations (e.g., schools) is done by individuals but not by individuals acting alone. As Argyris and Schön (1978) assert, a key aspect of organizational learning is the interaction that takes place between parties, be they individuals or organizations. Also, that “learning is the accumulation of knowledge and the understanding of its potential benefit” (Yu, Jacobs, Salisbury & Enns, 2013, p. 350).

Organizational learning theory teaches two important lessons relevant to this study. First, learning happens in only two ways in an organization: 1) by the learning of its members, or 2) by acquisition of new members who have knowledge the organization previously didn’t have (Simon, 1991). Second, to successfully keep pace in modern, knowledge-based societies, organizations require “intelligence beyond that of any individual” (Isaacs, 1993, p. 28). When taken together, these two lessons have important implications when considering any reform
efforts in a school context: the people in the organization (teachers, students, administrators, family) must learn if the organization is to change, and no one person in the organization will be able to make it happen, i.e., it must be a group effort.

What organizational learning theory tells us, therefore, is that what we know and learn about narrowing the achievement gap will not have a positive impact on academic achievement among underrepresented populations unless explicit efforts are made to do so. Successful examples already exist of such organizational learning among schools and school models to close the achievement gap. Mehan (2007) describes one effort at inter-organizational collaboration taking place in San Diego. The Preuss School at the UC San Diego serves as a model school to reform efforts at Gompers Charter Middle School, Cal Prep in Berkeley, and UC Los Angeles’s Community School (Quartz et al., 2016), which is located in a low-income neighborhood some distance from resources such as those available at a university. This is an example of organizational learning, in the sense that, spurred by Vygotsky (1997) and others in the cultural historical activity tradition, learning has come to be viewed as a distributed process. In Mehan's (2008) project, learning does not focus on the individual level, but seeks to understand how "organization-level factors shape the behaviors of people who constitute the organization" (p. 64) and whether inter-institutional collaboration efforts result in successful joint activity. Further, “organizational learning develops between people but is not located in any one individual's mind or memory” (p. 65). Therefore, it makes sense that to understand how we can spread best practices from one organization (school) to another organization, we look not only at individuals, but at characteristics, strategies, and policies on a schoolwide level.
Research Questions

Ecocultural systems theory and organizational learning theory describe a teaching and learning process in which learning happens within several different contexts, or systems, simultaneously. This study explores the conditions and features of those different systems and how they interact to create environments for teaching and learning that are likely to improve the academic achievement of underrepresented students and thereby close the achievement gap.

The following research questions are addressed in this study:

1. What can a comparison of the highest- and lowest-achieving high schools tell us about which conditions and features are most important to closing the achievement gap, and which may be hindrances?
   a. How do the conditions and features at charter schools differ from, and how are they similar to, those at traditional schools?
   b. What role does the autonomy provided by charter schools play in facilitating or restricting these conditions and features?

2. At these highest- and lowest-achieving high schools, what can teachers’ and administrators’ perceptions of and beliefs towards these conditions and features tell us about why they are or are not successful?
   a. How do the perceptions, feelings, and beliefs among teachers and administrators at charter schools differ from, and how are they similar to, those at traditional schools?
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In Chapter 1 I defined the achievement gap and briefly traced its history in the United States over the last half-century. Although its persistence supports the determinism of reproduction theorists, who argue that schools inevitably reproduce the social hierarchy in society, growing numbers of examples of schools which have reduced the achievement gap suggest that certain mediations can make the school system more meritocratic. In at least one of these exemplar schools, inter-organizational collaboration assists in spreading features of one successful model to another school site as an example of organizational learning.

In this chapter, I more fully describe the history of efforts to close the achievement gap, and then explain why school context, culturally relevant schools, and teacher beliefs warrant examination as integral aspects of understanding what constitute meaningful and long-lasting school reforms.

**The Achievement Gap: 1970 to the Present**

For thirty years following World War II, teachers were granted greater autonomy and were viewed as professionals who alone could teach children to such a strong extent that parents were discouraged from trying to teach their children to read for fear of harming their academic achievement (Hargreaves, 2003). However, the economic downturn in the 1970s and 1980s, coupled with the election of neo-liberal governments in the U.S. and Europe (e.g., Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan in the U.S.), ushered in a new era of restrictions and a subsequent “taming” of teachers (Chan, Fisher & Rubenson, 2007). Hargreaves (2003) found that the priority on teaching to standards and measuring success according to scores on standardized tests restricted the autonomy of classroom teachers regarding choices of curriculum and methods of instruction. Giroux (2016) takes this point further, describing teachers’ roles in the classroom as having been “relegated to the role of
technicians whose sole objective appears to be the enforcement of a deadening instrumental rationality in which 'teaching to the test' becomes the primary purpose of schooling” (p. 185). Subsequently, the Bush administration passed the No Child Left Behind act of 2001 (NCLB) in an effort to establish consequences for consistently underperforming teachers and schools. NCLB delineated punishments for failure to meet national benchmarks, as a whole and in subgroups, primarily on the basis of test scores.

In relation to the achievement gap, the standards movement in the U.S. produced mixed results. On the one hand, following the publication of A Nation at Risk, the adoption of standards did help to reduce the achievement gap, perhaps because teachers who had previously held lower expectations for underrepresented minorities in the implementation of standards subsequently raised classroom rigor among these populations (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2010). On the other hand, with the addition of the accountability measures added by NCLB, the achievement gap increased. The purpose of the punitive measures in the NCLB was, in part, to set high expectations for all students and to hold teachers and administrators more accountable for their students’ learning. NCLB dictated consequences for teachers and schools whose students did not meet standards. However, Hyslop-Margison and Sears (2010) found that the accountability measures in NCLB produced the opposite of the intended outcome: rather than raising the professional bar, many teachers found themselves in classrooms with unclear expectations, inadequate resources, and little interaction with other teachers, which “undermines teacher responsibility by situating educators as the primary authors of their own success or failure” (p. 2). Teachers were increasingly isolated by uncertainties about their responsibilities and their evaluation (Palmer, 1998). Teachers shared less, collaborated less, and were reluctant to seek help from administrators.
Common Core State Standards Reform

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (National Governors Association, 2010), introduced in 2012, were intended to preserve the most beneficial aspects of the standards movement—higher expectations—without the top-down imposition of instructional strategies and curriculum. To accomplish this, the CCSS combined internationally-benchmarked rigor with explicit directions for teachers to use their own professional judgment alongside ongoing professional development to guide their instructional strategies and, to a large extent, their classroom curriculum. Regarding instructional strategies, the CCSS repeatedly and explicitly placed the responsibility for instructional methods with the teachers, stating, “the standards define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, not how teachers should teach” (p. 5). Also, while the standards defined what students should know, they left most specific classroom content largely up to teachers, stating instead that “while the standards make references to some particular forms of content, including mythology, foundational U.S. documents, and Shakespeare, they do not—indeed, cannot—enumerate all or even most of the content that students should learn” (p. 5). This thought is expanded later: “The Standards must therefore be complemented by a well-developed, content-rich curriculum consistent with the expectations laid out in this document” (p. 5). The CCSS delineated student expectations while acknowledging the importance of teachers’ professional judgment.

Charter School Reform

Another nationwide effort to narrow the achievement gap has been the creation of charter schools. Charter schools are public schools that are given autonomy to act independently of school board policies, and are bound instead by their own charters, which
delineate aspects of the governance of each school site. Some charter schools choose to use their autonomy to pilot innovative strategies that succeed in narrowing the achievement gap.

The California Department of Education defines charter schools as schools of choice:

Charter schools are nonsectarian public schools of choice that operate with freedom from many of the regulations that apply to traditional public schools. The 'charter' establishing each such school is a performance contract detailing the school's mission, program, goals, students served, methods of assessment, and ways to measure success (as quoted in Wolf, Borko, Elliott, & McIver, 2000, p. 2).

The reasoning behind giving charter schools greater autonomy, at least in part, is to “foster experimentation to see if novel educational approaches can produce good results” before they are disseminated more broadly (Carnoy, Jacobsen, & Rothstein, 2005, p. 4). The explicit objective of numerous charter school efforts is to pilot innovations which may be effective in closing the achievement gap, in keeping with the original purpose of creating charter schools, which include to "develop innovations in curriculum and instruction" and to "create high performing schools where children would learn more" (Miron, 2011).

Since their creation, charter schools have spread across the nation, steadily gaining in popularity. For example, "since their inception in 1992, the number of charter schools has grown to more than 6,800 nationally, serving nearly three million students" (Sass et al., 2016, p. 1). With a total enrollment of American school children of close to 80 million (National Center for Educational Statistics), the rapid growth of charter schools and charter school enrollment is a significant event in American education.

Numerous studies into the effectiveness of charter schools compared to traditional schools have flourished. The results have been mixed. A review of literature by the American Federation of Teachers (2004) is representative of studies that conclude charter schools do not outperform conventional public schools. The American Federation of Teachers (2004), using
test results from the federal government's National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), showed that average achievement is higher in regular public schools than in charter schools, both for students in general and for low-income students in particular. It must be noted that the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) is an organization which represents teachers’ unions throughout the United States; as charter schools are rarely unionized, AFT has a vested interest in the results of their findings. Carnoy et al. (2005) reanalyzed the AFT data and reached similar conclusions. The AFT's report also noted that for black students, a group that many charter schools are specifically designed to serve, average achievement was no better in charter schools than in regular schools. Carnoy et al. (2005) concluded that “while deregulation helps some educators devise good schools, it also enables others to devise bad and even corruptly managed schools” (p. 1). The authors acknowledged, therefore, that the average findings do not apply to all schools, but that the results in terms of student scores on the NAEP varied widely from charter school to charter school, summing up their finds as “If bonanzas are realized in some places, they are apparently offset by catastrophes in others” (Carnoy et al., 2005, p. 3).

Other studies of statewide results have reported similar findings, such as Bifulco and Ladd (2007), who have confirmed either no benefit or negative benefits from charter school attendance in North Carolina, and who found in fact that the effects of charter schools have “increased the racial isolation of both black and white students” and have widened the achievement gap (Bifulco & Ladd, 2007, p. 31).

However, some studies counter the view that charter schools underperform in comparison to their traditional counterparts. In some regions, charter schools have had notable success in improving overall student achievement and helping to narrow or eliminate the
achievement gap. For example, Dobbie and Fryer (2009) described Harlem’s Children’s Zone (HCZ), which combines community investments with reform-minded charter schools to help reduce the achievement gap among the poorest minority children in the region served. The authors found that HCZ closed the black/white achievement gap in math, and halved it in ELA. In elementary schools, the racial achievement gap in both subjects was closed (Dobbie & Fryer, p. 21). In another study of Harlem’s charter schools, Hoxby, Murarka and Kang (2009) found that, on average, a student who attended a charter school for all grades K-8 would close about 86% of the "Scarsdale-Harlem achievement gap" in math and 66% of the achievement gap in English, and would be 7% more likely to earn a Regents diploma (which requires passing exams in Living Environment, Mathematics, Global History, Comprehensive English, and U.S. History) by age 20 for each year he or she spends in that school (p. 8).

The Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) charter school model has repeatedly been associated with success in narrowing or closing the achievement gap. For example, Angrist, Dynarski, Kane, Pathak, and Walters (2010) found “KIPP Lynn” in Lynn, Massachusetts, generated substantial score gains for students admitted by lottery over students who applied but were not admitted, with effects on the order of .35 standard deviations for math and .12 standard deviations for ELA. The gains benefitted Hispanic and non-Hispanic students about equally, with the largest gains found among students with low baseline scores. Their results suggest that not only KIPP Lynn, but fundamental elements of the KIPP model, combine to produce noteworthy achievement gains, at least as measured on statewide tests (Angrist et al., 2010, p. 5). In a more recent study, Sass, et al. (2016) challenged the overwhelming attention paid to test scores in charter school research by focusing instead on the long-term effects of charter school enrollment, including student earnings as young adults. They followed a cohort
of Florida public school students, all of whom were enrolled in charter schools in eighth grade, some of whom continued in charter schools in high school, while others chose to enter traditional schools. They compared these students’ progress over approximately 20 years (up to ages 23-25). The use of a control group who were “treatment and comparison group alike” provided a meaningful measure of the dependent variable—the students in the study who either did or did not continue in the charter schools. They found that attendance at Florida charter schools was associated with higher high school graduation and college attendance rates, a higher likelihood of persisting in college for at least two years, and an increase in maximum annual earning for students, on average, of $2,318—about 12% higher than for comparable students who attended a charter middle school but matriculated into traditional high schools (Sass et al., 2016, p.19).

That researchers found variations among charter schools should not surprise us. The only trait that is shared by all charter schools is greater autonomy from local control over certain aspects of their operation. Because of this autonomy, it is reasonable to expect to see a greater variety in their programs, including innovative mediations occurring more frequently in charter schools than in traditional schools. Carnoy et al. (2005) acknowledged that charter schools “might be successful in generating innovations that should be imitated, even if average charter school test scores are at or below those of regular public schools” (p. 4).

My study follows from Carnoy et al. (2005), in an effort to identify the “innovations that should be imitated”—both in traditional and charter schools. I identified the strongest and weakest high schools Blue Ridge County, a fictitious name, in relation to closing the achievement gap among low-income students of color using 2015 CAASPP scores in both math and ELA, and—by comparing them—to identify which resources, policies,
organizational structures, and processes at these schools are fundamental to closing the achievement gap, adding to previous research that focuses especially on what unique contributions charter schools may offer.

Taken together, what these different findings suggest is that, compared to regular schools, some charter schools are more successful and others are not. This finding is reasonable considering that the only characteristic that all charter schools share in common is the autonomy to act independently in some ways of school boards and district mandates and to act instead as specified in their own charters. Logically, just as we see in regular schools, some charter schools will demonstrate greater effectiveness than others. It is also reasonable to assume that effects on academic achievement one way or the other may be magnified given the greater opportunities for innovation and experimentation in charter schools. This larger range of variance among charter schools can be a reason for concern as well as an opportunity. Clearly, there are some charter schools that are effective in narrowing the achievement gap, and boosting student achievement in general. Research cited above which examines charter school performance explicitly is often based on test score data, with a few exceptions (Sass et al, 2016, for example). However, research into charter schools with success in narrowing the achievement gap has not looked closely at what charter schools distinctly can tell us about how to reduce the achievement gap that we may not be able to learn from regular schools. This study examined that by exploring the highest-achieving and lowest-achieving high schools in Blue Ridge County in relation to the achievement gap, with a special focus on what charter schools can tell us about successful mediations for underrepresented students with an emphasis on three domains of study: school context, Oakes’ (2003) Critical Conditions for College Access, and teacher beliefs.
School Context

Contexts inside and outside of school sites impact student achievement directly or indirectly, and these interactions are complex. Students’ homes and neighborhoods can impact students’ learning on a local level, while state and federal policies can have profound effects in classrooms as well. Defining and studying these myriad contexts and how they interact is beyond the scope of this study. However, as the nucleus of our study, the context of each individual school receives special attention, and therefore deserves closer examination.

Defining the term school context as it relates to this study serves to clarify at least the primary subject—the microsystem—at the heart of this research. School context, for the purpose of this study, will be defined as “the resources, policies, organizational structures, and processes” that characterize a school (Oakes, 1989, p. 182). These four features of school context serve as parameters from which to understand school context at the school site level.

Although the interplay of many contexts affecting educational performance must be acknowledged as relevant to understanding how and why students perform as they do, school context is especially important because it is the setting of most student learning. The special importance of the school site as a unit of study has been professed for decades. Oakes (1989), for example, urged policymakers to include features of school context as a measure of school success in a time when meaningful measures of educational performance were under debate. In 1989, the U.S. Department of Education, the National Science Foundation, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and nearly every state were working to create methods of assessing school performance (Oakes, 1989). Measurement efforts focused almost exclusively on “outcome indicators” like standardized test scores. Oakes (1989) argued that those indicators by themselves were not enough. The “indicators of the schooling context are as necessary as outcome indicators,” she wrote (Oakes, 1989, p. 182). Depending on only the
small range of educational results that standardized tests measure might place undue emphasis on "looking good," and result in a narrowing of school curriculum to emphasize those features to be tested. Oakes (1989) defended the need for school context to receive special attention in school assessment in terms of understanding not only which schools performed well, but also collecting data to inform educators of why? Oakes (1989) argued that “policy makers need information about the resources, policies, organizational structures, and processes that characterize schools. Such information is essential if they want monitoring and accountability systems to mirror the condition of education accurately or to be useful for making improvements” (p. 182). She gave three reasons why context needed to be included in the indicators of educational performance: 1) stakeholders place a high value on the quality of the resources, people, and activities that shape children's day-to-day school experiences; 2) context indicators may prevent schools from placing undue emphasis on "looking good" on a small range of limited outcome indicators; and 3) context information may provide clues to policy makers about why we get the educational outcomes that we do from different schools (Oakes, 1989).

Policymakers, however, have seldom taken Oakes’ (1989) advice. NCLB specified consequences for under-performing schools grounded in standardized test scores. Harris and Herrington (2006) found that after NCLB, teachers who felt underprepared and without sufficient resources may have been too fearful to seek help, meaning that teacher collaboration suffered and student performance declined, especially among underrepresented minorities. Furthermore, the top-down nature of NCLB implementation meant that teachers often found themselves undertrained and underequipped to implement the standards-based curriculum on which NCLB evaluated their schools, resulting in less accountability for
individual teachers for their students’ performance. After NCLB passed, the achievement gap has widened. Had measures of school success included the collection of data on school context, policymakers might have been better able to understand the causes of the drop in performance among underrepresented minority students.

In the discussion surrounding effective measures to narrow the achievement gap, the example of Oakes (1989) and NCLB teaches us that examining contextual factors that impact student achievement is fundamental to understanding how to best serve underrepresented minorities. As discussed in Chapter 1, each school site itself in isolation cannot give us all the information we need to understand all relevant influences on student achievement. However, school context is a rich source of information for gleaning a better understanding of how schools perform.

