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School climate and teacher beliefs in a school effectively serving poor South Carolina (USA) African-American students: A case study ☆

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Abstract

This study examined the roles of school climate, teacher expectations, and instructional practices in one elementary school in South Carolina (USA) that produced effective achievement outcomes with poor and minority students. Survey data, teacher interviews, and classroom videotaping was used to identify school characteristics and instructional behaviors of six teachers nominated by colleagues as exemplary. The school was characterized by an emphasis on high student expectations, school staff cohesiveness, engaging instruction, high parent involvement, and multicultural instruction integrated with curriculum. The practices identified are consistent with literature on effective American schools; and the practices are key aspects of the sound instruction of poor and minority children. Teachers stated that teacher education programs did not prepare them to teach these students and that they had to learn this on the job.
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1. Introduction

Several studies have investigated the characteristics of public schools in the USA considered to be "effective schools" as determined by their ability to meet their chosen organizational and academic goals. These studies have demonstrated the importance of schools that have objectives targeting high academic achievement; strong instructional leadership; a safe and orderly learning environment;

practices that are modified by continuous assessment; and teachers who hold high academic expectations for all students regardless of background, economic status, or ethnicity (e.g., Brookover et al., 1982; Hallinger, Bickman, & Davis, 1996; Hilliard, 1994; Levine & Lezotte, 1988; Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis, & Ecob, 1988). Successful schools have cultures and climates that are conducive to learning and that depend heavily on the staff and students to ensure this (Brookover & Schneider, 1975; Purkey & Smith, 1985).

Once the initial characteristics of successful schools in the USA were identified, researchers turned their attention to investigating those school-related factors that may successfully impact the achievement of low income and African-American

students given the literature demonstrating the particular academic challenges faced by low income and ethnic minority students in American schools. The link between income, ethnicity, and educational outcomes is well documented in these (Jencks & Phillips, 1998). These studies show that poor and minority students, compared to higher income and non-minority students, earn lower achievement and aptitude scores, are more likely to repeat a grade and be placed in special education classes, and are more likely to drop out of school before earning a high school diploma.

Poverty limits educational opportunities and advantages even before children attend school; it influences the quality of childcare and early child-hood education; and can impact the extent of parental school involvement once the child begins school. In the USA, the relationship between income, ethnicity and school achievement is mod-erated by a variety of complex factors that include the impact of poverty on access to health care, family ability to provide enriching educational environments at home, the demands on families of stressful working conditions associated with low income jobs, the physical environments and learning atmosphere of schools in poverty neighborhoods, the quality of teaching in those schools, and the support that students receive for high achievement from peers. Ogbu (1994) has argued that racial stratification impairs black achievement and con-tributes to the black–white achievement gap. He argues that African-Americans are not provided proper educational environments; are tracked and exposed to inappropriate curriculum and instruc-tion; and notes that forces within the African-American community itself, such as mistrust of educational institutions, contribute to poor minor-ity school achievement. Some minority children devalue academic achievement (Phinney, 1996). Similarly Skiba, Michael, Nardo, and Peterson (2002) noted that poor and minority students may be assigned to non-rigorous curriculum tracks, internalize negative societal stereotypes about their ethnicity, and are more likely than non-minorities to be disciplined for infractions.

Within the broad movement to identify and describe effective schools in the USA there have been studies describing the characteristics of effec-tive schools for low income and African-American students. This research, as well, has demonstrated the importance of school environments stressing the importance of learning and achieving; school

leadership focusing on quality instruction; high teacher expectations for all students that are communicated widely in the school starting in the early grades; clear, measurable, and academic goals that are accepted school-wide; effective use of staff development to aid in planning; the provision of incentives to instructional staff for ensuring high student performance; and extensive parent and community involvement with the school and its activities (Hallinger et al., 1996; Irvine, 1988; Moody & Moody, 1989).

While some research conducted in USA schools has examined how much school-level factors impact the achievement of low income and ethnic minority students, other research has focused on the role that individual teachers can play to encourage student academic success. This research demonstrated the key role that high teacher expectations play in influencing high student achievement (Stoll & Fink, 1996). Teachers form expectations about student performance based on both income and race (and other factors), and subsequently teach curriculum materials to students in line with these expectations (Anyon, 1988; Jencks & Phillips, 1998). Low income and disadvantaged students are generally not taught using constructivist or other methods that further their autonomy and independent thinking (Means, Chelemer, & Knapp, 1991). These students generally are not required to use analytical and higher-order thinking skills (Anyon, 1988; Puma, Jones, Rock, & Fernandez, 1993); and they are generally not taught using cooperative learning assignments (Solomon, Battistich, & Horn, 1996). However, when coopera-tive learning methods and methods that encourage students' independent thinking are used compared to more traditional, didactic methods, academic achievement is enhanced (Schieffer & Busse, 2001).