We have seen successful mediations for narrowing the achievement gap that include features related to school context. For example, whole-school detracking at The Preuss School (Alvarez & Mehan, 2006) documents a school in which low-income students of color have closed the achievement gap in relation to average white students statewide (according to CAASPP 2015 scores) by, in part, creating a detracked curriculum in which all students take rigorous, college-preparatory classes. Hargrove (2007) found that in a study of San Diego County schools, four key contextual features of schools were associated with schools that had greater success in closing the achievement gap: 1) better educated teachers, 2) more experienced teachers, 3) less administrative turnover, and 4) more mature student assessment systems. Hargrove’s (2007) findings overlap with the Seven Critical Conditions for College-Going youth (Oakes, 2003): 1) Safe and adequate school facilities, 2) a college-going school culture, 3) rigorous academic curriculum, 4) qualified teachers, 5) intensive academic and
social supports, 6) opportunities to develop a multi-cultural college-going identity, and 7) family–neighborhood–school connections. In the Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ), Dobbie and Fryer (2009) confirmed the importance of family–neighborhood–school connections in their study of community investments and charter schools designed around the mission of raising academic achievement among its low-income student population of color; HCZ was successful in closing or narrowing the achievement gap in several grades. Jencks and Phillips (1998) uncovered broad empirical support for the sizable effects on student achievement that can result from additional school resources and Sass et al. (2016) found that persistence in Florida high schools was associated with greater likelihoods of high school graduation, college attendance, college graduation, and higher earnings as young adults. These examples together present a strong case for examining features related to school contexts that are important to raising academic achievement among underrepresented minority students.

The example of Oakes (1989) and NCLB can also teach us that, although school context is important, we must also study the broader contexts in which each school operates. Datnow (2005) makes this point in a study of long-term sustainability of school reforms in a region she calls “Sunland.” She writes, “as the findings make clear, the changing district and state policies, leadership, and agendas affected the sustainability of externally developed reforms in Sunland in different ways, quite substantially in some cases and less so in others, depending on local conditions, experiences with reform, and capacity” (Datnow, 2005, p. 145). Thus we must look at the school site contexts, and also at the broader contexts in which the school site operates.

Even as we look at broader contexts, like state and federal policies, we must look at local contexts, such as the neighborhoods from which underrepresented students come, and be
sensitive to the socio-cultural forces which influence how they construct knowledge and what knowledge frameworks they bring with them into the classroom. This is because in some schools and districts, where broadly-viewed school contexts—including the broader state and federal contexts—have remained the same, schools have not produced similar results. For example, some North Carolina charter schools, intending to improve academic achievement among low-income African-American students, implemented many of the same mediations that have succeeded elsewhere. However, their efforts resulted in a widening of the achievement gap and increased racial segregation. School context and broader state and federal contexts do not account for some key features necessary to raise achievement among underrepresented minority students. The students who are most likely to underperform are impacted especially by one feature of their local contexts in a very different way than their white and Asian counterparts: their culture.

**Culturally Relevant Schools**

A focus on school context keeps us mindful of the multi-layered influences on how children learn in the classroom, but as the example of Bifulco and Ladd (2007) demonstrates, there is more to consider. Indeed, in many schools where white and Asian students perform well, students of color struggle. Lipman (1995) notes that in these schools, most students of color are not only significantly behind their White peers in academic performance, but are also disproportionately assigned to the lowest academic tracks and to special education, and disproportionately suspended. In the same contexts, students of color often do not achieve as highly as white students do.

Understanding what it means to have culturally relevant schools helps to explain these discrepancies in findings. Culture is part of our discussion of context, of course, as context includes family and community influences that reflect students’ cultural backgrounds. But
disparate academic achievement within very similar contexts warrants special examination of the role of culturally relevant pedagogy in education.

Culturally relevant pedagogy is Ladson-Billings’ (1995) phrase for teaching that “not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate” (p. 469). If the ethnicity gap is narrowing, the reader may ask, why is cultural relevance important? The answer is that cultural identity is a significant component of the achievement gap, and if we only study income differences in the school context, we are overlooking the important, perhaps pivotal, role of culture and identity in schools.

Furthermore, when students of color are disproportionately from low-income homes, culture becomes entwined in income, status, and aspirations. High aspirations in the example of The Brothers (McLeod, 1987) is a fundamental difference between these low-income black students and the Hallway Hangers, their low-income white counterparts at the same high school. While The Brothers worked hard to get good grades and work towards college, the Hallway Hangers dropped out, used drugs, and stole. Yet these two groups of students came from largely the same contexts—at school, at home, and under the same state and federal policies. Their identities were critical to their success or failure.

Indeed, when we look at the examples of successful mediations shared above and in Chapter 1, we see that many of these mediations—nearly as many as those that describe contextual changes in schools—relate to cultural identity. This is the issue at the core of the example of The Brothers discussed above, in which—in this case—students of color outperformed white students from similar backgrounds because the students of color had formed a different, academic, identity around college preparation. Several other studies relate
especially to cultural identities. For example, Ogbu (1991) found that new immigrants, who often outperform their more Americanized U.S. counterparts, differ especially in their understanding of themselves and their roles in society in five areas: positive dual frame of reference (they have positive memories of their previous countries); viewing disadvantages as assailable; blaming discrimination on their foreigner status (rather than personal faults); trusting schools; and having parental support of academic achievement. These differences in their identities—how they view themselves and their positions relative to their environment—are powerful enough to boost their school performance ahead of American-born students with families from similar ethnic and cultural backgrounds who are more familiar with the language and school culture.

Mehan (2008) explicitly recommends a combination of contextual and cultural interventions as a first step in recognizing the “transformative possibilities of cultural and institutional mediation” (p. 68):

- Make learning involve the construction of identities and skill to participate as a member of many different settings;
- Give students appropriate access to resources, including well-prepared teachers, well-designed curricula, and sufficient and current lab equipment;
- Empower schools and their agents collectively to act in deliberate, intensive, and explicit fashion to generate a socialization process that produces the same sorts of strategies and resources deployed in privileged homes and institutions

Mehan’s (2008) recommendations neatly establish broad categories that encapsulate the diverse mediations described within the domains of school context and culturally relevant pedagogy, discussed in this and the previous sections.

But one aspect of one of his recommended interventions—“well-prepared teachers”—is so closely tied to student achievement that it deserves special focus (Mehan, 2008). The
study of teacher quality is too broad a category in its entirety to address here. However, especially in relation to the success of school reforms, there is one characteristic of teachers that is especially important in meaningful change: teacher beliefs.

**Teacher Beliefs**

Bridging the closely-related domains of school context and culturally relevant pedagogy are teacher beliefs. Of all contexts within and without the school context, the classroom where teachers interact directly with students constitutes the educational context in which students spend the most time. On a cultural level, if we acknowledge that students’ identities are critical features of their academic achievement, then reasonably we can assume that what teachers believe has a big impact on what students believe, and therefore teacher beliefs are an important element in the study of what works in student reforms aimed at boosting achievement among underrepresented minorities.

Defining the term *belief* and how it differs from *knowledge* is a difficult task that has been the focus of many articles (Abelson, 1979; Bullock, 2011; Chong, Wong & Quek, 2005; Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992; and Richardson, 1996, for example). Here we will use Abelson’s (1979) system which defines belief as embodying all or most of these seven features: non-consensuality (differing understandings of the same topic); existential presumption (e.g., the existence of God); alternativity (opinions about an ideal world); affective and evaluative loading (what is “good” and “bad” and motives based therein); episodic structure (dependence on personal experience, folk stories, propaganda); open-boundaried; and varying levels of certitude (Abelson, 1979).

Appreciating the role of teacher beliefs is important because if teacher beliefs go against elements of a reform effort, and these beliefs are not addressed, they in themselves may hamper any reform. For reforms to reach the classroom (core of teaching and learning),
meaning-making processes need to occur for teachers, like for example if a teacher’s ideologies differ from the reform’s (Muncey & McQuillan, 1996). Schmidt and Datnow (2005) find that teachers are often considered to be the centerpieces of educational change. Reform efforts often focus on improving teacher knowledge and skills, but seldom address emotions of change for teachers (Hargreaves, 2001). Innovations have a better chance of succeeding if teachers feel some ownership of the change process (e.g., Cousins & Leithwood, 1986; Schmidt & Datnow, 2005). This pivotal role of teacher beliefs is fundamental to successful reform efforts because there is a clear relationship between teacher beliefs and teaching practices (Richardson, 1996).

Understanding the importance of teacher beliefs to meaningful reform is the first step. One must have a way to identify what teachers believe. This is difficult because researchers have to infer what teachers believe (Chong et al., 2005). Teacher beliefs can be complex and contradictory and are not directly observable (Bullock, 2011). Nevertheless, teacher beliefs are a critical component in successful reform.

Consistency between teacher beliefs and practices is an area of growing research, and findings vary widely (Fang, 1996). Beliefs may or may not always translate into teacher practices. Teachers can say that they have high expectations for youth, for example, but then treat students differently (intentionally or unintentionally) in practice. Knowing what teachers believe is not necessarily a good indicator of what they teach or how they behave in their classrooms. However, studies suggest a correlation between teacher beliefs and successful implementation of school reforms (Cousins & Leithwood, 1986; Schmidt & Datnow, 2005).

**Conclusion**

This review of literature has traced the history of efforts to close the achievement gap. School context and culturally relevant schools were emphasized as areas deserving special
attention in this study because changes in both have been associated with numerous mediations that have been demonstrated to reduce the achievement gap. Teacher beliefs, finally, cannot be ignored, as positive teacher beliefs in relation to reform efforts have consistently been linked to improved student learning.

This study uses a combination of publicly available data, survey responses, and interviews to identify the strongest performing and lowest performing regular and charter high schools in Blue Ridge County. Once identified, this study examined what special features of study schools may be most fundamental to impacting student performance, positively or negatively. This examination especially focused on school context, Oakes’ (2003) Critical Conditions for College Access and Equity, and teacher beliefs to identify what traditional schools and charter schools can suggest about what works and what are the greatest obstacles to success among our disadvantaged students.

This study attempts to follow Oakes’ (1989) advice: to combine data on school context with outcome indicators to better assess what works and what doesn’t work in relation to narrowing the achievement gap.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

In Chapter 2, I summarized efforts to close the achievement gap including the creation of charter schools as schools of choice and the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). I also expressed the need for more research into innovative contributions from high schools. The objective of this research study is to learn from high- and low-achieving high schools about which school features and conditions are most successful in closing the achievement gap and which pose the largest obstacles to student success. As described earlier, charter schools warrant special attention in this study because they are explicitly created to foster experimentation and to pilot innovations that may be generalizable to other schools; in fact, some have the explicit focus of finding methods to improve achievement among underrepresented minorities.

This is a mixed methods study. The methodology for this study compares the highest-achieving and lowest-achieving high schools in relation to closing the achievement gap in Blue Ridge County\(^1\) during the earliest stages of CCSS reform, as identified by 2015 California Assessment of Student Performance and Practice (CAASPP) test scores for grade 11 students.

The selection of schools for this study depended upon an analysis of CAASPP scores across a variety of criteria. No one criterion could identify the most robust schools in raising or failing to raise the achievement of underrepresented students. Instead, Blue Ridge County high schools were ranked (high and low) by 2015 CAASPP scores among high school juniors, according to multiple criteria in five different sorting procedures:

1. Overall scores of all students
2. Scores of low-income Hispanics
3. Scores of low-income students overall

\(^1\) A pseudonym.
4. Scores of all students whose parents had not graduated from a 4-year college
5. Scores of low-income students in schools which were predominantly (50% or greater) low-income

Selection was affected in part by the limitations of sample sizes at some schools. CAASPP scores were only published on the California Department of Education’s website for subgroups with sufficient numbers of students \((n > 12)\). Therefore, for example, low-income Hispanics were analyzed but not low-income African-Americans, because many schools had too few low-income African-American juniors to produce a score. Data collection occurred in three stages: 1) examination of public data and school selection; 2) survey dissemination; and 3) interviews. My research questions for this study were as follows:

1. What can a comparison of the highest- and lowest-achieving high schools tell us about which conditions and features are most important to closing the achievement gap, and which may be hindrances?
   a. How do the conditions and features at charter schools differ from, and how are they similar to, those at traditional schools?
   b. What role does the autonomy provided by charter schools play in facilitating or restricting these conditions and features?

2. At these highest- and lowest-achieving high schools, what can teachers’ and administrators’ perceptions of and beliefs towards these conditions and features tell us about why they are or are not successful?
   a. How do the perceptions, feelings, and beliefs among teachers and administrators at charter schools differ from, and how are they similar to, those at traditional schools?
The District Context

Blue Ridge County is a large county in Southern California. The county serves almost 300,000 students of diverse ethnic backgrounds, socio-economic statuses, and language proficiencies. The county is divided into over 40 school districts with hundreds of schools and over 100 charter schools. Minority enrollment is 69% (majority Hispanic) and the student–teacher ratio averages 24:1.

Positionality

Blue Ridge County suits my study because it is large and diverse. Not only have I taught in the county for 22 years in two different districts, I am also a graduate of its primary and secondary schools. As a student and a teacher, I have first-hand knowledge of reform efforts, including national, state, county and district programs, some of which have explicitly targeted reducing the achievement gap as their goal. This experience helps me to understand the complex factors which impact the performance of the diverse student populations throughout the county, including low-income minority students and their school communities.

However, my positionality also may have had a negative effect on my study. I interviewed participants within schools and districts where I work or have previously worked, and while I was unfamiliar with most of my participants, my relationship with some of those interviewees and survey respondents could potentially have skewed how they responded to my inquiries.

Overall, my position in the county offered advantages and disadvantages when collecting and interpreting data for this study. Both with faculty I knew previously and with those I did not, I attempted to establish a safe, confidential, reassuring, and research-focused relationship aimed at collecting unbiased and uninhibited sharing of information and beliefs related to my research goals.
Research Design

This study is a mixed-methods study that emphasized qualitative research practices based on an ecocultural systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) of learning and organizational learning theory (Argyris & Schön, 1978). Data collection for this study was conducted in three phases. In the first phase I used quantitative measures to identify the highest- and lowest-achieving schools in Blue Ridge County in relation to closing the achievement gap. For the second phase I disseminated surveys to all faculty at each school site that agreed to participate. During the third phase I identified interviewees from among survey respondents and conducted open-ended interviews.

Phase One: Identification of Participant Schools

In Phase One, I collected publicly available online data, beginning with analysis of CAASPP scores from 2015 for eleventh graders (the only grade level in high school in which testing is mandatory). From this data, two groups of schools were identified for selection as a result of the analysis of 2015 CAASPP scores: 1) high-performing high schools in relation to closing the achievement gap, and 2) low-performing high schools in relation to closing the achievement gap. Both of these groups included disproportionately large numbers of charter schools.

To most reliably identify the highest- and lowest-achieving schools in serving underrepresented students, school selection and sorting involved five sorting procedures. These different analyses included the ranking orders. Schools were selected based upon which scored highest (or lowest) across these five criteria (excluding alternative schools). Once these schools were identified, they produced a comparison of traditional versus charter school, highest- to lowest-achieving, as shown in Table 1.
Table 1: Highest- and Lowest-Performing High Schools in Blue Ridge County

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highest Achieving</th>
<th>Traditional</th>
<th>Charter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rockfield High*</td>
<td>Bear Creek Charter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shadow Pine High</td>
<td>Sterling Charter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Greenville High</td>
<td>Mapleton Charter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowest Achieving</td>
<td>Wellspring High</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Newoak High</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hartland High</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*All names are fictitious.
**No low-achieving charters were included because they were all alternative schools (e.g., court schools, continuation schools).

Once the focus schools were identified, I analyzed the descriptive data publicly available on the schools listed in Table 1, including information on School Accountability Report Cards (SARCs), DataQuest data from the California Department of Education (CDE) website, and school demographics and other information posted on the schools’ websites. This helped me describe the overall school context. I paid special attention to features that may be facilitated by or unique to the charter school setting.

**Phase Two: Survey Dissemination**

In Phase Two, I solicited approval from principals at the focus schools to include their schools in my dissertation research. All the teachers and administrators at the focus school sites were invited to participate in a survey to collect information about the resources, policies, organizational structures, and processes at these schools that the participants believed were fundamental to the successes and/or lack of success at their school sites. At selected schools, after receiving permission from on-site administrators (and, where necessary, district-level administrators), surveys (Appendices C and D) were disseminated by email via the
school principals. My initial contact with principals (and district officials) included an explanation of the research study.

Of the nine schools identified for inclusion in this study, four agreed to participate. All of these schools were high-achieving in relation to closing the achievement gap. These four schools were Bear Creek Charter, Greenville High, Mapleton Charter, and Sterling Charter. The other two schools in the highest-achieving category—Shadow Pine High and Rockfield High—did not participate. Shadow Pine High School declined because they were already involved in another study. The principal at Rockfield High School agreed to participate, but no teachers or administrators from Rockfield ultimately completed any surveys.

Among the lowest-achieving schools, Hartland High School explicitly declined and no reason was given. The other two lowest-achieving high schools never responded to my requests in any way. When an interview was scheduled with the principal at Newoak High, the principal was out of his office dealing with multiple crises and was unable to meet with me. Further appeals to administrators from both schools through a district-level administrator and faculty members of a local university with connections at these schools had no effect.

At the four schools that agreed to participate, the school principals sent surveys to all administrators and teachers employed at the school site. Teachers and administrators were given different surveys and both surveys included a brief explanation of the research study and a consent form (Appendices A and B). No parents, students, or classified staff members were included in this study. Participants took surveys hosted by Qualtrics.com. As shown in Appendices A and B, the content of the initial email invitation informed participants that their identities would be kept anonymous and confidential in the final report. Participants were not required to provide names, although at the end of the survey participants had the option to
include their names if they wished to be considered for participation in a follow-up interview in exchange for a $20 Amazon gift card.

In surveys for both administrators and teachers, question topics were limited to information related to school procedures, processes, resources, and organizational structures, including teacher beliefs about best practices at their schools. The surveys were piloted within my doctoral cohort and modified based on my classmates’ responses. These surveys included questions related to academic supports for students, frequency of professional development, teacher autonomy, collaboration time for teachers, and areas of greatest administrative focus.

The objective of the surveys was to uncover trends in survey responses regarding which features within individual schools contexts are: 1) most beneficial to closing the achievement gap, and 2) more prominent in charter high schools in comparison to traditional high schools.

**Phase Three: Interviews**

Phase Three included interviews with one to two participants from each school site. Where both teachers and administrators completed surveys, one teacher and one administrator were interviewed. Where only teachers completed surveys, one newer teacher and one more experienced teacher were interviewed. In all cases, interviewees were chosen from among those who participated in the survey to be interviewed. Participants who completed the interview in Phase Three received $20.00 Amazon gift cards. Interview questions included such topics as site characteristics, strategies, and policies at each school site, as well as teacher beliefs (Appendix D). Two respondents who initially volunteered to participate in interviews later withdrew. Therefore, a total of six educators from the four study schools were interviewed, with at least one interviewee from each school.
The purpose of the interview was to validate and expand upon the data collected by surveys and from publicly-available online sources to develop a greater understanding of what features of the target schools were most likely to boost achievement among underrepresented students, including: which elements in a school context were most consistently associated with high student achievement, which of those features were more prominent in charter schools compared to traditional schools, and what did teachers believe about why these features were effective.

**Participant Demographics**

From the four schools that participated in this study (Greenville High, Bear Creek Charter, Mapleton Charter, and Sterling Charter), a total of 30 teachers and five administrators returned surveys. These educators represented diverse levels of experience and education levels. Participating teachers taught a variety of subject matter. All four school sites in which these educators worked were high-achieving schools in relation to closing the achievement gap. Three of the participating schools were public charter schools (Bear Creek Charter, Mapleton Charter, and Sterling Charter) and one school was a traditional public high school (Greenville High).

Of the 30 teachers and five administrators who returned surveys from these four school sites, a total of six educators sat for interviews: four teachers and two administrators. The administrators came from Mapleton Charter and Greenville High. Among the teachers, two taught at Bear Creek Charter, one taught at Mapleton Charter, and one taught at Sterling Charter. As shown in Table 2, the years of experience in education among these interviewees ranged from five to 40 years. At the time of the interviews, five of the educators held master’s degrees and one held a bachelor’s degree (although that one was expecting to complete a master’s degree later that year). The teachers taught either English or Spanish, and one of the
teachers also taught an Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) class, a college preparatory elective for low-income students who will be the first in their families to attend four-year colleges or universities.

Table 2. Interview Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee *</th>
<th>School*</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Experience in years</th>
<th>Education level</th>
<th>Subject</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daphne</td>
<td>Bear Creek Charter</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>MA or MS</td>
<td>English/AVID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brigitte</td>
<td>Bear Creek Charter</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>BA or BS</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandi</td>
<td>Sterling Charter</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>MA or MS</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laurentia</td>
<td>Greenville High</td>
<td>Admini- strator</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>MA or MS</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danette</td>
<td>Mapleton Charter</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>MA or MS</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leroy</td>
<td>Mapleton Charter</td>
<td>Admini- strator</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>MA or MS</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Pseudonyms

The participants were given semi-structured interviews using prepared guidelines that correlated with survey questions (Appendix D). Interview durations ranged from 30 to 90 minutes. Interviews were conducted at a location chosen by each participant, which included school sites and private areas in and around coffeehouses. Interviews were recorded with written consent from each participant (Appendix E) and were encrypted. Audio was analyzed using MAXQDA (1989-2017) software.

Analytic Plan

Data Reduction. During the first cycle of coding of the qualitative data, I drew on Bronfenbrenner (1994) and Oakes (1989, 2003) to develop a priori codes by which to apply a
deductive reasoning approach (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016) to the study. The a priori codes were organized into three categories—Access to Knowledge, Press for Achievement, and Professional Teaching Conditions (Oakes, 1989). For responses that did not clearly fit into these a priori codes, I employed an inductive approach, allowing the data to provide me with emergent and in vivo codes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 1984) by looking for patterns among the data grouping them into categories that seemed recurrent and interrelated. I gathered these emergent and in vivo codes into a fourth category, Student and Community. This category included descriptors that did not fit within the school site environments, such as students’ home lives, students’ mental and emotional development, and connections between schools and outside communities and agencies, such as local institutions of higher learning.

In my second cycle of coding, I focused on what participants believed contributed to their students’ success and what accounted for their struggling students’ lack of success. To facilitate this comparison, I coded qualitative data as “Successful” or “Unsuccessful,” and used my existing codes (a priori, emergent, in vivo) to describe data from interviews and surveys.

Analysis. The data collected through publicly available web sites and teacher and administrator surveys were analyzed using a combination of statistical and qualitative analysis. Initially, I conducted a cross-case comparison among all four school sites, looking for overall patterns.

For the statistical analysis, I used descriptive statistical measures to better understand participants and their work environments. These descriptions of participants’ work environments touched upon all multiple levels of my Bronfenbrenner-based model of nested contexts: school sites (microsystems); districts and the county office of education
(mesosystems); homes and communities (exosystems); teacher cultures, community cultures, and state/federal contexts (macrosystems); and teacher maturation and local/state/federal trends over time (chronosystems).

The quantitative analysis included data such as numbers of participants, years of experience in education, levels of education, frequency of on-site teacher collaboration for planning, frequency of professional development, compositions of subgroup populations (EL, Special Ed, low-income), and test scores (2015 CAASPP results for juniors).

For qualitative analysis, I used MaxQDA to tally code occurrence frequencies and possible connections between short answer and interview data. Using MaxQDA, I analyzed which school features were mentioned most often by teachers and administrators at each school site in the study. I read through responses by category to look for patterns in comments taken from both surveys and interviews. From these patterns I identified not only school features that respondents believed were important in fostering academic success among underrepresented students, but also why the respondents believed these school features were important and effective in boosting student success, and which of these features were more important than others. After the initial cross-case analysis of all school sites, I conducted a more in-depth within-case analysis of each school site. I organized responses in both cross-case analysis and within-case analysis by Oakes’ (2003) Critical Conditions for College Access. Responses that did not fit under any of the conditions were grouped separately under emergent categories.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to identify the conditions most essential to supporting educationally underprivileged students. This chapter addresses the two research questions from Chapter 1, repeated here:

1. What can a comparison of the highest- and lowest-achieving high schools tell us about which conditions and features are most important to closing the achievement gap, and which may be hindrances?
   a. How do these conditions and features at charter schools differ from, and how are they similar to, those at traditional schools?
   b. What role does the autonomy provided by charter schools play in facilitating or restricting these conditions and features?

2. At these highest- and lowest-achieving high schools, what can teachers’ and administrators’ perceptions of and beliefs towards these conditions and features tell us about why they are or are not successful?
   a. How do the perceptions, feelings, and beliefs among teachers and administrators at charter schools differ from, and how are they similar to, those at traditional schools?

As described in Chapter 3, survey and interview data were analyzed in conjunction with publicly-available online data from the California Department of Education (2017) and from other publicly available online data. Data from surveys and interviews were collected through open-ended questions that focused on topics relevant to student success: What is most fundamental to helping students succeed? Why do some students do poorly in spite of these fundamentals? What two-three changes would most help struggling students be more
successful? Coded responses were analyzed in terms of which features and conditions they supported.

In this chapter, these data are organized into four main findings: 1. lower participation rates in educational research among lower-achieving schools, 2. school features and conditions that support Oakes’ (2003) Seven Critical Conditions for College Access; 3. school features and conditions that do not fit within Oakes’ (2003) Seven Critical Conditions; and 4. educators’ perceptions and beliefs about which features and conditions are most important to student success.

The first finding addresses the difficulties involved with conducting research in low-achieving schools and the impact on this study because none of the four identified schools participated.

The second and third findings answer research question one. They describe the existing conditions and features at the study schools that respondents believed are most fundamental to improving student achievement among their students. Finding two focuses on how respondents’ feedback aligns with Oakes’ (2003) Seven Critical Conditions. Finding three delineates participant responses that do not fit within Oakes’ (2003) Seven Critical Conditions.

The fourth finding answers research question two. This section explores more general patterns of beliefs shared by respondents regarding what school features and conditions are most important to help students succeed. The conditions and features mentioned in this section may or may not be present at the respondents’ study schools, but respondents believe that they are important to student success.
Data shared within each main finding are discussed individually in cross-case and within-case analysis by school site. A brief discussion is presented after each finding. A comprehensive discussion of the findings continues in Chapter 5.

**Finding 1: Lower Participation Rates in Educational Research among Lower-Achieving Schools**

None of the lowest-achieving schools selected for participation agreed to participate in this study. I had originally intended to compare the data from the highest- and lowest-achieving schools in order to answer my research questions by exploring which conditions were present in highly successful schools and also present in the least successful schools in relation to reducing the achievement gap.

Data could not be collected from any of the lowest-achieving schools identified in the sampling phase of this study. After two attempts to contact the schools, the principal from one of the schools declined participation. The other two principals never responded in any way after numerous requests. In contrast, all of the principals from the highest-achieving schools personally responded to my requests on the first or second attempt to contact them. Invitations to participate in the study were identical for selected low- and high-achieving schools, stating that the study was, “focusing on beliefs regarding best practices for closing the achievement gap.” The achievement level of the target schools was not identified in any study communication.

Without the participation of the lowest-achieving schools in this study, I was unable to answer my original research questions. Therefore, I revised the research questions to exclude data from lower-achieving schools as follows:

1. What can teachers and administrators from the highest-achieving high schools tell us about which conditions and features are most important to closing the
achievement gap, and which may be hindrances?

a. How do the conditions and features at charter schools differ from, and how are they similar to, those at traditional schools?

b. What role does the autonomy provided by charter schools play in facilitating or restricting these conditions and features?

2. At these highest-achieving high schools, what can teachers’ and administrators’ perceptions of and beliefs towards these conditions and features tell us about why they are or are not successful?

a. How do the perceptions, feelings, and beliefs among teachers and administrators at charter schools differ from, and how are they similar to, those at traditional schools?

Findings two and three answer revised research question number one. Finding four answers revised research question number two. Broader implications of these findings are discussed in Chapter 5.


Data analysis largely supports previous findings regarding school conditions that are required for educationally underserved students to learn and prepare themselves for college, such as Oakes’ (2003) seven Critical Conditions for College Access:

1. Safe and adequate school facilities
2. A college-going school culture
3. Rigorous academic curriculum
4. Qualified teachers
5. Intensive academic and social supports
6. Opportunities to develop a multi-cultural college-going identity

Oakes’ (2003) Seven Critical Conditions provide a frame for my initial analysis of teacher responses related to what features at their school sites most contribute to closing the
achievement gap. In this section, data is organized by the seven conditions and discussed in terms of the degree to which my findings support the importance of these conditions at the study schools. Participants’ responses are summarized in Figure 2. Grey bars indicate combined responses from all surveys and interviews from administrators at all study schools ($n=5$). Blue bars indicate combined teacher responses from all study schools ($n = 30$). Participant responses summarized in Figure 2 are discussed in greater detail below by condition.

![Oakes' Seven Critical Conditions](image)

**Figure 2. Rates of participants who identified Oakes’ (2003) seven critical conditions as important to their students’ success**

**Condition 1: Safe and Adequate School Facilities**

*Data.* Few of the participants in this study (11% $n = 4$) explicitly identified safety as an important condition for academic success among disadvantaged students at their schools. One administrator at Greenville High and three teachers at Bear Creek were the only
respondents who mentioned safety as an important feature of their school for student success.

None from Mapleton Charter nor Sterling Charter identified school safety as important to their students’ success (see Table 3).

Table 3. Respondents Who Identified Safety as Important to Students’ Success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Greenville High (n=7)</th>
<th>Bear Creek Charter (n=14)</th>
<th>Mapleton Charter (n=11)</th>
<th>Sterling Charter (n=6)</th>
<th>% of Total Participants (n=36)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Admin (n=5)</td>
<td>100% (n=1/1)</td>
<td>0% (n=0/1)</td>
<td>0% (n=0/2)</td>
<td>0% (n=0/1)</td>
<td>20% (n=1/5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers (n=30)</td>
<td>0% (n=0/6)</td>
<td>27% (n=3/13)</td>
<td>0% (n=0)</td>
<td>0% (n=0)</td>
<td>10% (n=3/30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>14% (n=1/7)</td>
<td>25% (n=3/14)</td>
<td>0% (n=0/11)</td>
<td>0% (n=0/6)</td>
<td>11% (n=4/35)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although few respondents identified school safety as important to their students’ success, one measure of safety, suspension rates, are below average at the study schools compared to the suspension rates of Blue Ridge County overall. Table 4 shows the relative rates of suspensions as a percentage of student enrollment for each study school compared to the average for Blue Ridge County (California Department of Education, 2017). Note that although three of the four study schools encompass middle and sometimes elementary school, in this table only grades 9-12 were included so that all entities could be more equitably compared. Suspension offenses are tracked by the state of California in 32 different categories, all of which relate directly or indirectly to school safety (e.g., brandishing a knife, sexual assault, bullying, property damage).
Table 4. Suspension Rates for Grades 9-12 in 2016-17

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Cumulative Enrollment</th>
<th>Total Suspensions</th>
<th>Unduplicated Count of Students Suspended</th>
<th>Suspension Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blue Ridge County</td>
<td>167,572</td>
<td>7,880</td>
<td>5,809</td>
<td>3.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenville High</td>
<td>1,844</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>2.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bear Creek Charter</td>
<td>505</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mapleton Charter</td>
<td>461</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sterling Charter</td>
<td>554</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Among the respondents who did identify safety as a concern, survey and interview responses suggested that safety was important at their schools for two main reasons: to provide safe places in otherwise less-safe neighborhoods, and to provide students with emotional support so that they would not act out in negative ways. Daphne from Bear Creek Charter, for example, discussed the importance of offering students a safe place to be during the day, saying, “with our school … we know there's a safe place to go until 5:00.” Bear Creek offers after school programs that allow students to stay on campus after classes are dismissed. Therefore, students have safe places to work and learn even if their neighborhoods are not considered to be safe.

Emotional safety was a primary concern for another Bear Creek teacher, who said that students need to have, “Safe spaces for them to go to work through emotionally trying situations so they do not express them in destructive ways.” This feeling was shared by Laurentia, an administrator who in her interview addressed the importance of having emotional safety and support at Greenville High. She also lamented that they could not do more. “So I would love to have groups. I would love to have more. It's just all about more
people. Underrepresented or not, you know, it's really just about more people, more people to help.” Safety at schools working to improve academic achievement among underrepresented students was an important issue to the educators at those schools.

**Discussion.** Although previous research findings suggest that school safety is a critical condition for student success, only three (11%) teachers and one administrator identified safety as an important feature of their schools. The low rate of responses may be due to a number of factors. For one, the target schools were, on average, safer than most schools in Blue Ridge County. According to Table 4, the study schools were all arguably safer than the average school site in the county. Because safety was not as much of a concern at these schools, perhaps it was less frequently mentioned by respondents.

Another explanation may be that teachers did not think about school safety very much because teachers were not directly involved in providing schoolwide safety. Administrators may have been more directly involved in ensuring school safety, but among schools that are safer than average, perhaps school safety was not foremost on their minds.

**Condition 2: A College-Going School Culture**

*Data.* Evidence of a college-going school culture was apparent at all four study schools. According to SARC data, mission statements at all four schools explicitly identified college preparation for all students as a school-wide goal. This goal is a stated part of the school structure as well. At the time of data collection, three of the four schools were combination schools, schools that include middle schools and in two cases elementary schools as well. These three schools, Bear Creek, Mapleton, and Sterling, enroll students before grade 9 with the express purpose of better preparing them for the rigor of high school college-preparatory classes. Mapleton Charter, for example, is a grade 6-12 school. Both Bear Creek Charter and Sterling Charter enroll students in grades K-12. Greenville, a comprehensive high
school in a large district, is the one exception, serving only grades 9-12. This difference in school structure may reflect the greater autonomy afforded to charter schools, and is discussed in greater detail in the Discussion section below and in Chapter 5.

College-going culture was identified by most of the participating administrators and some of the teachers as important to their students’ success. Table 5 shows that 60% of administrators and 20% of teachers mentioned college-oriented culture as being important to their students’ academic achievement. At least one respondent at every study school identified college-oriented culture as a reason why their students are successful. Overall, 26% of all respondents found a college-oriented culture at their schools to be of high importance to their students’ success.

Table 5. Respondents Who Identified a College-Oriented Culture as Important to Students’ Success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Greenville High (n=7)</th>
<th>Bear Creek Charter (n=12)</th>
<th>Mapleton Charter (n=11)</th>
<th>Sterling Charter (n=5)</th>
<th>% of Total Participants (n=35)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Admin (n=5)</td>
<td>100% (n=1/1)</td>
<td>100% (n=1/1)</td>
<td>50% (n=1/2)</td>
<td>0% (n=0/1)</td>
<td>60% (n=3/5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers (n=30)</td>
<td>17% (n=1/6)</td>
<td>27% (n=3/11)</td>
<td>11% (n=1/9)</td>
<td>25% (n=1/4)</td>
<td>20% (n=6/30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>29% (n=2/7)</td>
<td>33% (n=4/12)</td>
<td>18% (n=2/11)</td>
<td>20% (n=1/5)</td>
<td>26% (n=9/35)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The schools’ college-oriented culture tended to be described in terms of instilling students with college expectations and a college prep curriculum. Respondent comments often focused on the importance of convincing underrepresented students that they should and can go to college. Danette from Mapleton Charter stated, “So it's a belief that every kid can learn, followed up by the actual, here is what the program looks like, so kids are prepared to go to
college.” Convincing these students that attending college is a reasonable expectation can be a big shift in thinking for many of these children. As one teacher from Bear Creek said of the importance of their emphasis on going to college, constant encouragement from school faculty helps students to “know that they can and will go to college.” Daphne at Bear Creek Charter emphasized this point in her interview. Describing her homeroom students (whom she stays with for four years), she said, “sadly [students] don't believe in themselves…All my kids are going to a 2- or 4-year next year. In 9th grade I had some kids who couldn't spell the word ‘college,’ like it just, and it's like that for many [homeroom] teachers.” Academic preparation was frequently mentioned, but these comments suggest that it is equally important to establish within the students a mindset that they are going to college, something that only happens when the school site explicitly encourages underrepresented student population to think of themselves as college-goers.

Daphne’s reference to a college-prep program at their school was mirrored by other educators. An administrator at Mapleton mentioned their homeroom-like program in this context. At Bear Creek, Brigitte acknowledged the critical role of the AVID program (Advancement Via Individual Determination) in not only preparing students for college, but creating a college-prep culture that permeates through families and the community:

And then there's the trickle down effect. So we have a lot of siblings here. So one of our students, she spoke at [an] AVID conference and she was awesome. She now works with our AVID program. She has I think 4 siblings here, spread between the middle school and the elementary school. And she came back and just was talking about, just to see someone so young understand the impact. She said, “I'm the first in my family to go to college, but now it's the expectation for all of my siblings.”

When students begin to believe that they can and should go to college, their shift in thinking can spread to other students throughout the school, their families, and their neighborhoods.
Laurentia at Greenville recounted a conversation that she had with a student whose parents had not graduated from a 4-year university which highlights the need for URM students to be taught that they can and should explore high-level course offerings.

Laurentia: "Wow, two teachers said that you were smart enough to be in an AP class."

Student: "Well, I'm only getting a C."

Laurentia: "It's ok, it means that you've got the ability. So let's talk about the ability. Which class would you like to take? You could be in an advanced class. Did you know that?"

Student: "No, I had no idea."