The present research draws on the American literature on effective schools, school climate, and teacher expectations in order to study one public elementary school in South Carolina (USA) that, following planned educational change, was able to demonstrate success in serving poor, rural African-American students. The state of South Carolina's public schools present an interesting context in which to examine the impact of poverty and ethnicity on educational outcomes because there are few schools in the state that are objectively recognized as effective with poor and minority students populations. In the state of South Carolina, over 30% of the population is African-American and 20% of the children live below the poverty level. Public schools which are

located in rural towns and high poverty areas, compared to schools with more affluent children, are 11 times less likely to score at or above the state's average achievement levels on standardized tests. In these rural, poor, and heavily minority school districts and counties, there is less educational funding than in other parts of the state due to the area's low tax base. These poorer areas of the state have high adult unemployment, limited employment prospects, and thus great disparities in wealth and education between citizens varying in education level and ethnicity. Prior to this study very few elementary schools located in poor areas of the state reported standardized achievement test scores at or above the state average (Roberts, 1998). Further, very few schools (about 2% at the time of this study) provided a high-quality educational experience for poor and minority students. The school studied in this research was one whose academic achievement as measured by state-wide achievement tests was well above both the school district's and the state's average even though most students' families had incomes at poverty level and over 70% of the students came from rural African-American families. This school also was specifically selected because it was the state's only school located in a high poverty area to win national recognition for its education of minority students, its promotion of high achievement, and its strong educational leadership. It was only one of 15 schools statewide in which students' achievement was at the 95th percentile compared to an expected level based on the school's poverty index.

This study sought to first examine the school's climate and teachers' beliefs about instructional practices using primarily surveys and quantitative methods. The study also sought to describe the activities, routines, themes, and behavior exhibited by teachers that, as suggested by previous research, might be associated with high academic achievement. For example, of interest was determining if teachers would show a high level of commitment and risk taking in the name of school improvement; determining if they had high expectations for their students; and determining if they used constructivist instructional techniques. This study specifically investigated, using qualitative methods, the school's "exemplary" teachers who were identified by peer nominations. The following research questions were addressed:

(1) What characterizes the climate in a school that effectively teaches economically disadvantaged minority students?

(2) In this school, what are teachers' beliefs about effective instructional methods?
(3) For exemplary teachers in an effective school, how is school climate perceived and how do teachers communicate school climate to students? What expectations do these teachers have for students and how do these expectations influence their choice of instructional methods?

The study of schools such as this one has important implications not only for American schools but for schooling and teaching internationally. World-wide the relationship between poverty and illiteracy is well-established. Some South American countries fail to provide poor children with adequate compulsory education. In Latin America and the Caribbean there are large numbers of students living from rural areas and peasant families who repeat a grade and drop out of school before completing the sixth grade. Teachers throughout Europe and other parts of the world are increasingly concerned about teaching in classes of mixed student ability. For example, the expansion of the European Union, has led to greater mobility among temporary workers and the enrolment in schools of children of poor and migrant workers, many of whom have language deficits, and high rates of absenteeism and school drop-out. Japan, as well, has witnessed an influx of Japanese language minority students due to an easing of restrictions on foreign workers, many of whom are of Portuguese and Chinese background. In countries of the former Soviet Union (e.g., Bulgaria) groups of minority students who previously attended segregated schools with poor educational facilities are now attending classes with peers who were not educationally disadvantaged. Similarly, in Australia, there are high drop-out rates for minority students from indigenous Australian families.

2. Methods

2.1. School and participants

The school studied, located in coastal South Carolina (USA), enrolled 600 in 4-year-old kindergarten classes through the fifth grade. The school is located in a school district with 15 elementary schools and a total of 7500 students. The school population is 71% African-American, 28% Caucasian, and 1% Hispanic. Most students are of low socioeconomic status. Most reside in federally

subsidized housing and 86% receive free school meals because of their poverty status. Thirty-four percent of the students are in special education programs. The school was studied because, following 10 years of poor student performance, it received national awards for school achievement in two consecutive years. This accomplishment was the result of a 5-year improvement plan that focused on high student expectations. This plan, developed with business and community input, created a new school mission statement, set performance goals, designed needs assessments, and developed specific strategies for curricular improvement, community and family involvement, staff development, and optimal learning environments. The district implemented, after school enrichment activities, extended year academic summer camps, arts enrichment activities, business partnerships for mentoring and tutoring, community service projects, early foreign language instruction, family literacy and involvement programs, exemplary writing award initiatives, technology enhancements, new programs to enhance reading and other academic areas, and new initiatives for artistically gifted and talented students. As a result, the school received numerous state and national recognitions in the years just prior to this study.