Laurentia explained why this conversation was an example of something significant that is part of her school culture, “we do a lot of stuff that way to try to get all of the kids involved. And I really like that because it's all academic in nature and it's like, ‘Hey, you can really do this.’” Underrepresented students benefit from encouragement and information related to going to college, something they are less likely to get at home compared to children from middle-class families.

Brigitte of Bear Creek Charter talked about how their school-wide emphasis on college preparation helps students at her school be successful:

It's an opportunity for students—it's written in our charter that all students apply to 4-year universities, so we are college driven, which is different than schools neighboring us. A lot of the students who graduate [from neighboring schools] don't even have the A-G requirements to apply to the UC system. And if they do, who's to say those grades are competitive … There is so much interaction with parents and community [at Bear Creek] and really educating parents because a lot of them don't have the college-going wherewithal to help students.

Brigitte’s comments echoed the comments from Daphne and Laurentia, a theme that recurred among many respondents, that they were doing more than educating their students about going to college, they were also educating students’ families. In families and communities
where college graduation is rare, there is less understanding about what it means to go to college than in middle-class homes, let alone confidence that their children can succeed in college. Schools that explicitly work to instill college-going beliefs in their underrepresented students improve their students’ motivation and instill confidence in them so that they can more easily believe that they can be accepted into and graduate from four-year colleges.

The mindset that college is unattainable is a common belief among underrepresented children. It can be unlikely that anyone in the family has any college experience. Therefore, common understandings that would be held among families with college-educated parents are not present. As Brigitte said:

I remember when I had the first graduating class. It took me until junior year. I was saying something about dorms, and they said, ‘What was your dorm like?’ And I started describing meal plans, and dorms, and clubs. I was telling them how I used to go and join clubs because they had free pizza. And I was like, ‘There’s ways to eat free everywhere in college.’ But they didn’t know anything about college life.

Some educators recognize the importance of sharing these anecdotes with their students as ways to make college more real and achievable in their students’ minds. Having knowledge of what life is like in college is the first step for these children to start believing that they can succeed in college themselves.

**Discussion.** Educators in the study schools felt it was critical that their schools provided encouragement and guidance for their students. Educator responses helped inform a more nuanced understanding of why college-oriented culture is so critical for educationally underprivileged students. Access to college-prep courses, of course, is also an important factor in college-going readiness, which is discussed next.
Condition 3: Rigorous Academic Curriculum

Data. Oakes (2003) defines rigorous academic as students being prepared for and having access to college preparatory and AP courses in high school. College-prep course offerings were mentioned by 20% of educators (40% of administrators, and 17% of teachers), as shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Respondents Who Identified Rigorous College-Preparatory Course Offerings as Important to Students’ Success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Greenville High (n=7)</th>
<th>Bear Creek Charter (n=12)</th>
<th>Mapleton Charter (n=11)</th>
<th>Sterling Charter (n=5)</th>
<th>% of Total Participants (n=35)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Admin (n=5)</td>
<td>100% (n=1/1)</td>
<td>0% (n=0/1)</td>
<td>50% (n=1/2)</td>
<td>0% (n=0/1)</td>
<td>40% (n=2/5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers (n=30)</td>
<td>17% (n=1/6)</td>
<td>9% (n=1/11)</td>
<td>11% (n=1/9)</td>
<td>50% (n=2/4)</td>
<td>17% (n=5/30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>29% (n=2/7)</td>
<td>8% (n=1/12)</td>
<td>18% (n=2/11)</td>
<td>40% (n=2/5)</td>
<td>20% (n=7/35)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These data from study participants support Oakes’ (2003) finding that rigorous courses together with the expectations that all students can succeed in them are important components of college preparation for URM students. In Danette’s interview, when asked what is most fundamental to helping the student population of Mapleton, she immediately answered, “Academically, it’s having our rigorous courses.” Mapleton has a modified single-track curriculum in which all students participate in the same college-preparatory curriculum, with some variations allowed in courses like math and Spanish according to readiness as determined by on-site assessment tests. Leroy, an administrator at Mapleton, also discussed how part of their students’ success is due to the “[modified single-track] curriculum where everyone takes the same level classes. [Teachers] have the same high expectations for all
students.” At Mapleton, where all students take the same high-level college prep courses, students complete an average of seven AP classes by graduation.

Note that one respondent, Brandi from Sterling Charter, both touted her schools’ rigorous course offerings and complained that her school was not able to do more for their native Spanish speakers:

> We got a letter from [a local university] … advocating for one of our Hispanic students who was saying, “I see that you don't have Spanish for Spanish speakers” … Most schools of our size at least give them a diagnostic exam. They do it for math, why not do it for us? Now, the reason is because a lot of these kids are already tracked, especially our Hispanic population. Some of them are tracked; they're in a special English class.

Brandi’s comments reveal the concern that teachers have regarding course availability for their students. Sometimes factors beyond the students’ control affect what courses they are able to take, either because their school does not offer a more challenging course for which they would be eligible (such as a Spanish for Spanish speakers course), or because their schedule is restricted by scheduling limitations due to other courses they must take (like special English classes for EL students).

Discussion. As with school safety, few participants overall (40% of administrators and 17% of teachers) mentioned rigorous academic curriculum as important to their schools’ success. It may be that because these schools already provide rigorous course offerings to their students, educators at these sites are not immediately concerned about academically rigorous course opportunities. Their students may already be finding success and the school culture may already encourage their students to attend rigorous AP and honors classes. There is always more to be done, as Brandi points out. In her example, Hispanics are not getting the rigorous course offerings for a variety of reasons: they are tracked unintentionally by virtue of being in special EL English classes, and their school is smaller and unable to have as many
course offerings (such as Spanish for Spanish speakers) that might be present in a larger, more comprehensive high school, in Brandi’s opinion. Respondent comments suggested that similar restricted course availabilities may affect students who are scheduled into other uncommon courses, including gifted, remedial, and special education courses.

**Condition 4: Teacher Quality**

*Data.* Few teachers in this study explicitly named high teacher quality as important to student success. There were only five respondents who did so—two teachers (7%) and three administrators (60%)—as shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Respondents Who Identified High Teacher Quality as Important to Students’ Success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Greenville High (n=7)</th>
<th>Bear Creek Charter (n=12)</th>
<th>Mapleton Charter (n=11)</th>
<th>Sterling Charter (n=5)</th>
<th>% of Total Participants (n=35)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Admin (n=5)</td>
<td>100% (n=1/1)</td>
<td>0% (n=0/1)</td>
<td>100% (n=2/2)</td>
<td>0% (n=0/1)</td>
<td>60% (n=3/5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers (n=30)</td>
<td>0% (n=0/6)</td>
<td>0% (n=0/11)</td>
<td>11% (n=1/9)</td>
<td>25% (n=1/4)</td>
<td>7% (n=2/30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total Participants (n=35)</td>
<td>14% (n=1/7)</td>
<td>0% (n=0/12)</td>
<td>27% (n=3/11)</td>
<td>20% (n=1/5)</td>
<td>14% (n=5/35)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To validate teacher responses, I examined online quantitative data, which presented mixed results in relation to teacher quality.

Two of the four study schools employed teachers with above average education levels for the state of California and for Blue Ridge County (Table 8). Statewide, the percentage of teachers with a masters or a doctorate was 42% in 2016-17 (41% masters + 1% doctorate) with 2% not reporting. In Blue Ridge County, the percentage of teachers with a masters or a doctorate was 56% (55% masters + 1% doctorate). Among study schools, the average percentage of teachers with a masters or a doctorate was below the county average at 53%,
Table 8. Highest Degree Earned in Addition to Teaching Credential Among School Faculty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Bachelors</th>
<th>Masters</th>
<th>Doctorate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State*</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue Ridge County</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Schools</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenville High</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bear Creek Charter</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mapleton Charter</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sterling Charter</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*2% not reporting

Source: California Department of Education, 2017

As seen in Table 8, educational levels at the study schools are overall slightly below average for Blue Ridge County. The same is true of years of teaching experience. Table 9 shows the average years of teaching experience in the state, county, and the study schools. Teachers in the state and county average 14 years of experience. However, the average experience levels of teachers at the study schools is 12 years. One school was above average, Greenville High, with 17 years of experience. Education levels for teachers at two schools, Mapleton and Sterling, was below average, with 11 and 8 years respectively. Data was unavailable for one school, Bear Creek Charter.
Table 9. Average Years of Service in 2016-17

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Average Years of Service</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue Ridge County</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Schools Average*</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenville High</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bear Creek Charter</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mapleton Charter</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sterling Charter</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(California Department of Education, 2017)*

*One school (Bear Creek Charter) excluded.*

Table 10 shows the rates of teachers who are credentialed and are teaching in the subject area for which they are credentialed. All teachers at all study schools (100%) possessed teaching credentials in the areas in which they were teaching, above average for the county and state.

Table 10. Rates of Teachers Credentialed and Teaching in the Subject Area for which They Are Credentialed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>% Credentialed</th>
<th>% Misassigned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study Schools Average</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenville High</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bear Creek Charter</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mapleton Charter</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sterling Charter</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Those teachers who acknowledged the importance of good teaching tended to say that good teachers know their students and find innovative ways to help all students achieve more academically. A teacher at Sterling Charter touted having “a highly caring & experienced teacher” for each classroom as one key reasons why her school has had success with disadvantaged students. Leroy at Mapleton said, “We've got great teachers…You really got to get these kids engaged and the way they get engaged is we're paying attention to them. The teachers know which students need what.” Good teachers take an interest in their students and make learning engaging and meaningful for them.

Most administrators acknowledged the importance of good teachers, but hiring the best teachers can be difficult. Traditional schools in large districts, like Greenville High, have a number of district restrictions on whom principals can hire and whom they must let go. For example, the principal at Greenville must hire teachers from the district if available before hiring outside teachers. This means that principals may not be able to hire good teachers who are brand new to teaching. As Laurentia said about an outstanding intern teaching science:

he ended up on the payroll, and he had two sections, and he ended up doing a fabulous job. Got his credential over the summer, and the principal's like ‘we need to keep you because you're really awesome.’ And so I can't remember how it worked out but he ended up able to stay and a lot of it is because the district doesn't have science teachers, like they're always looking for science teachers, so it was pretty easy to get him into that role.

This traditional school faced obstacles when trying to recruit and retain top teachers (and administrators). There was a process by which jobs had to be posted in the district and excessed teachers given the first opportunity for these jobs. In the case above, as Laurentia says, there is no problem because there were no science teachers in the district competing for the position. But this was a recurrent theme at Greenville—the only study school which was working within this large district hiring policy. Although Mapleton and Bear Creek also
operate within the same district, their charter school status allows them to hire whom they want with fewer district restrictions.

In the large district, Greenville was also impacted by district rules regarding informing faculty if they must be terminated. Laurentia recounted an example of another faculty member who had just finished her first year, but was given a pink slip per district policy because the district couldn’t guarantee that she would have a position the following year due to funding limitations. “She's brand new in the district and stuff so she got a really good, she ended up with one day at an elementary school, like a day and a half at an elementary school, and then so she's almost a full time. But she got a pink slip, so I doubt if she'll come back. She's really good. It's a bummer.” Greenville struggled to recruit and retain top teachers in the context of district policies affecting personnel.

The charter schools in this study did not report the same challenges with recruiting and retaining teachers. However, a challenge that was reported at Bear Creek Charter is teacher burnout. Working with underserved students can be exhausting and stressful, and some teachers wear out. In her interview, Brigitte acknowledged the need to guard against burnout:

It's just a hard problem to address in the teaching profession because there's limited funds to do unlimited things and you have people who are, by nature, helpers and givers and martyrs, and it's worth sacrificing for, but sometimes I think it's hard to find that line. And that's been a really big lesson for me over the last couple of years is learning to say no, to balance, because I think burnout [is] probably the biggest problem in our education system with teachers.

Retaining good teachers is a challenge at schools for underrepresented students because they may face challenges in balancing their work loads.

Discussion. The three validating, quantifiable measures of teacher quality used in this section—teacher education, teacher experience, and teacher subject matter misassignment by credential type—demonstrated mixed results. Teachers were slightly below average for the
county over all in teacher education and teaching experience and above average overall in the rates of teacher credentialing and teaching assignment—credential alignment. Although teachers at both Greenville and Mapleton were more educated, on average, than other teachers in Blue Ridge County, those at Sterling Charter were slightly below average for the county, and teachers at Bear Creek Charter were below average even at the state level. In terms of teacher experience, those at Greenville High have slightly more experience than average for the state and county, but teachers at Mapleton and Sterling charters have less experience. All teachers at all schools were credentialed and teaching within their credential areas. Combined with the small numbers of teachers who identified teacher quality as important, this study produced mixed results in terms of the importance of high quality teachers in closing the achievement gap.

There are two important points to make regarding teacher quality. First, although few teachers mentioned good teaching explicitly as important to student success, a majority of administrators did (60%, n=3). The prevalence of administrators who identified good teaching as important to student success may suggest that because administrators are in a position to more easily compare performance across classrooms, they may have a greater appreciation for the impact that a good teacher can make in helping students learn more. It is also notable that these administrators work at the same two schools—Greenville and Mapleton—where there are the greatest number of teachers with advanced degrees. (See Table 8). One of the two teachers who identified the importance of teacher quality, Danette, also works at Mapleton, which is the school with the highest education levels among teachers, and she is the most experienced of all the teachers in this study. Additionally, she has been
involved in leading numerous staff development workshops. This may indicate that those who work with many teachers are more likely to appreciate the value of having good teachers.

The second important point related to teacher quality is that although only two teachers explicitly identified teacher quality as important to students, many teachers implicitly discussed the importance of good teaching by identifying behaviors of good teachers as being important (e.g., good communication with home, good classroom management, engaging lessons, highly caring and experienced teachers). This finding is discussed in more depth in Finding 4.

An interesting and related point is the differences between charter schools and traditional schools that was evident in relation to hiring and retaining good teachers. The charter schools in this study are all autonomous Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) and therefore have fewer restrictions on whom they hire and the procedures by which they can dismiss teachers. By contrast, educators at Greenville High, a comprehensive high school in a large urban district, do not share that same autonomy. Greenville administrator Laurentia discussed this concern at length in her interview. Although hiring talented teachers is undoubtedly a challenge for all school administrators, respondents from no charter schools identified interference from outside agencies as a problem at their schools.

By contrast, at Greenville, as throughout Greenville’s large, urban district, principals are heavily restricted in whom they can hire and in whom they can retain by district policy. Teachers are often given “pink slips” (notices of possible dismissal from employment) in the spring because of the district’s requirement that all teachers who may be released at the end of the year be notified in advance. These pink slips are generally given on the basis of school budget constraints and lack of seniority, not teacher quality. Also, principals must post all
open positions before filling them, and they must fill those positions using district teachers if any qualified teachers are available. As a result of these two requirements, even if an administrator is aware of a good teaching candidate, such as an intern who has been working at their school, it is not certain that they will be able to hire that person because they will need to go through appropriate posting procedures for the position and allow any current district faculty to have an opportunity to take the position first. Once a teacher is hired, if that teacher is new to the district, there is no guarantee that the teacher will not be let go if the budget is tight the following year. The charter schools in this study did not face these challenges. However, teachers at the charter schools did complain about the potential for burnout at their schools. Also, the teachers at the charter schools had fewer years of teaching experience on average compared to Greenville High and to state and county averages.

**Condition 5: Intensive Academic and Social Supports**

*Data.* Intensive academic and social supports were the most widely identified of all the seven critical conditions by teachers. This condition was readily acknowledged by every administrator (100%) and by a majority (57%) of teachers, including multiple teachers at every school, as shown in
Table 11. These expressions came sometimes in the form of appreciation for existing support services, and sometimes in the form of identifying the need for greater support services at school or a lack of support at home.
Several teachers mention that there is more than one support system in place at their school, and highlight the importance of this robust network. One teacher from Mapleton Charter with 16-years experience characterized Mapleton’s support network as, “Multiple levels of support. The work is meaningful and engaging and students have a lot of support.” This highlights a recurrent theme among respondents that students at once need emotional support to manage the challenges of their schools’ rigorous curriculum while at the same time getting the academic support for students who may struggle to keep up with this accelerated pace.

Laurentia discussed her wish that Greenville could do more in terms of serving the emotional needs of their underrepresented minority populations by operating more support groups out of the counseling office:

We can’t run support groups because we have, there's no way we can support groups. If we had support groups, then we could have an African-American male group. We used to, we had that one year, that was amazing, that was really cool. And we had a Hispanic women's issues group.

This concern for these student populations reflects an appreciation for the importance of emotional, not just academic, support services for students.
Sometimes within one school there is disagreement about the level of support, or the need to have more support even though there is already a support system in place. The same teacher from Mapleton Charter who attributed their student success in part to their support network, also said, “My students who are struggling the most need more support. They require 1) classes with fewer students and more one-on-one interaction and 2) specific instructional time set aside for them learning and practicing executive functioning skills.”

Room for improvement in providing academic and social support systems was frequently mentioned, even as teachers identified the importance of their existing support systems.

The desire for greater student support—academically and emotionally—occurred frequently among respondents at Mapleton. Although teachers at Mapleton regularly cited their student support as a key reason for their success, there were also frequent expressions of the need for more support, as with one 25-year veteran teacher who suggested “adding in one-on-one tutoring, more counseling” as a suggestion for how to help their struggling students. This may indicate that regardless of the degree of school support networks, more support for struggling students is highly valued.

**Discussion.** These findings indicate the central importance of support mechanisms for students who are struggling, both academically and emotionally. It is telling that 100% of all administrators mentioned this as a key to student success, as they are the faculty members who are most likely to see a cross section of struggling students and what is happening to students who do not receive the necessary supports—i.e., failing students, behavior problems, and those with mental health issues.

The fact that 100% of administrators mentioned the importance of having intensive academic and emotional supports for all students suggests that it is an area of high importance
of which administrators are very aware. This may be because administrators monitor schoolwide academic achievement and behavior concerns—two areas that can be directly influenced by networks of academic and emotional support. Likewise, teachers deal with these students on a daily basis in their class, and are keenly aware of the struggles that are facing those with lower basic skills and those who are struggling academically and socially.

Interestingly, Greenville High, the traditional comprehensive high school, which is the largest school and the one in which there were the most complaints about needing more support groups, was also the school in which there were the fewest who mentioned the support systems they have in place as being critical to their students’ success. This is an interesting finding because it may suggest the challenge of providing academic and emotional supports to students in large, comprehensive high school setting. This seems to be in contrast to the pattern observed with Condition 1 where teachers infrequently mentioned school safety as an important factor, but where schools were in fact especially safe overall compared to county averages.

Condition 6: Opportunities to Develop a Multi-Cultural College-Going Identity

Data. No respondents explicitly described the importance of creating a “multi-cultural” college-going culture at their schools, but 80% of administrators and 17% of teachers did identify issues related to instilling in their underserved students a culture of academic rigor, high expectations, and a college-going mind frame. In Table 12, I summarize those who identified these traits, including statements related to helping a particular ethnic group (e.g., Hispanics), or of creating confidence and academic culture among students who didn’t expect to go to college, qualities which can be less common among URM students. The respondents tended to focus on the importance of helping
their students believe that they were able to succeed and that they should be more assertive about pursuing a college education.

Table 12. Respondents Who Addressed the Importance of Giving Students Opportunities to Develop a Multi-Cultural College-Going Identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Greenville High (n=7)</th>
<th>Bear Creek Charter (n=12)</th>
<th>Mapleton Charter (n=11)</th>
<th>Sterling Charter (n=5)</th>
<th>% of Total Participants (n=35)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Admin (n=5)</td>
<td>100% (n=1/1)</td>
<td>100% (n=1/1)</td>
<td>50% (n=1/2)</td>
<td>100% (n=1/1)</td>
<td>80% (n=4/5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers (n=30)</td>
<td>0% (n=0/6)</td>
<td>27% (n=3/11)</td>
<td>11% (n=1/9)</td>
<td>25% (n=1/4)</td>
<td>17% (n=5/30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total Participants (n=35)</td>
<td>14% (n=1/7)</td>
<td>33% (n=4/12)</td>
<td>18% (n=2/11)</td>
<td>40% (n=2/5)</td>
<td>26% (n=9/35)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents frequently mentioned the importance of helping struggling students build confidence in their academic ability. As one teacher at Bear Creek writes, it is important to help students succeed by “building up their confidence in solving problems and helping them realize their potential in math, teaching them ways to identify their points of confusion and study habits.” These students need direction in terms of building their own confidence and often in building basic skills so that they are able to complete college-prep-level work.

Laurentia’s comment in this regard highlights a common theme among respondents that educators at their sites must assertively challenge their students to be more confident and determined in pursuing higher education opportunities:

And we really focus on our Hispanic kids because we have so many, we have a really strong foundation here. We try to keep them all. And because some other schools have so much more than we do, and not all of our Hispanic kids are bussed but most of them are, so it's a population that is just, it's underserved. When we have parent nights, you know we can't always get a bus for the parents to come up. And it's just, it's a bummer, so we do a lot of stuff that way
to try to get all of the kids involved. And I really like that because it's all academic in nature and it's like, "Hey, you can really do this.”

Laurentia saw the importance of reaching out to the students and their parents in an effort to promote a college-going mindset. Underrepresented minority students may have a greater need to be informed of the demands and expectations of college-prep rigor. She discussed another point in her interview the importance of making her schools’ college-going culture explicit and mandatory for her struggling populations:

Parents are like "you're going there because I don't want you over [a different school] because this is a bad place so you're going to go there instead," so they come here and that's all they've known is here, and they're coming here and it's like "no, we don't play that here. You can't do this, you can't do that, you can't do that, so let's get down to business." And they realize really quickly that the culture here is, you know, "you're going to get good grades and go to college. That's what you're going to do."

Students and their parents do not necessarily understand the value of college or whether college is a realistic goal when they first come to the school, but they do believe that Greenville is a good school.

For Laurentia and many of the other respondents, it is up to the study schools to assertively foster a college-going mindset for their URM students who may never have been encouraged to go to college. Other respondents shared Laurentia’s reported a specific and explicit focus on helping URM students. Briggite of Bear Creek Charter said of her own school community:

It's one of the lowest-income neighborhoods in [the county], second highest—at least a couple years ago this was true—the second highest rate of foster youth percentage-wise in a school. Predominantly African-American and Latino … It's an opportunity for students--it's written in our charter that all students apply to 4-year universities, so we are college driven, which is different than schools neighboring us.”
As with Laurentia’s comments from Greenville, Briggite of Bear Creek highlights the importance of challenging their URM population explicitly to get into 4-year colleges and universities, something that neighboring schools may not offer.

At Mapleton, the mission is explicitly to help underrepresented, primarily URM students, to get into four-year universities. Their LEA plan states that their mission is “to provide an intensive college preparatory educational program that would enable students to attend college or university, … [targeting] low-income youth who demonstrate motivation to attend college and often who would be the first generation in their families to graduate from a four-year university.”

One of the examples of the importance of emphasizing college-going culture was a counter example from a teacher at Sterling who blamed students for low effort and work ethic based on “Lack of motivation cultivated by a society of 3rd, 4th, and so on generations of welfare families and mentality.” This teacher goes on to explain that URMs (namely, native Americans) have been taught through entitlement programs to be less independent:

When the personal sense of integrity, dignity, and self worth has been taken away over generations of government subsidies and limited opportunities, we have the type of society we see today. Our country's First Nation people groups are a primary example. Look at other countries and other cultures around the world and you will see an entirely different story.

Although in this quote it is suggested that URMs suffer from a taught helplessness, the conclusion may not be so different from that of other respondents—that these students have the potential to succeed in college if they can change their mindset.

Discussion. It is evident from teacher and administrator comments and from school mission statements that educating all students, including specifically targeting those who are less likely to perform well, is a systematic part of all of the study schools. Most administrators identified a multi-cultural college-going identity as important, although fewer teachers did.
Among respondents who identified the importance of a multi-cultural college-going identity directed especially at URMs, the primary focus was generally on informing students and assertively working to convince them and their families that they can and should try to succeed in advanced courses and go to college.

Respondents stopped short, however, of explicitly discussing college-going issues specific to students of color such as cultural relevancy or self-advocacy. As discussed in Chapter 2, cultural relevance refers to teaching that “not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate." (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 469). Although elements of this approach are implied in participants’ responses, there were no explicit discussions of the importance of cultural relevancy as a characteristic of teaching which increases achievement among URMs.

**Condition 7: Family–Neighborhood–School Connections**

*Data.* Several respondents talked about a lack of parent support and/or involvement, a common complaint among teachers. However, respondents from all study schools also identified and appreciated efforts that were made at their schools to foster direct involvement among parents, local communities, and the schools, such as having parent meetings, making phone calls to parents, or utilizing software that allows parents to monitor student performance. These comments, which were volunteered from participants at every school, identified the importance of family–neighborhood–school connections. See Table 13.
Table 13. Respondents Who Identified Family–Neighborhood–School Connections as Important to Students’ Success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Greenville High (n=7)</th>
<th>Bear Creek Charter (n=12)</th>
<th>Mapleton Charter (n=11)</th>
<th>Sterling Charter (n=5)</th>
<th>% of Total Participants (n=35)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Admin (n=5)</td>
<td>100% (n=1/1)</td>
<td>0% (n=0/1)</td>
<td>50% (n=1/2)</td>
<td>100% (n=1/1)</td>
<td>60% (n=3/5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers (n=30)</td>
<td>0% (n=0/6)</td>
<td>18% (n=2/11)</td>
<td>33% (n=3/9)</td>
<td>25% (n=1/4)</td>
<td>20% (n=6/30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total Participants (n=35)</td>
<td>14% (n=1/7)</td>
<td>17% (n=2/12)</td>
<td>36% (n=4/11)</td>
<td>40% (n=2/5)</td>
<td>26% (n=9/35)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A majority of administrators (60%) and some teachers (20%) identified the importance of building family–neighborhood–school connections. Participant responses tended to discuss the importance of maintaining communications with parents and making a difference in students’ neighborhoods.

Leroy identified relationship-building with students, faculty, and families as the single most important factor in Mapleton’s success with URMs: “we do a good job of building relationships: teachers and teachers, administrators and teachers, students, parents. It’s key.” Strong connections among families, schools, and neighborhoods require ongoing effort and time investment. This is a top priority at Mapleton. A teacher at Greenville High said their school’s emphasis on “good communication between teachers and parents and students” was one of the most important features of their school program in terms of student success.
Daphne, who grew up in a neighborhood similar to that of her school, expressed a sentiment that other respondents hinted at—that they and their schools are making a broader difference among their students’ families and neighborhoods:

I think that what we do is we're not just helping students here, I think we're really, and maybe this is naive of me, that maybe we're helping change our community. The desire for people to want to go here is high, which is great, and we get our kids involved in the community, and a lot of our graduates now, we've had one graduating class. A lot of those kids come back and work for us, and "I want to be a teacher, I want to work for the community, or get involved in public service" … The neighborhood has changed for the better, which is great. It used to be pretty rough and I just I'm really proud of the work we do. I really think and know that we're making differences.

Daphne sees her work as having an impact on her students’ lives outside of her classroom, making a positive change in their neighborhoods and communities.

*Discussion.* Educator feedback indicates that family–school–neighborhood connections are important to their students’ success. Several educators identified family and neighborhood connections, and their efforts to strengthen them, as important features of their schools, including 60% of administrators and at least one respondent from every school. An administrator at Mapleton indicated that relationships between students, teachers, and other school personnel and students and their families is the most important feature of their school.

These data suggest that school teachers and especially school administrators agree with Oakes’ (2003) findings regarding the importance of family–school–neighborhood connections.

**Oakes’ (2003) Seven Conditions**

Overall, administrators frequently contributed Oakes’ (2003) seven conditions as very important to their students’ success, but teachers did so less frequently. Teachers mentioned other features and conditions more often, and these findings will be discussed in Finding 3.
One general finding related to Oakes’ (2003) seven conditions was that some differences emerged between traditional schools and charter schools. Traditional schools appeared to have greater opportunities for course selection and they tended to have more experienced teachers. Charter schools however appeared to enjoy greater flexibility over certain features of their school sites, such as more local control over recruiting and retaining school faculty while traditional school educators were more likely to complain about district-level interference beyond school site control. More discussion of these and other differences between traditional and charter schools appear in Finding 3 and in Chapter 5.

The only condition which was mentioned by a majority of teachers (57%) was Condition 5, Intensive Academic and Social Supports. Teachers at successful schools maintain a strong focus on providing additional support to students who are struggling, whether they themselves provide that support or someone outside their classrooms, such as counselors or resource teachers.

**Finding 3: School Features and Conditions that Do Not Fit within Oakes’ (2003) Seven Critical Conditions for College Access**

Oakes’ (2003) Seven Critical Conditions for College Access constitute essential components of the college-prep education that previous research suggests children from middle-class homes experience—either at home or in their neighborhood schools—that are critical to their students’ success in preparing for and attending four year colleges. However, analysis indicates that four features respondents frequently mentioned at their schools did not fit within Oakes’ (2003) seven critical conditions. These four other features and conditions are described in this section.
Student–Teacher Rapport

While Oakes (2003) identifies the importance of family–neighborhood–school connections as one important feature for student success among underserved students, respondents highly valued a different relationship in their schools: *student–teacher relationships*.

Of the 35 respondents, 15 mentioned student–teacher rapport as among the most important features at their schools related to student achievement. Danette of Mapleton, for example, identified the importance of the connection between teachers and students within the classroom: “it really is this partnership of teacher to student…I think the classroom is a very sacred space…And I think what I've really learned over the years here at [Mapleton] is just the connectedness of things. That the connectedness really is important.” A Bear Creek teacher said that her school “has successful students because of the relationships that the staff builds with the students.” In her interview, Daphne from Bear Creek elaborated on this sentiment. When asked, “At your school what do you believe is most fundamental to helping your students succeed?” she answered:

> Relationships, 100%. . .We have something called [homeroom], which makes us very different…They become your actual children. Like I joke with people, ‘I have 20 kids.’ They're like, ‘Oh, really? How'd you do that?’ I'm like, ‘They're my students but like they're my children.’ And we grow with them for four years. . .because some of our kids, I mean, I've brought kids snacks before, and food, when they're like, ‘We're going through a rough month Ms. ____,’ and I'm like ‘Oh, well I can make a Costco trip. Here's some nutrient bars, here's some stuff, you just take it home kid, no worries.’

This degree of mutual respect and care are evidence of a relationship that includes real knowledge and understanding of the students in the classroom and what they need.

Mapleton, where many teachers also mentioned student–teacher rapport as very important, is like Bear Creek in that they have a program similar to homeroom in which
students and teachers stay together for multiple years. This multi-year engagement with a single class encourages more personal, stronger student–teacher rapport.

**Cooperative Learning and Differentiation**

Oakes (2003) identifies quality teachers as one necessary feature for helping disadvantaged students, which speaks to the importance of having meaningful lesson plans and research-driven teaching strategies. But I think it is worth highlighting that teachers at the focus schools frequently brought up specific teaching strategies which they believed to be foundational to their students’ success. Those strategies most often mentioned fell into two categories: cooperative learning and differentiation.

Cooperative learning is viewed by respondents as a means to increasing student engagement and having students work together to improve understanding. One Bear Creek teacher writes in her survey, “My classes offer chances for collaboration that helps students support each other as well.” Brandi of Sterling explained that teachers at her school were moving away from lecturing, being the “sage of the stage,” to now with Common Core being more “cooperative, collaborative.”

Several teachers mentioned the importance of tailoring their instruction to students: “providing individual opportunity to the students” (Mapleton), “ability and time to differentiate instruction and assessment for individual students” (Mapleton), and “being a little flexible … helping those students” (Greenville). This focus on knowing students and helping them work together to better understand their material is an important aspect of the study schools.
Combination Elementary-Junior-Senior High Schools

One of the four study high schools included middle school grades, 6-12 (Mapleton Charter). Two other schools included elementary through high school, grades K-12 (Bear Creek Charter and Sterling Charter).

One rationale for the extended grade level model is the hope that students enter high school more prepared for college-preparatory rigor. As Briggite from Bear Creek said:

They were having the problem of kids coming in in 6th grade, and coming from elementary schools already so far behind, that [our director] was like, ‘what are we doing?’ And the 8th grade teachers were devastated because they'd formed all these bonds, and these kids were doing so well, maybe they got them up to grade level or whatever it might be, and then they were kind of just sending them out to these big neighborhood high schools that were not statistically successful. And so that was the vision of imagine if we got these kids in T-K or Kindergarten and then moved them up through.

Combination schools allow the opportunity to work with the same students for a long period of time, improving their ability in a rigorous environment and better preparing them for college-preparatory rigor in high school.

Smaller Schools

The average school size for all four study high schools was 821 students, slightly less than the county average (858), and this average is skewed by Greenville High, whose enrollment is significantly larger than the average (1,799). The school size comparison focused only on grades 9-12 in the three charter schools (Bear Creek Charter, Mapleton Charter, and Sterling Charter) for a more equitably measure of comparison, although all three of these schools extends include more grades than 9-12. The enrollment of these schools is significantly less than the state average (503, 450, and 533, respectively).

However, the fact that three of the four study schools were significantly smaller than average does not necessarily mean that smaller schools are more successful schools at closing
the achievement gap. Greenville at 1799 students is one of the very highest achieving schools in terms of reducing the achievement gap in Blue Ridge County, a county which serves almost 300,000 students. Also, it is difficult to compare schools in this study based on school size alone because there are many other variables which affect student achievement, including that the other three schools are all charter schools and are all combination schools which include grades 6-12 or K-12. Although there were more complaints from Greenville respondents about their ability to provide adequate emotional support to their students, there were also fewer complaints about course accessibility. Nevertheless, smaller school size may be one of many factors worth exploring for administrators and policy makers who wish to experiment with school features and conditions that may reduce the achievement gap among URMs.

Finding 4: Educator Perceptions and Beliefs about Which Features and Conditions are Most Important to Student Success

In the previous two sections I addressed data that answer my first research question regarding what are the study schools doing that makes the biggest difference with underrepresented students? In Finding 2 I described how educator responses supported the seven critical conditions for college-going success that Oakes (2003) identified. In Finding 3 I described other conditions and features at the study schools that data suggest may be promising school features to add to the Seven Critical Conditions. I highlighted some differences between the traditional school and the charter schools.

In this section, I move from research question one to research question two, focusing here on what educators more generally believe about what helps students succeed and what less successful students need to be more successful whether or not these features and conditions existed at their school sites.
Oakes (2003) described the critical conditions addressed above, but data collected from this survey indicates that educators’ beliefs only partially agree with those conditions. In fact, across all seven critical conditions addressed in the section above, only one, Intensive Academic and Social Supports, garnered a majority of teachers’ responses (although if we focus only on administrators, a majority did identify the importance of more of these conditions).

To answer the question of what teachers believed were most important to student learning, I discuss below which strategies, characteristics, and programs respondents believed to be most important to their students’ success. Twenty-four unsolicited topics were identified two or more times, and the top 15 (those mentioned four or more times) are included in
Table 14. These topics show those school features that educators at the study schools believe are most important to student success. These conditions and features are listed by “School Features” and by “Student Characteristics,” and within each category they are ordered from most frequently mentioned to least frequently mentioned.
Table 14. Educator Beliefs Regarding Features Key to Student Success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>n of Responses</th>
<th>n of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>School Features</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student–Teacher Rapport</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching Strategies</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty High Expectations</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course Offerings</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher prep time/ collaboration</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Determination/ Motivation</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Work Habits</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students Use Academic Support</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Involvement</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Development / Innate Intelligence</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students ask for help / self-advocate</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students have strong academic ability</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student curiosity</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Confidence</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Focus / Engagement</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 14 shows the top 15 features identified by teachers and administrators in response to the survey and interview questions. The column on the left identifies which features and characteristics teachers identified. The middle column shows the frequency with which that feature was referenced, and the right hand column shows how many participants referenced it (some respondents referenced a given feature multiple times, therefore the number of times a feature is mentioned may be mentioned more than the number of respondents who mentioned it). The exact numbers of teachers and administrators who cited each different feature are disaggregated by school site for each feature by feature in following sections.

Note that few of these features align directly with the critical conditions that Oakes (2003) identifies. These educators, all of whom are working at highly successful schools with highly successful school programs, predominantly identify other school features as most responsible for their students’ success. Possible reasons for this are discussed in Chapter 5.

Of special note is the prevalence with which respondents identified student characteristics instead of school features. Of the features and conditions most frequently mentioned, 10 of the 15 (67%), are student characteristics that are out of the control of the schools and teachers. These included many of the student traits that educators often credit for their good students’ successes, like stable home support, innate intelligence, determination, work ethic, and good behavior. On the surface, teachers crediting students’ success to the students and their home support may not seem surprising, but in the context of this study—involving educators from the county’s most successful schools in closing the achievement gap—the finding that teachers take little credit for students’ success is striking. All of these respondents came from some of the most successful schools in the county with proven
success working with underserved populations. In Chapter 2, I reviewed literature that explains how persistent the achievement gap has been in American education; study schools for this study have successfully interrupted one of the most robust patterns in education. They have upset the reproduction of social hierarchies that prior literature would predict. The success of these school sites is remarkable, and significant credit for this success logically belongs in large part to the unique features of each school site. Yet, although all the schools that participated in the study are highly successful schools, educators from those sites more often attributed their students’ success to student qualities outside the control of the school and teachers rather than to their own efforts or the programs at their schools. Table 14 delineates the predominance of these responses among participants.