2.2. Procedures

Following district research permission and approval of procedures to conduct research with human participants, 13 teachers in grades 3, 4, and 5 were contacted to participate. These grades are the ones required to take the state mandated statewide achievement test of state standards in language arts, science, and mathematics called the *Palmetto Achievement Challenge Test (PACT)*. Nine teachers consented. Subsequently, these teachers nominated up to 3 colleagues out of the 13 teachers who were the most exemplary teachers in different grades using this definition: *This is a teacher who goes above and beyond the call of duty in educating children. This individual is always seeking new and innovative approaches to education and often supplements the curriculum with other information. There is a sense of community in this teacher's classroom and this is also communicated to the parents. This individual represents a model of teacher collegiality and is recognized as a leader among others.* Thus, it was possible for a teacher who did not complete the questionnaires to be nominated as

an exemplary teacher and participate in the qualitative portion of the study once informed consent was obtained. The first author compiled all responses and selected the two teachers in each of 3 grades (3, 4, and 5) whose names were most often nominated to participate in the qualitative portion of the study. One of the 6 was not one of the original 9 teachers who completed the measures. All teacher participants gave informed consent for study procedures. Permission also was obtained from students' families to videotape the classrooms.

2.3. Data collection

Two survey instruments were used. The first assessed teachers' perception of school climate and the second assessed practices used in classrooms:

Organizational Health Inventory (Hoy & Tarter, 1991). This scale measures five factors comprising school climate (Hoy, Tarter, & Kottkamp, 1991): institutional integrity, collegial leadership, resource influence, teacher affiliation, and academic emphasis. Respondents indicate the extent to which 37 statements characterize their school on a 4-point Likert-type scale (rarely occurs; sometimes occurs; often occurs; very frequently occurs). Select items are:

> The principal discusses classroom issues with teachers.
> Teachers express pride in their school.
> Teachers accomplish their jobs with enthusiasm.
> There is a feeling of trust and confidence among the staff.
> The principal is friendly and approachable.

Reliability coefficients for the subtests range from .87 to .95. These scales tap school climate at three levels: the institutional level (relationships between the organization and its environment); the administrative level (relationships between the principal and teachers, expected teacher performance, and resources available to teachers); and the teacher level (whether teachers feel a sense of job accomplishment, school affiliation, and academic emphasis/ expectations of high student achievement).

Primary Teacher Questionnaire (PTQ, Smith, 1995). The PTQ is a self-report scale comprised of 39 statements assessing beliefs about teaching practices, and such beliefs are often associated with actual practices (Fang, 1996; Solomon et al., 1996). Each PTQ statement is rated on a scale from

"strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The scale items yield two factors: developmentally oriented (constructivist) and traditionally oriented beliefs. Select items are:

> The school should be organized so that the individual teacher integrates instruction across areas of the curriculum.
> The teacher's primary goal regarding children's behavior should be to establish and maintain teacher classroom control.
> Learning materials should be symbolic and representational.
> Children should move at their own pace in acquiring important skills in areas such as reading and mathematics.

2.4. Qualitative analysis

A second research foci used a qualitative approach. Following procedures described in greater detail by Stainback and Stainback (1984) and Wicker (1985) this study examined teaching beliefs and strategies that appeared to represent both patterns and routines characterizing the school and its teachers. By studying several teachers internal validity is improved and arguments are stronger that the variables identified contribute to the conclusions drawn. In this part of the research two primary tools were used: individual teacher interviews conducted by the first author and videotaped classroom instruction. The research task was to examine routines, themes, and practices as they related to climate, expectations, and teaching practices.