Statistically, the student populations that these schools serve do not perform well in almost every school context. These schools are finding ways to be successful with student populations that struggle. Therefore, school programs and features specific to these study schools arguably deserve substantial credit for their students’ success. However, educators at these sites 67% of the time give credit to student characteristics and features outside of their control instead of crediting their own programs (such as homeroom classes, robust school site support networks, combination schools, or their own teaching strategies). This finding will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 5.

In the remainder of this section, I continue to answer my second research question—what school features educators believe are most important in helping underrepresented students succeed. I focus on the five features identified by educators as most important to students’ success, as summarized in the School Features section. Student–teacher rapport was most frequently mentioned by the study participants as one of the most important features of
students’ success, followed by teaching strategies, faculty high expectations, course offerings, and time for teachers to plan together. Each of these five features will be addressed in more detail in the remainder of this section.

**Student–Teacher Rapport**

*Data.* The importance of good student–teacher rapport was identified 20 times by 13 different respondents from three of the four study schools, and by 60% of administrators overall. Although this was not the characteristic most often mentioned participating educators (that was Teaching Strategies, addressed below), student–teacher rapport was discussed in a different way. Respondents often talked about it as being the most important factor, the “transformative” part of what educators need to do to be successful.

Table 15. Respondents Who Identified Student–Teacher Rapport as Important to Students’ Success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Greenville High (n=7)</th>
<th>Bear Creek Charter (n=12)</th>
<th>Mapleton Charter (n=11)</th>
<th>Sterling Charter (n=5)</th>
<th>% of Total Participants (n=35)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Admin (n=5)</strong></td>
<td>100% (n=1/1)</td>
<td>100% (n=1/1)</td>
<td>50% (n=1/2)</td>
<td>0% (n=0/1)</td>
<td>60% (n=3/5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teachers (n=30)</strong></td>
<td>33% (n=2/6)</td>
<td>55% (n=6/11)</td>
<td>22% (n=2/9)</td>
<td>0% (n=0/4)</td>
<td>33% (n=10/30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>43% (n=3/7)</td>
<td>58% (n=7/12)</td>
<td>27% (n=3/11)</td>
<td>0% (n=0/5)</td>
<td>37% (n=13/35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participants (n=35)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mapleton administrator Leroy, for example, spoke about the relationships between faculty and students as the most beneficial of the school features he discussed. “You know, the four things that I said I think are really important, the longer year and all that stuff, but being here for 18 years, I think it’s paying attention to the kids. We pay attention to kids here.” As discussed in Finding 3, this belief was shared by Mapleton teacher Danette. “It
really is this partnership of teacher to student. And of course, the parents are there, the community's there. But this already gets into my philosophy, but I think the classroom is a very sacred space. And it needs to be honored and the children revered.” The relationship between teachers and students created respect within the classroom community that improved learning. As with Leroy, Danette discussed the importance of cultivating these relationships, saying what matters is, “My relationship with students: establishing and maintaining rapport; frequently ‘checking in’ with students on their progress as we work through a lesson or long-term assignment.” Similar sentiments were expressed by faculty throughout the study schools. 

A Bear Creek administrator wrote that the most important feature of a successful school is, “The strong teacher—student relationships we build. The strict, accountable, yet loving, respectful culture.” A Bear Creek teacher wrote that Bear Creek, “has successful students because of the relationships that the staff builds with the students.” Daphne said, “the relationships that we build with students are truly transformative.” These respondents value the effectiveness of creating an atmosphere of respect, familiarity, and concern between teachers and students as a key component of helping students succeed.

Discussion. No other school feature was discussed in such powerful terms as the importance of the student–teacher rapport across all four study schools. Respondents identified this feature as the most important, even “transformative,” feature of any school for student success. One reason this may have been mentioned so often is that faculty are directly involved in facilitating positive and meaningful professional relationships with students. It makes sense that these respondents have had the opportunity to experience classrooms with and without effective student–teacher relationships, and thus have first-hand knowledge of the difference in student achievement when there are closer connections between instructors and
students. Teachers may believe that better student–teacher rapport helps them better support their students because they have greater knowledge of student strengths, weaknesses, and interests, and because there is a greater sense of trust among teachers and students, which fosters better behavior and communication within the classroom.

**Teaching Strategies**

_Data_. Teaching strategies was mentioned as being important more than any other school feature, and was mentioned with particular frequency by teachers. Teachers identified a handful of different teaching strategies or philosophies that they felt were most important, but all of them related to how teachers structure learning in their classrooms. Administrators were less likely (20%) to identify teacher strategies as important to students’ success when compared to teachers (47%). Teaching strategies was the most frequently mentioned of all school features by teachers. See Table 16 for a breakdown of these data by school and position.

Table 16. Respondents Who Identified Specific Teaching Strategies as Important to Students’ Success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent of Total Participants</th>
<th>Greenville High (n=7)</th>
<th>Bear Creek Charter (n=12)</th>
<th>Mapleton Charter (n=11)</th>
<th>Sterling Charter (n=5)</th>
<th>% of Total Participants (n=35)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Admin (n=5)</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers (n=30)</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total Participants (n=35)</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Collaboration, student choice, and making challenging curricula relevant and accessible through differentiation were the focus of most respondents’ comments. In response
to what makes students successful at Greenville, a teacher wrote, “my ability to provide challenging, motivating, and accessible opportunities to learn and practice the skills and material.” Challenging material must also be interesting and accessible to students. Another Greenville teacher also emphasized the importance of giving students choice and engaging their interests by “providing them with opportunities to pursue topics/concepts of interest to them.” These comments reflect a shift from the teacher as expert, or “sage of the stage,” to a more student-centered model that more closely mirrors a coaching relationship that responds to students’ interests and needs.

A Bear Creek teacher emphasized the importance of using strategies that involve students making sense of their curriculum by working with other students and identifying connections between students’ learning and the real world. “We practice a lot of collaboration and critical thinking. My classes make connections between the curriculum and current, real-life events.” Learning increases when students are more active participants in the learning process and when they view the learning as relevant. Another teacher at Bear Creek shared the need for teachers not just to guide students, but for students to take an active role in working together to learn:

I think I help a student succeed by differentiating their writing feedback and helping them set individual goals for improvement. We discuss their progress, their goals, and reflect on what is working and what they need to reach the next level. My classes offer chances for collaboration that helps students support each other as well.

Effective teachers promote active student involvement through differentiation and cooperative learning. They organize learning around topics of relevance and interest to students and multiple exposures to key concepts in their curriculum, with the emphasis being to learn the material, not just to cover it. Another Bear Creek teacher wrote, “I've learned to present content/concepts in various ways and use activities to help students learn/master it. In
addition, I allow students to retake quizzes/tests and rewrite essays to become successful in the course.”

One Greenville teacher wrote that her teaching incorporates “reasonable pacing (not too fast, not too slow); lessons designed with ‘the end in mind’ so that I am actually teaching the skills they will use to complete a task. I don't just assign, I teach.” The learning objective is the driving force behind the lessons, making sure that students develop the tools they need to mastering the material.

Discussion. These data suggest that effective teaching strategies are an important factor in teaching and learning that occurs in the classroom. The teachers and administrators at the study schools also identified specific strategies that they believed were most effective in helping their students to be successful. These strategies included differentiation (including student choice and making learning relevant to student interests) and cooperative learning. Generally speaking, these strategies tend to support a shift away from teacher-centered teaching, in which teachers act as experts, to a more student-centered model, in which student interests, cooperation, and readiness are foundational to teaching and learning.

As found in previous data for this study, respondents may have been more likely to share school features that already exist at their schools and in which they are directly involved. This may explain why teaching strategies was the most frequently identified school feature by teachers, but only 20% of administrators identified this school feature as important.

Faculty High Expectations

Data. High expectations were identified 17 times by 16 different educators as important to student success, slightly less often than teaching strategies, but mentioned by more respondents than any other school feature. A majority of administrators (60%) and
Almost half of all teachers (43%) identified high expectations as important to their students’ success, for a total of 16 respondents out of 35, or 46% of all respondents. See Table 17.

Table 17. Respondents Who Believe Faculty High Expectations Are Important to Students’ Success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Greenville High (n=7)</th>
<th>Bear Creek Charter (n=12)</th>
<th>Mapleton Charter (n=11)</th>
<th>Sterling Charter (n=5)</th>
<th>% of Total Participants (n=35)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Admin</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=5)</td>
<td>(n=1/1)</td>
<td>(n=1/1)</td>
<td>(n=1/2)</td>
<td>(n=0/1)</td>
<td>(n=3/5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=30)</td>
<td>(n=2/6)</td>
<td>(n=5/11)</td>
<td>(n=3/9)</td>
<td>(n=3/4)</td>
<td>(n=13/30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total Participants</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=35)</td>
<td>(n=3/7)</td>
<td>(n=6/12)</td>
<td>(n=4/11)</td>
<td>(n=3/5)</td>
<td>(n=16/35)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Perhaps because the study schools explicitly state as part of their mission that they will help all students get access to four-year colleges, they tend to attract teachers with a passion for helping underrepresented students succeed academically. Daphne tells the story of how the goal of helping all students drew her to Bear Creek:

I chose to work at this school because when I was trying to be a teacher, it was really hard to find a teaching job, but I read the school mission statement, which is that "all students have the potential ability to make a great life for themselves," and I'm like "this is my teaching philosophy--I need to be here." So I looked at the website, and was so impressed with their focus--it was so student driven on student success.

Daphne views her passion for helping underrepresented students succeed as a driving factor in her success with her students. The connection between high teacher expectations and student success is not an accident at the study schools. Schools which foster a school wide culture of high expectations for all students are more likely to have successful students, and perhaps they are more likely to attract teachers who believe that all students can learn. As administrator Leroy said, it is not enough to have one or two teachers with high expectations.
for their underserved students. *Institutionalized high expectations* are one of the most important features of any school that helps improve the success of URMs.

Like Daphne, other teachers and administrators discuss high expectations as very important to high student achievement. Some respondents—all of them teachers—discussed the belief that students can learn as something they believe is imperative to teach at their schools. Danette shared a typical perspective regarding the importance of high expectations among teachers at schools that are to be successful teaching underrepresented students:

> Philosophically, it's the belief every teacher must have…that these kids can learn. These kids are capable of learning. And it's kind of tricky sometimes, cause we have all the abilities, but that's fundamental. It sounds like a cliché, but it has to be fundamental…I really believe every kid can learn here. If I don't believe that, then I need to go elsewhere.

Teachers must possess the strong belief that all children are capable of learning rigorous and challenging college-prep material. Teachers who don’t believe that these children can and should be high achievers in school are less effective in teaching underrepresented students.

**Discussion.** Respondents identified the importance of high expectations at every level of the school program, whether in the individual classroom or in support classes or institutionalized as a whole school.

One reason that more respondents mentioned this feature than any other may be due in two different ways to their passion for helping the underrepresented students that these teachers serve. First, teachers may recognize that not all teachers believe that all students have the same potential to learn and succeed academically. To be successful teaching these students, teachers must possess a strong belief that students of every ethnicity and income level are every bit as deserving and capable of succeeding in college as any other students.

Second, the teachers in this study worked at schools whose explicit mission statements identified helping all students achieve and attend four-year colleges. As in the case of
Daphne, this may tend to attract teachers who are passionate about helping underrepresented students. Therefore, these teachers were quick to identify this is an important feature of working with these students and being successful with them.

Interestingly, one teacher mentioned that she wanted to teach at the school specifically because of the high expectations for all students that are advertised on the school website as part of the school mission statement. Publicizing high expectations can be part of attracting more teachers with high expectations.

**Course Offerings**

*Data.* As data previously shared has suggested, it is not enough for teachers to simply believe that struggling students can learn. Schools must also provide the necessary college-prep-level courses that these students need to be academically prepared for college. This was the fourth of the top five school features identified by respondents as critical to school success, including 20% of administrators and 10% of teachers who identified this as an important feature of an effective school in terms of helping students to be successful.
Table 18. Respondents Who Believe Course Offerings Are Important to Students’ Success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Greenville High (n=7)</th>
<th>Bear Creek Charter (n=12)</th>
<th>Mapleton Charter (n=11)</th>
<th>Sterling Charter (n=5)</th>
<th>% of Total Participants (n=35)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Admin</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=5)</td>
<td>(n=0/1)</td>
<td>(n=0/1)</td>
<td>(n=1/2)</td>
<td>(n=0/1)</td>
<td>(n=1/5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=30)</td>
<td>(n=0/6)</td>
<td>(n=1/11)</td>
<td>(n=1/9)</td>
<td>(n=1/4)</td>
<td>(n=3/30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>(n=0/7)</td>
<td>(n=1/12)</td>
<td>(n=2/11)</td>
<td>(n=1/5)</td>
<td>(n=4/35)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Teachers who expect that students can do the work and get into four-year colleges must be supported with course offerings that prepare students for college. As discussed in Finding 2, Danette of Mapleton expressed this sentiment that belief alone is not enough. “So it's belief that every kid can learn. Followed up by the actual, here is what the program looks like, so kids are prepared to go to college.” The institutionalization of rigorous work through challenging courses reflects the high expectations for all students to truly be prepared for college.

Two of the study schools, in fact, offer few alternatives to college prep courses for their students. Some of the respondents specifically identified their schools’ limited options other than college prep courses as important to their students’ success. For example, Daphne explained how Bear Creek does not offer any courses that are not college prep courses:

We don't have any remedial courses. Even our traditional courses are considered college prep, and then we have honors and AP of course because all of our students are on a track to get a college diploma and enter any college they choose, so students have A-G requirements already taken care of when they graduate with us, and I think that really sets us apart. It just makes our kids have that access that maybe they wouldn't have in other places.
The course schedule that every student must take satisfies requirements for A-G level courses, so that all students who graduate should have an excellent chance of qualifying for college if their grades and test scores are satisfactory.

Administrator Leroy describes a similar college-focused curriculum at his school, saying that important to Mapleton’s success is a “[modified single-track]² where everyone takes the same level classes. They have the same high expectations for all students.” Again, high expectations are coupled with rigorous courses in order for students to be highly qualified for college success on their own merits.

Discussion. Schools in this study had an explicit focus on helping all students become college ready. The schools took steps to ensure that they acted on this goal by incorporating college-prep level courses in their curricula, and in some cases requiring all students to take college-level courses. Although this feature was not mentioned as often as high expectations among faculty, it is logical to assume that rigorous courses are a necessary partner to high expectations in order for schools to prepare students for college. High expectations are not enough unless students are exposed to rigorous courses that allow them to fulfill teachers’ high expectations. Students who fail to meet A-G course requirements will have fewer college acceptances regardless of their GPAs and test scores.

Time for Teachers to Plan Together

Data. Three teachers and one administrator identified opportunities for teachers to collaborate and plan together as important to student success. One administrator from Sterling (20%), two teachers from Bear Creek, and one teacher from Mapleton (10% of teachers)

---

² Whereas a single-track curriculum requires all students to take the same classes, Mapleton offers some exceptions, such as more advanced Spanish courses for native Spanish speakers.
identified this as something they believed was important to their schools’ success (see Table 19).

Table 19. Respondents Who Believe Teacher Collaboration is Important to Students’ Success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Greenville High (n=7)</th>
<th>Bear Creek Charter (n=12)</th>
<th>Mapleton Charter (n=11)</th>
<th>Sterling Charter (n=5)</th>
<th>% of Total Participants (n=35)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Admin (n=5)</td>
<td>0% (n=0/1)</td>
<td>0% (n=0/1)</td>
<td>0% (n=0/2)</td>
<td>100% (n=1/1)</td>
<td>20% (n=1/5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers (n=30)</td>
<td>0% (n=0/6)</td>
<td>18% (n=2/11)</td>
<td>11% (n=1/9)</td>
<td>0% (n=0/4)</td>
<td>10% (n=3/30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total Participants (n=35)</td>
<td>0% (n=0/7)</td>
<td>50% (n=2/12)</td>
<td>9% (n=1/11)</td>
<td>20% (n=1/5)</td>
<td>11% (n=4/35)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents identified the opportunities to meet and plan together as important so that teachers can foster the best teacher strategies for helping students learn. Practical help and support and encouragement from one another are important reasons why respondents valued time for teachers to plan with other teachers. As a Mapleton teacher put it, “constant teacher collaboration and development allows for the use of best practices.” Without the opportunity to be exposed to new ideas in teaching, and to work with other teachers to learn how and when to employ these strategies, it is difficult for teachers to keep current with employing best practices in their classrooms.

Discussion. Although it may seem as though collaboration is not highly valued at all schools, with 10% of teachers and 20% of administrators identifying its value, the veracity of this finding is supported in two ways. We have already seen that collaboration and differentiation is highly valued by participants. It makes sense that these same strategies would be seen as important to help teachers learn best.
On Traditional vs. Charter Schools

Data. The findings in this chapter are based on one traditional school site and three charter schools. These findings inform us about some of the advantages and disadvantages of these different school types, an explicit focus of this study. The traditional school had a greater selection of course offerings. The charter schools, on the other hand, had the autonomy to have more control over hiring and firing of teachers and greater freedom to shape their school structure, including creating combination schools and keeping schools smaller, which this study suggests may improve faculty-student rapport.

Another difference between charter and traditional schools appears in the survey results concerning whom teachers believe have the most control over their curriculum and their pedagogy. Teachers were asked through multiple choice questions who has the most control over what and how they teach. Teachers were given 6 options from which to choose. (See Teacher Survey, Appendix C.) Responses indicate some similarities and some differences in the autonomy that teachers feel in traditional schools vs. charter schools. See Figure 3 and Figure 4.
As shown in Figure 3, teachers generally stated that on the topic of their curriculum, one of three different parties was most responsible: themselves, teachers in their departments, or Common Core State Standards. Among these three there was no clear consensus, even
within the same school sites. While the greatest number of respondents identified themselves as having the most influence over what they taught, there were nearly as many respondents who responded that their curriculum was controlled by teachers in their departments and a significant number who believed that state-level Common Core Standards primarily controlled what they taught.