2.4.1. Teacher interviews

The six exemplary teachers were individually interviewed for approximately 35 min prior to the winter holiday break. The interview was comprised of 17 questions (see Appendix A) drawn from the work of Ladson-Billings (1994) and addressed (a) teachers' expectations for students, (b) teacher perceptions of school climate, and (c) teaching strategies used for low SES African-American students and how strategies connected with academic achievement. Teachers were not told the interview questions in advance and were unaware of the responses of others. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. The first author then searched the pool of individual statements to find repeating phrases and themes relating to patterns of school practices. A decision was made to only use themes that appeared in the transcripts of no less than five of six teachers.

2.4.2. Videotapes of classrooms

Class videotapes were used as a reliability check to determine if the themes identified in the interviews would be repeated in the classrooms. The classes of exemplary teachers were videotaped twice (October, March) and each taping produced 45–75 min of video material. The researchers sought to tape a variety of school activities. The first author also took notes throughout these periods. Observations were typed and transcribed. Content also was extracted from the school's website. The videotaping, observations, and website analysis was used to affirm the themes mentioned in interviews, and thus provided a further reliability check on the data and conclusions.

3. Results

3.1. Quantitative data on school climates and teaching beliefs

Eight female and one male teacher (with 7–21 years of teaching experience) completed the OHI and PTQ. Five were nominated as effected teachers. PACT scores for their classes were similar to the school district average. Teachers' ($n = 9$) OHI scores were summed across the five scale factors. Means and standard deviations (in parentheses) were: institutional integrity ($M = 13.56$, SD = 2.77), collegial leadership ($M = 25.00$, SD = 3.81) resource influence ($M = 20.56$, SD = 2.48), teacher affiliation ($M = 25.89$, SD = 2.98), and academic emphasis ($M = 15.44$, SD = 1.59). Based on scale norms most scores fall within the "average" range. Academic emphasis is above average. The relatively small standard deviation shows teacher agreement that the school's academic expectations are high. Teachers also completed the PTQ. This test yields mean scores for endorsement of Traditional Instructional methods and for developmentally appropriate methods (see Table 1). The scores indicated that the teachers endorsed both instructional methods and showed a tendency to favour traditional methods.

3.2. Qualitative data on "exemplary" teachers

Six teachers were nominated as exemplary teachers. Subsequently they were interviewed and

videotaped in the classroom. The group included two teachers each from grades 3 (white female, black male), 4 (white male, black female), and 5 (white and black female). All teachers were fully certified to teach in grade; four earned masters degrees. Their data were analyzed to shed light on the study's major issues: (a) what are the academic expectations of exemplary teachers, (b) how do they experience school climate, and (c) what instructional strategies do exemplary teachers working in an "effective school" employ. The following themes were identified:

Theme 1. Sense of collegial cohesiveness: Analysis of teacher interviews indicated that teachers felt a sense of cohesiveness among their colleagues. Teachers reported that they socialized and worked together, often exchanged ideas and supplies, and assisted colleagues in teaching committees established by the principal for each grade and subject level.

Theme 2. Hands-on approach to curriculum instruction works best: This common theme reflected teachers' endorsement of a "hands-on approach" to learning. Teachers specifically mentioned the need to weave reading into other curriculum areas, to teach so as to excite the students, and to do projects and experiments rather than teach using worksheets or having group reading lessons. These teachers stressed the importance of being flexible in their approach to teaching while still addressing the state content standards and recognized that not all children learn the same way.

Theme 3. Overarching teaching philosophy that all children can learn: Every teacher interviewed endorsed the theme that all children can learn and achieve, and discussed the importance of recogniz-

ing "where a child is at." All believed in their ability and effort to intervene and be successful with students with initially low achievement.

Theme 4. Communicating that all students will be successful: Teachers described their school as playing a vital role in challenging students and communicating to them that they can achieve and thus raising their expectations for themselves. Teachers discussed school-wide programs, announcements, and publications that reinforce the message that all children can succeed and excel. For example, the principal challenged the students to read a certain number of books to obtain innovative incentives (e.g., being taken to lunch at a restaurant by the principal). Teachers also developed projects to convey this message. Teachers monitored and charted behaviors associated with strong achievement such as attendance, role-model behavior, and homework completion and gave public recognition to students for these accomplishments. Teachers stated that they placed value on open family communication of a child's successes and difficulties.

Theme 5. High expectations for all students: Teachers uniformly reported they expect "all" their students to learn; several stated that it was their responsibility to communicate to students that they can always improve. Teachers encouraged their students to meet the high expectations set for them through multiple, unique ways and accepted different ways to demonstrate mastery. As put by one teacher, "There's more than one way to be right." Teachers stated that they communicated these expectations daily and that they began conveying this message to the students on the first day of school. All teachers reported that these students often came to school with low expectations or a past in which they were not successful. In addition, all teachers noted that they had ways of assessing a student's own belief about his/her ability and actively worked on changing these beliefs so that the student would believe that he or she *can* and *would* make high academic gains.