There were noticeable differences, however, between the results of the traditional school and the three charter schools in terms of whom teachers believe have the greatest influence over their curriculum. Half of all traditional school respondents said that Common Core State Standards had more influence over their curriculum than any other source. Only four of the charter school teachers (17%) identified CCSS as having the greatest influence over their curriculum. Charter school teachers were much more likely (80%) to identify themselves or teachers in their departments as having the most control over their classroom curriculum. This suggests that in the area of choosing classroom curriculum, charter school teachers felt that they had greater autonomy and flexibility within their school sites than teachers at traditional schools.

Figure 4 shows that in the area of teachers’ pedagogy there is an even greater contrast between traditional schools and charter schools in terms of beliefs regarding those who had the greatest influence over their classroom pedagogy. Teaching strategies are explicitly not dictated by CCSS, and therefore it is not surprising that in contrast to what teachers reported about control over their curricula, no teachers said that CCSS have the greatest influence over their pedagogy. Overall, the vast majority of teachers identified themselves as having the most control over how they teach, accounting for 73% of all teachers across all four study schools combined.
However, clear differences distinguished the traditional school from the charter school findings. Traditional school teachers in this study were equally likely to name site administrators (50%) as having the most control over how they teach as they were to say themselves (50%). However, charter school teachers were much more likely (80%) to identify themselves as having most control over their classroom pedagogy. This suggests that in the area of teaching strategies, charter school teachers feel that they have greater autonomy and flexibility within their school sites than teachers at traditional schools.

Discussion. Teachers’ responses regarding who most controls their curricula and their pedagogy demonstrate that there are some broad similarities among charter schools and traditional schools. Teachers from traditional schools and from charter schools differed substantially regarding whom they felt had more influence over their curriculum and pedagogy. These data suggest that there may be greater autonomy among charter school teachers in terms of classroom curricula and classroom pedagogy. Traditional school teachers were much more likely to say that CCSS had the most control over their curriculum compared to charter schools. In class pedagogy, traditional school teachers were much more likely to say that site administrators dictated teaching methods. This may indicate a shift in the nexus of control at traditional schools to off-site sources of influence. The CCSS have greater influence over curricula. The site administrators have greater control over pedagogy, and the site administrators are answerable to district leadership. Charter schools have greater school-site-level control over curricula and pedagogy.

Oakes’ (2003) Seven Conditions and Organizational Learning Theory

Finding 2 showed that administrators largely identified the importance of Oakes’ (2003) Seven Critical Conditions, Findings 3 and 4 showed that teachers focused more on classroom-level features and conditions at their schools. This may suggest several things.
Oakes’ (2003) conditions are school-level indicators. Administrators are most concerned about their schools at a whole-school level. Teachers, on the other hand, are most responsible for classroom level functions. Teachers tended to mention classroom level indicators instead of school level indicators.

This separation of duties and the corresponding differences in perception and beliefs between administrators and teachers may indicate that administrators and teachers are aware of their parts in a larger system of spheres of influence that work together to impact their students’ learning environments. This is illustrated in Figure 5. This suggests an organizational learning theory approach, in which those in the organization learn from one another according to established systems for learning and organizational memory. Different parties within an organization learn according to their needs and share their learning for best effect. Administrators and teachers act almost like organizations within organizations, each impacting the other but working with others at their own level to learn and facilitate their responsibilities in this interactive process. This suggests that within the microsystem of Bronfenbrenner (1994) we see organizational learning taking place in two spheres: administrators and teachers, and both situate themselves in different ways in relation to one another and to the parents and students they serve in order to facilitate desired outcomes (Figure 5).
This suggests a certain degree of compartmentalization is occurring at school sites, in which information is shared more freely from teacher to teacher and from administrator to administrator, but information is not shared in the same way between teachers and administrators.

Teachers placed significant attention on student characteristics like innate intelligence and home life, but teachers also frequently mentioned the importance of their own work, such as Oakes’ Condition 5, Intensive Academic and Social Supports. This shows that teachers are aware both of their role in their students’ achievement and of the importance of the administrators, students, and families. This supports the organizational learning theory approach show in Figure X, where teachers understand that they are only one part of a more complex interaction of spheres of influence on their students’ lives. All of these different components must work together in order for students to reach their potential academically.

Here is an example of where a Bronfenbrenner understanding of nested contexts of student learning overlaps with organizational learning theory. Structures in place within the sphere of the administration, the sphere of the teachers, and the sphere of the students’ home lives each have their own systems for sharing information and learning as individuals to benefit the overall goal of educating the child. In the same ways that businesses must learn as
organizations—some more effectively than others—so to do some administrators, teachers, and families learn within their own spheres and across spheres in the raising and education of a child. All of these different organizations working within the Bronfenbrenner model are most effective at the desired outcome of helping students learn when they are able to learn and share information effectively within each sphere and across spheres.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

As discussed in Chapter 1, ecocultural systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) posits that biological and cultural development of young children occurs within a nested system of overlapping influences, from immediate, daily contacts (microsystems) to more far-reaching influences of a larger society (macrosystems) to trends and beliefs over time (chronosystems). This study asserts that the education of a high school student may be viewed in the same terms, in which the school site forms the microsystem in which students come in daily contact with their teachers. The school site interacts within other spheres of influence impacting each child’s education (the district, home, community, county), as shown in Figure 1. Therefore, just as with the early development of children, the influences affecting the quality and success of a high school students’ educational achievement are many, complex, overlapping, and interactive.

How these different spheres within ecocultural systems model of teaching and learning might learn from and teach one another can be described using Argyris and Schön’s (1978) organizational learning theory, which positions learning within organizations as occurring among individuals who are working within certain guidelines and procedures for acquiring and retaining knowledge necessary to an organization. Elements within each system of the Bronfenbrenner based model of teaching and learning may be seen as acting like organizations according to organizational learning theory. Each system within the ecocultural systems model, from the teachers to the administrators to the families and beyond, can be understood as individual organizations filled with individuals who create procedures for learning and for sharing what they learn (Figure 5).

When we view teaching and learning through ecocultural systems theory and organizational learning theory, we see learning as a process that does not occur within one
individual in isolation, nor even within any one relationship or classroom or organization, but instead as a constant flow of information within and among different contexts influenced by ongoing experiences and interactions on many levels. To understand how and why students learn in school, one must consider the many conditions and features within these contexts that together act upon students’ personal and academic development.

If we accept the models of ecocultural systems theory and organization learning theory to describe the complex environments and conditions in which students learn in schools, then to understand how to improve student achievement, one must first understand the factors and conditions that affect student achievement. Although these conditions may vary widely by geographic region, student demographics, and many other factors, research discussed in Chapter 2 highlights some of the important conditions that are most relevant to this study—those conditions necessary to nurture a college-going culture among underrepresented students, such as Oakes’ (2003) Critical Conditions for Equity and Diversity in College Access. These conditions focus on school-level indicators (the microsystem) of college-readiness for students, as well as conditions and features beyond the school site.

The aim of this study was to add to existing literature that delineates these school-level conditions and features, as well as other systems of influence, and to suggest other features, both within the school sites and beyond, that support high academic achievement among underrepresented students.

Chapter 4 demonstrated how findings of this study generally supported Oakes’ (2003) Critical Conditions for College Access while also providing a more nuanced understanding of these conditions and suggesting additional school, district, and community features that contribute to student success, such as the importance of teaching strategies like cooperative
learning and differentiation, the existence of combination schools, the importance of strong student–teacher rapport, and a tendency for teachers to appreciate how the impact of their work is one important element among many in an effective educational program. While many of Oakes’ (2003) conditions were reaffirmed in this study, it is worth noting that there was stronger support for some of Oakes’ (2003) conditions than others, and there are other school features not predicted by Oakes’ (2003) conditions that many educators valued as important components in their students’ academic success.

**On an Ecocultural Model of Teaching and Learning**

Ecocultural systems theory assumes that student achievement occurs within multiple contexts and is a social process. Chapter 4 described findings that help inform what conditions and features within different spheres of influence in schools may have the most impact on student learning with underrepresented students. Findings supported Oakes’ (2003) seven critical conditions for college access, while adding seven other features of a successful program for reducing the achievement gap. These seven other features include:

- Strong Student–Teacher Rapport
- Effective Teaching Strategies (especially cooperative learning and differentiation)
- Combination Schools (combining high schools with middle and elementary schools)
- Smaller Schools
- Faculty High Expectations
- Course Offerings
- Time for Teachers to Plan Together

These seven features overlap with Oakes’ (2003) critical conditions in some areas. Student–Teacher Rapport, for example, may fit within Family–Neighborhood–School Connections. Effective Teaching Strategies and Time for Teachers to Plan Together are both aspects of Teacher Quality. Above and beyond Oakes’ (2003) Seven Critical Conditions, however, the
seven features identified in this study may be of particular interest to administrators and policy makers who wish to improve academic success among underrepresented students.

If we apply the Oakes’ (2003) conditions and the seven features identified in this study to the Bronfenbrenner (1994) ecocultural model, we see implications regarding how these conditions may exist in the microsystem (school site), mesosystem (district/county), and exosystem (home/community). See Figure 6.

The school features and conditions identified within this study fall within three systems of the ecocultural model. While most occur in the microsystem setting of the school site, three coexist in the mesosystem or district/county contexts (flexible hiring/firing procedures, combination schools, and smaller schools), and one (school–home–neighborhood connectedness) involves the exosystem of the homes and community that the school serves. Therefore, a few of these conditions are not under the control of school sites individually, but exist in tandem with district/county policy and students’ neighborhoods.
Figure 6. Conditions and features that foster high achievement among underrepresented students in a Bronfenbrenner-based model of teaching and learning

**On Organizational Learning Theory**

The compartmentalized nature of different spheres within the Bronfenbrenner-based model (1994) of teaching and learning (Figure 1) suggest that these spheres may each operate like organizations, each with its own individuals (administrators, teachers, students and their families) with their own procedures for learning and remembering relevant information.
related to student outcomes (Figure 5). The implications of this comparison are that existing research which informs organizational learning may be useful for informing not only dissemination of information from school to school, but also from administrator to teacher and from school site to family.

The existence of these different spheres which are each continually learning and sharing information may be evidence of organizational learning theory in the ecocultural systems model of teaching and learning. Within an organization, members learn what they need to know. Organizational learning theory describes the processes by which the individuals within organizations learn. As organizations grow, a distinction develops between individual and organizational learning, retain knowledge, and share knowledge. Organizations develop procedures for capturing the learning of their individual members. Of course, individuals are still doing the learning, but how they learn is affected by a set of shared assumptions which evolve as an organization grows and evolves. While standard operating procedures are accepted as an important part of an organization’s knowledge-building and memory, they can also sometimes inhibit learning.

**On Common Core and Student Achievement**

Common Core State Standards received surprisingly little direct mention from study respondents. This is true even through interview questions specifically asked about the degree to which teachers used CAASPP.org resources, which are online training aids to assist teachers with helping students meet standards and perform well on the CAASPP tests. Administrators mentioned CCSS very little, even when prompted to discuss how their school sites use CAASPP.org to prepare students for the SBAC tests in the spring. Teachers occasionally volunteered information about CCSS in the context of describing best teaching strategies. These conversations generally emphasized the changing nature of teaching that is
being driven by research into how children learn best and guidelines set forward in CCSS. This is a move away from the “sage on the stage” model of teaching to a more student-centered, collaborative, and inductive learning.

The minimal mention of CCSS on the part of administrators was not an expected finding of this study. This wide-sweeping reform has perhaps been the largest reform effort in Blue Ridge County since the introduction of No Child Left Behind.

One reason why administrators may not be focusing as much on CCSS at the study schools may be that these study schools were chosen because of their success specifically on the CAASPP tests. In the case of traditional schools in large districts, like Greenville, the more macro contexts of Bronfenbrenner’s (1994) nested contexts interrupt administrators very little when they are performing well. It is too bad not to have the lower-achieving schools participating in this study for a comparison to see if district oversight of CAASPP performance is more intrusive in lower-scoring schools. Administrators at struggling schools might be much more likely to be concerned about CCSS at schools where district officials are concerned about raising student performance on standards-based testing.

In the context of charter schools, there may be a different explanation. Already, these schools operate with greater autonomy from the district and county level interventions. While the charter schools in this study all work hard to help students master the CCSS as demonstrated by their superb performance on the 2015 CAASPP, they do not need to answer to anybody about the Common Core. This is especially true as long as these schools are performing well and meeting benchmarks.

As a new and major reform effort in the county, the CCSS helps to add to the literature describing the relevance of Oaks’ Seven Critical Conditions. The findings of this study
suggest that while all of the conditions are still relevant and important, some other important developments may be just as important to consider. These include elements which in relation to the CCSS are of more central importance to the student-centered learning model espoused in the CCSS.

**Traditional vs. Charter Schools**

Another important aspect of this study is the contrast between traditional and charter schools. The interaction between school sites and their districts and counties is impacted by the extent to which schools are bound to the policies of those districts and counties. Charter schools as nonsectarian schools of choice (Wolf et al., 2000), created to pilot innovative means for improving student achievement, in some cases specifically targeting URMs, have greater autonomy from these policies and thus have more local autonomy, but may also have fewer resource including fewer course options.

Greater flexibility on many levels appears to be afforded to charter schools and their teachers and gives teachers greater autonomy over their classroom instruction and curriculum than traditional school teachers. Because Common Core State Standards have greater impact over the curriculum of traditional school teachers, charter school teachers appear to have greater autonomy over their class curriculum than do traditional school teachers; many charter school teachers feel that what they teach is heavily influenced by either themselves or their department, but much less by CCSS when compared to traditional school teachers. Charter school teachers report even greater freedom to choose teaching strategies. This reinforces the likelihood that charter school teachers have greater autonomy and flexibility than traditional school teachers.

The greater flexibility at charter schools also gives school sites better control of school structures like the calendar, school size, and the recruitment and retention of school personnel.
On the other hand, traditional schools have more resources which enables them to have more course selection and more course offerings.

The presence of charter schools appearing disproportionately at both the highest and lowest ends of student achievement in the county in this study demonstrate that flexibility and autonomy alone do not give charter schools a magic bullet that will automatically improve all student achievement. The effectiveness of charter school programs depends upon how teachers and administrators use the flexibility that is afforded to charter schools. The fact that some of the lowest schools in this study are charter schools suggest that in some cases the freedoms afforded by the charter school model may allow for less effective programs and less oversight. However, when used effectively, the additional autonomy and flexibility of the charter model allows charter schools to function to fulfill their purpose by finding best practices in isolated contexts which can they be examined for possible dissemination to other schools. One aim of this research was to disseminate some of these best practices from the charter schools in this study.

Respondents Credit Student Characteristics over their Own Actions for their Students’ Success

One interesting and unexpected finding in this study is how frequently teachers attribute their students’ success to their students. Regarding the schools in this study, there is abundant statistical evidence to suggest that these same students at other schools would not perform as well academically. Statewide, academic measures like the CAASPP scores from which these schools were selected show that educationally underprivileged students score on average far below their more affluent, predominantly white and Asian peers. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, this achievement gap is one of the most robust patterns in education. However, unique features and conditions of the study schools have somehow countered social
reproductionists like Bourdieu (1991) who assert that schools tend to reproduce the social hierarchies found in society. Schools in this study have significantly reduced or even closed this achievement gap.

However, the data in this study suggest that the study schools are all successful with their underrepresented students largely because of features and conditions of their schools unique to their sites. These particular combinations of school conditions and features, positioned as they are within the nested structures of overlapping spheres of influence on student learning are together able to mediate the reproductive effects of social hierarchies and promote a more meritocratic educational system.

Yet despite the effectiveness of the schools in this study, respondents appeared to suggest at a rate of 2:1 that student characteristics were important to their students’ success instead of their own role in helping boost student achievement.

This finding might seem to suggest that educators undervalue their influence on their students’ success or that they are for some reason hesitant to take credit that is due to them and their school sites. However, taken together with other evidence from this study, such as teachers beliefs that their support systems and teaching strategies are important to their students’ success, it seems more likely that these teachers see themselves as important, but as only one of many important influences in their students’ lives. This view seems to agree with the view of the CCSS that teacher judgment should be trusted as teachers are challenged with a more student-centered learning environment. Also, as predicted by Bronfenbrenner’s (1994) model, this data supports the belief that learning happens in multiple overlapping contexts, not just in any one relationship or classroom.
Oakes’ (2003) Seven Critical Conditions

All seven of Oakes’ (2003) critical conditions were volunteered by respondents, predominantly administrators. This suggests that administrators at the study schools are readily aware of the importance of these seven critical conditions for college access. Teachers were more readily aware of some of these conditions and less aware of others. As shown in Figure 2 five of the seven conditions were discussed by a majority (60%+) of administrators, but only one condition was mentioned by more than 20% of teachers.

Oakes’ (2003) Seven Conditions were referenced by a majority of administrators in the study schools, but were not widely identified by teachers. One of the conditions, Safe and Adequate School Facilities, was scarcely mentioned by any administrators or teachers although the study schools were safer than average as measured by the suspension rates at these schools. The seven conditions are critical indicators of a school environment that foster an effective college-going culture, and so this finding may indicate that educators may not always be readily aware of all of the conditions at their schools that contribute to the effectiveness of their school programs. In other words, faculty members may be more aware of certain features than others.

Two criteria seemed to correlate with whether respondents were more likely to identify a school feature as important. First, teachers generally identified school features that are present at their schools (e.g., strong support systems for students, high expectations, and effective teaching strategies). Although respondents sometimes identified the needs at their school (e.g., more support for struggling students or more course selection and availability for Spanish speakers), there was little consensus on what these needs might be. When asked what their schools could do to help struggling students be more successful, teachers most
frequently mentioned changes they could make in their classrooms rather than school wide changes.

Second, teachers generally identified the school conditions and features for which they were more directly responsible. Administrators tended to mention features that were more strongly associated with administrators, while teachers more often described features that teachers were responsible for.

This may be an important finding in that it may impact how research is understood in similar research models. Researchers do not necessarily get a full picture of the most important conditions and features at a school by asking faculty members what they think. Instead, researchers may be more likely to find out which effective features the school already posses that the respondents are most directly responsible for.

**Teacher Quality**

Of all of Oakes’ (2003) seven conditions for college access, this study found the least supporting evidence for the fourth condition, “Qualified Teachers,” as only 14% (n = 5) of respondents overall identified teacher quality as important to their students’ success. This apparent discrepancy between Oakes’ (2003) findings and my own findings may be explained in three ways. First, I have shown that teachers are less likely to mention school features for which they are not directly responsible, and a majority of administrators and one teacher leader who is highly involved in professional development activities were among those who did mention teacher quality as important. Second, teacher education and experience are only two of many measures of teacher quality, and as such is not conclusive proof of the degree to which the teachers at the study schools are highly qualified. Third, many respondents mentioned specific traits of good teaching which suggest qualified teachers, such as Teaching Strategies, Student–Teacher Rapport, and Faculty High Expectations, which constituted three
of the four most frequently identified school features by respondents (see Figure 2). Findings from this study, therefore, may indicate that qualified teachers are very important features in schools that help underrepresented students succeed in high school, even if teachers did not explicitly identify teacher quality as important.

**No Low-Achieving Schools Participated in This Study**

The failure of any lower-achieving schools to participate may indicate that lower-achieving schools are more reluctant to open their schools and faculties to people outside their school sites. School administrators may be concerned about being portrayed in a negative way in research out of fear that this might have a negative effect on their schools. Unfortunately, this lack of willingness to participate in this study may contribute to the ongoing isolation of these and other similarly low-achieving schools. This in turn may make it difficult for schools like these to receive the attention and help they may need, and to be able to contribute their valuable experience and insights to the literature in how to help schools like them.

The original intent of this study was to compare the highest- and lowest-achieving schools in Blue Ridge County in relation to closing the achievement gap. The purpose of including the lowest-achieving schools was to better understand what conditions and features are most important to closing the achievement gap. Are the same conditions and features present in low-achieving schools as at high-achieving schools, and if so why are they not as effective in lower-achieving schools?

Perhaps administrators in the low-achieving schools in this study were reluctant to participate or were too focused on the challenges of a low-achieving school to give their attention to the details of my request. Either way, this finding is concerning, because results from this study may inform policy which could benefit these schools, and the absence of these schools from this and other studies mean that the perspectives of educators at their sites are
underrepresented in studies like this one addressing how best to serve struggling students. Lower-achieving schools may have just as much to contribute in terms of identifying what it is about successful schools as higher-achieving schools. It is a disappointment that none of the three lower-achieving schools participated.

This result may also suggest that Oakes’ (2003) seven critical conditions for college access are incomplete. The effectiveness of a school administration may be as necessary for college access as the other seven conditions that she identified. All the administrations of the high-achieving schools responded in a timely way and were clear about their intentions to participate or not participate. None of the low-achieving schools agreed to participate after multiple efforts from several different people. Two of these schools never responded in any way, and the administrators could not be reached by phone. This may suggest that the administrators at the lowest-performing schools were ineffective in completing all of the functions of their positions. If they were unable to respond to my requests over several months of effort, it is possible that other administrator responsibilities were also left undone. It is worth noting that this did not happen at any of the high-achieving schools.

**Limitations**

This study examined a small sample of highly successful study schools in a large county in southern California. These schools were identified entirely on the basis of one year of test scores, the 2015 CAASPP scores for grade 11. As this study has demonstrated, the features and conditions which are more often identified here are not necessarily the most important school features nor the only important school features, but are likely the most important school features that already exist at the study schools and in which respondents are directly involved. Finally, my role as a teacher within one of the study schools may have influenced some respondents’ answers.
Implications

Implications for Practice and Policy

This study offers several implications for administrators, teachers, and policy makers who wish to increase achievement among their underrepresented students and close the achievement gap.

Because teachers may be aware that the positive impact that they have on their students’ lives is part of many other important elements in their students’ schooling and lives, administrators and teacher-leaders at all levels and might more assertively and explicitly reflect upon the importance of the work that they do to identify what is helping and what contributes to their students’ success. The fact that respondents often did not credit their classrooms or their schools for their success may suggest that educators acknowledge that their work, while important, is only one element of many that must work together in the education of a child. This is an important area for further study, discussed in greater detail under Suggestions for Further Research. Making teachers aware of their important role in boosting their students’ success may help to motivate them and encourage them to continue their good work with educationally underprivileged students, while at the same time encouraging them to find solutions for improving achievement among their struggling students.

Another implication of this study is that educational researchers must be cautious about how they interpret information collected from open-ended surveys and interviews regarding what is most and least effective in a given school site. Teachers and administrators may be more likely to highlight programs and features of their schools in which they are directly involved. Accessing other data through direct observations, publicly available data, or other means to validate respondents’ views may be necessary to develop a robust
understanding of what truly happens within a school site. This is not to say that respondents’ views don’t matter. Respondents’ feedback should be viewed, as one might expect, as being influenced according to respondents’ experience and perspective, and taken together with other data for a more complete view of the context in which students learn.

In Chapter 1, I discussed the theory of organizational learning that asserts that learning within organizations (e.g., schools) is done by individuals but not by individuals acting alone. As Argyris and Schön (1978) assert, a key aspect of organizational learning is the interaction that takes place between parties, whether they are individuals or organizations. One implication of this study is that the features and conditions found to be most effective in helping underrepresented students become college-ready should be spread to other schools in appropriate ways according to each school’s context. Just as teachers learn from one another and administrators learn from one another within schools, and just as schools and families learn from one another, so too schools can and should learn from one another. Teachers and other educators can learn from each other, but to do so requires processes to be in place to facilitate this learning.

**Implications for Future Research**

The achievement gap is a resilient opponent in the struggle to build a more meritocratic and equal school system, which in turn serves a democratic society in general. The extent to which the effective school features and conditions identified in this study can be implemented successfully in other schools to foster greater equality and a stronger merit-based educational system is worthy of further exploration.

This research focused on what educators at highest-achieving schools in relation to closing the achievement gap believe about why their students are successful. However, in the
course of this study there was no effort to communicate with parents or students. Their beliefs would be valuable to explore.

Another area for future research is the Bronfenbrenner-based (1994) conceptual model of nested contexts influencing teaching and learning in schools proposed in this study. Further validation is needed to determine the accuracy and generalizability of this model of the complex influences that impact a student’s emotional and academic growth. Just as in Bronfenbrenner’s (1994) original model of child development, this broader model of teaching and learning intends to capture all the overlapping contexts which impact student learning in the classroom and beyond. The extent to which this model transfers to the school setting warrants further investigation.

Researchers might continue to explore how to interpret open-ended responses to surveys and interviews by teachers on the topic of what is most successful at their school sites. These results, while valid, should not be interpreted as being unbiased or comprehensive, and their results should be interpreted together with other forms of data.

Another area for further study is that of lower-achieving schools. More attention to lower-achieving schools may be as important as studying higher-achieving schools in terms of understanding how to improve achievement among underserved populations. Despite the challenges of conducting research in lower-income and struggling school sites, these sites should not be overlooked as subjects for future research. Ethnographic research within struggling schools may help researchers to understand more about what sense educators at these schools make of their teaching contexts and why their students struggle to succeed at the same rates as students in other schools, especially where school features and conditions that
have been successful in higher-achieving schools may also be present but less effective in lower-achieving schools.

Finally, this work would benefit from a larger study that compares these results across a greater number of schools and a wider variety of regions within the United States to help inform the extent to which these findings are generalizable.

**Conclusion**

The social reproductionist perspective that children inevitably assume the same social levels as their parents can be countered by key mediations in the form of specific conditions and features at school sites that have been demonstrated to interrupt this pattern. Those features and conditions are complex and must be interwoven into the multiple levels of influence, as described by the ecocultural model of teaching and learning and the overlay of the organizational theory of learning on this model presented in this study and summarized in Figure 1 and Figure 5. In the microsystem, or school level, this includes: the seven critical conditions for college access, Strong Student–Teacher Rapport, Effective Teaching Strategies, Combination Schools, Smaller Schools, Faculty High Expectations, Course Offerings, and Time for Teachers to Plan Together. In the mesosystem, or district/county level, schools benefit from flexibility in school structure, such as having the opportunity to have combination schools and to cap school size and allow for smaller schools to help underrepresented students. In the exosystem, or home/community level, schools must actively foster school–home–neighborhood connections. Although social reproduction in schools is a well-documented phenomenon, it is not inevitable. A delicate application of appropriate mediations to better serve the needs of underrepresented students, such as those discussed in this study, can reduce or eliminate the gap in academic achievement between lower-income,
predominantly black and Hispanic students, and more affluent, predominantly white and Asian students.
E-mail Invitation: Principals

Dear Principal ______________:

I am currently a doctoral student in the Teaching and Learning program in the Department of Education Studies at UCSD. I am interested in learning about teachers’ experiences working within programs that help to improve the academic performance of students who are traditionally underrepresented in college. By gaining teachers’ and administrators’ perspectives and listening to your voices, I hope to help shed light on policy debates regarding how to best support all students, both at the local and state level. I am writing to request your help reaching out to the teachers and administrators at your school site, and inviting them to participate in this research study.

I want you to understand that teachers’/administrators’ decisions to participate are completely voluntary. At no time will individual student data or identifying information be collected. Rather, I am interested in interviewing teachers/administrators about their experiences. All responses will be kept completely confidential. I will never use teachers’ names, the name of your high school or the school district in any publication or presentation. I will safeguard any risk of loss of confidentiality by using pseudonyms for all research participants as well as the names of the district and your school. All data will be kept in a password-protected file on my computer.

If you could forward the attached e-mail [see below] to the AVID teachers at your school site, I would very much appreciate it.

Since this is an investigational study there may be some unknown risks that are currently unforeseeable.

If you have any questions at all regarding this project, please feel free to call me at xxx-xxx-xxxx or email me at pensberg@ucsd.edu and I will be happy to answer any questions.

Thank you kindly for your time and assistance,

Phil Ensberg
APPENDIX B: HIGH SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR SURVEY

If you were directly contacted by Principal Researcher Phil Ensberg or your administrator about this survey, and if you have completed and returned the Administrator Survey Consent Form that accompanied the link to this survey, thank you for agreeing to participate in the following survey. This survey is completely anonymous, unless you choose to enter your name at the end in order to be considered for a follow-up interview. You may skip questions if you choose.

1. In what school did you serve as an administrator during the 2015-2016 school year?

2. Including yourself, how many administrators are at the school?

3. Please briefly identify your 3-5 biggest responsibilities in terms of time spent (e.g., 1 supervision, 2 student discipline, 3 facilities management, ...).

4. How frequently do teachers participate in professional development at your school (i.e., professional learning activities, like reviewing student data, learning in PLCs, or studying best practices)?
   - □ weekly or more frequently
   - □ 1-3 times / month
   - □ 2-4 times / semester
   - □ 1 or fewer times / semester

5. Which best describes who is primarily responsible for your teachers’ professional development?
   - □ district administration
   - □ representatives from throughout the district
   - □ school site administration
   - □ a designated on-site staff developer
   - □ on-site teachers
   - □ Individual teachers are responsible for their own professional development.

6. Briefly describe the main focus/foci of your professional development in 2015-2016 (e.g., lesson study, backward design units, PLCs, ...).

7. Briefly describe how professional development for your teachers is evaluated.

8. Approximately what percentage of the teachers at your school are new teachers (have been teaching for 3 years or less)?
   - □ 10% or less
   - □ 11%-20%
   - □ 21%-30%
   - □ 31%-40%
   - □ 41%-50% or more

9. Approximately what percentage of the students at your school are classified as English Learners?
   - □ 10% or less
   - □ 11%-20%
10. Approximately what percentage of the teachers at your school hold a graduate degree (M.A., M.S., Ph.D., Ed.D.)?
   - 10% or less
   - 11%-20%
   - 21%-30%
   - 31%-40%
   - 41%-50% or more

11. Approximately how often do core academic teachers meet together, on average, to discuss and plan for their courses?
   - weekly or more frequently
   - once / month
   - 2-3 times / month
   - 2-4 times / semester
   - 1 or fewer times / semester

12. Approximately how often, on average, is every teacher observed by a member of your administrative team in one year (both formal and informal observations)?
   - 0-1 observations / year
   - 2-3 observations / year
   - 4-5 observations / year
   - 6 or more observations / year

13. What are the two or three most important things that you and your administrative team look for in classroom observations (e.g., lesson organization, agenda on board, alignment of lessons to a curricular standard,...)?

14. What are the two or three most important things that guidance counselors routinely do at your school to help students be successful?

15. What features of your school do you feel contribute the most to your students’ success?
APPENDIX C: HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER SURVEY

If you were directly contacted by Principal Investigator Phil Ensberg or your administrator about this survey, and if you have completed and returned the Teacher Survey Consent Form that accompanied the link to this survey, thank you for agreeing to participate in the following survey. This survey is completely anonymous, unless you choose to enter your name at the end in order to be considered for a follow-up interview. You may skip questions if you choose.

1. In what school did you teach during the 2015-2016 school year?

2. What is the highest level of formal education you have completed?
   □ BA or BS
   □ MA or MS
   □ PhD or EdD
   □ Other (please explain)

3. While studying to obtain your bachelor’s degree or equivalent, what was your major or main area of study?

4. In what subject(s) did you teach the most classes during the 2015-2016 school year?

5. By the end of this school year, how many years will you have been teaching altogether?

6. How frequently do you participate in professional development at your school (i.e., professional learning activities, like reviewing student data, learning in PLCs, or studying best practices)?
   □ weekly or more frequently
   □ 1-3 times / month
   □ 2-3 times / semester
   □ 1 or fewer times / semester

7. Approximately, what proportion of your school’s professional development occurs outside of your regular work day (i.e., how often are you asked to come in before school, after school, or on weekends/holidays for professional development)?
   □ Always
   □ >90%
   □ 50-90%
   □ 25-49%
   □ <25%
   □ never

8. Not including the professional development you mentioned above, approximately how often do core academic teachers meet together to discuss and plan curricular and instructional improvements for their courses?
   □ About 0-2 times/year
   □ About 3-7 times/year
   □ About once per month
About twice per month
About weekly
On average, probably more than once per week

9. Who has the **most** control over what you teach to your students (i.e., the content of your course instruction) (please choose only one)?
- State-level Common Core Standards
- County/district level officials who are not full-time employees at my school site
- My school-site administrators
- Teachers in my department
- Myself
- A leadership group at my school site (please describe briefly, e.g., includes teachers across subjects and administrators)

10. Who has the **most** control over how you teach to your students (i.e., the teaching strategies you use to teach the content of your course) (please choose one)?
- State-level Common Core Standards
- County or district level administrators who are not full-time employees at my school site
- My school-site administrators
- Teachers in my department (e.g., math, science, English, electives)
- Myself
- A leadership group at my school site (please describe briefly)

11. When you think of your **most successful** students, what do you think makes them **successful**?

12. When you think of your **least successful** students, what do you think are the **biggest obstacles** to their success?

13. When you think about the **successful students** at your school, what is it about you, your class, or your school that you believe most helps those students succeed?

14. When you think about the **least successful students** at your school, what 2-3 changes in your class or your school do you believe would most help those students to be more successful?
APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview

Closing the achievement Gap: school of interest. Believe that I can learn from this school about what works with underrepresented students.

1. How would you briefly describe this school to someone who doesn't know anything about the school?

2. Why did YOU choose to work at this school?

3. Professional development.
   1. I see that at this school professional development occurs [once a week or more often]. Can you tell me about a typical professional development meeting? (What are the teachers doing? What are the administrators doing? Are classified employees involved in any way?)
   2. How is the curriculum for professional development decided upon?
   3. Who conducts or leads professional development?
   4. How was it decided that PD would be done in this way and by these individuals? (if the respondent knows)

4. Teachers. I have found that there are ___ veteran teachers at [school] but also ___ newer teachers. What do you believe may be the reasons for this distribution?

5. Teacher collaboration.
   1. How often do core academic teachers meet together to discuss and plan curricular and instructional improvements for their courses?
   2. How do you believe this time is typically used?
   3. Is this collaboration voluntary or mandated by administration?
   4. How, if at all, is the use of this time evaluated (by teachers or by administrators)?

6. Autonomy.
   1. To what extent do you have the power to influence what happens at your school site (administrators) and/or classroom (teachers)? Can you elaborate on who has the most influence over what happens at this school site?
   2. To what extent do you believe that your teachers have power to influence what happens in their classrooms? Can you elaborate on who has the most influence what happens in each classroom?
   3. To what extent do your teachers use the CAASPP.org resources, such as interim assessments and practice tests, as you know?

7. Difference makers.
1. In four-year colleges and universities, low-income, predominantly black and Hispanic students tend to be under-represented. What at your school do you believe is most fundamental to helping underrepresented students succeed?
2. Why do you feel some students do poorly in spite of these fundamentals?
APPENDIX E: CONSENT FORMS

Survey Consent Form

Closing the Achievement Gap: Charter School that Serve Underrepresented Students

Phil Ensberg, who is a graduate student in the Education Studies department at UCSD, is conducting a research study to find out more about Programs, Policies, and Strategies that help to close the achievement gap between affluent, predominantly white and Asian students and lower-income, predominantly black and Latino students.

If you agree to be in this study, the following will happen to you:

- You will be asked to complete an anonymous survey about your school and its programs (approximately 10-20 minutes to complete);
- IF YOU CHOOSE, at the end of the survey you may volunteer your name and email to be considered for participation in a follow up interview to ask about your survey responses in more detail.

You will be paid nothing for taking the survey; interview participants will be given $20 gift cards for participating in this study.

Research records will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law. Surveys will be anonymous, unless you include your name. Participants in interviews will be referred to by pseudonyms, and the key will be kept in a locked cabinet. All data will be encrypted and password protected.

Participation in research is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. You are free to skip any question that you choose.

If you want additional information or have questions or research-related problems, you may reach Phil Ensberg at xxx-xxx-xxxx.

By completing and submitting the surveys you are indicating that you are at least 18 years old, have read this consent form, and agree to participate in this research study.
Audio Consent Release Form

Closing the Achievement Gap:
High-Achieving Charter Schools that Serve Underrepresented Students

Principal Investigator: Phil Ensberg

You have expressed willingness and have been selected to participate in an interview for the research project named above. As part of this project, audio recordings will be made of you during your participation in this research project. Please indicate below the uses of these audio recordings to which you are willing to consent writing your initials beside those uses to which you consent. This is completely voluntary and up to you. In any use of the audio recordings, your name will not be identified and your identity will be kept anonymous. You may request to stop the recording at any time or to erase any portion of your audio recording.

1. The audio recordings may be studied by the researcher for use in the _______ research project.

2. Portions of the transcripts from the audio recordings can be used for _______ educational publications and presentations in educational settings.

3. The audio recordings may be reviewed in presentations to fellow researchers interested in the study of education.

You have the right to request that the recording be stopped or erased in full or in part at any time.

By signing below, you agree that you have read the above description and give your consent that for the use of audio recording as indicated above.

_________________________________________  _____________
Signature                  Date

_________________________________________  _____________
Witness                    Date

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact Philip Ensberg at pensberg@ucsd.edu or xxx-xxx-xxxx.
REFERENCES