Theme 6. Parents play a vital role in student success: Teachers generally felt that parent involvement was essential to the academic success of African-American children and often described ways that parents could contribute to this success. One teacher stated, "Parents need to just show they care, coming to see the things the children have done, making sure homework is done and that the children have books that they need to read, just

Table 1
Means for nine teachers for traditional and developmentally appropriate instruction

Teachers	Traditional	Developmentally appropriate
1[*]	2.17	3.33
2[*]	3.39	3.11
3[*]	3.21	4.33
4[*]	2.91	3.55
5[*]	3.60	3.50
6[*]	2.13	2.77
7	3.57	3.38
8	2.96	3.33
9	3.10	3.33

*Note that the first six teachers were nominated as exemplary.

giving them self-confidence." Another stated, "If I don't have a parent's support to make sure that students do the work that I'm requesting that they do, it's like working against my goal. I don't care who it is—grandparent, aunt, uncle, whoever—I call them and say that I'm having such-and-such a problem and I need their help. If things start to go right I will call the parent and let them know … that the child has done something good. They need to be praised. They need to feel good about themselves and what they are doing." Teachers valued their relationships with parents and other community members, felt that it was important to live in the community in which the school was located to really know the parents, and noted the importance of talking the language of parents. One teacher mentioned the benefits of knowing the extended family members and how this helps put parents at ease. Teachers reported the importance of respecting the knowledge of the parents and the contributions they make to their children's education, and of having high expectations for parents as well as for their children.

Theme 7. Teacher education does not prepare educators to work with diverse student populations: All teachers reported that working with and teaching African-American students and culturally diverse children is a unique task requiring special skills and training. All reported being ill prepared by their teacher education programs for this task. In fact, the consensus among all teachers was that their respective education programs did not address the education of minority students at all. Their comments reflected the following: (a) no formal coursework in cultural diversity, teaching minority students, or focusing on motivation and behavior management of minority students; and (b) no formal practica, internship, or student teaching with diverse classes. Teachers reported that university field experiences were in non-diverse, high performing schools, and that this current teaching assignment was their first one with minority children with diverse and special needs. For example, teachers commented that many children arrived at the classroom without receiving a proper breakfast and were not prepared for learning. These teachers recognized that these children required more loving support and encouragement before they were actually ready to learn the material presented to them in the classroom. They talked about the importance of immersing prospective teachers in the culture of these children and not lowering the expectations of success but making needed accommodations for them. They noted that they had to learn many approaches on the job.

3.3. Study of classroom videotapes

The videotapes showed a variety of instructional approaches designed to focus on essential understandings and skills rather than disjointed facts. Teachers ensured that the advanced learners spent their time grappling with important complexities rather than repeating work they already knew. Lessons were prepared so that subjects could be introduced in a meaningful and interesting manner. In one videotape segment the teacher conversed with a student about his math ability and reinforced that he did have ability to do the required (fractions) problem. Later, in this class, the teacher similarly encouraged a group of students. This teacher gently patted the back of one student who was successful and offered a wink, a smile and nod, and an emphatic "yes!" This student appeared very pleased and worked intently on similar math problems for the duration of the period.

In all classes videotaped the teachers promoted cooperative group learning. For example, in one class, the students worked in groups of four discussing a writing topic and critiquing each other's initial drafts. Students also edited other students' work and offered feedback to each other. The teacher served as a consultant to the group and used skilful questioning starting with simple, basic recall questions and moving toward more complex questions. Students also generated their own questions and all students were engaged in learning. All teachers used some type of ability-based instructional grouping, naming each group with clever names to reinforce the message of high expectations (e.g., Eagles Soaring High). However, students did not stay in the same group throughout the year but participated in multiple groups.

High standards and expectations were communicated in all classrooms during all videotaped classroom instructions. Often a student would say, "We've never done this before, this looks hard." Teachers responded by encouraging students to recognize how the specific exercise was based upon a previous skill taught and would ask students questions such as "What else have you done at home or school that was hard at first and you're good at now?" These simple interactions sent the message that "all students can succeed" to all students.

Nearly all classrooms recorded incorporated multicultural curriculum perspectives. All teachers reported sensitivity to aspects of the local culture. Many children were part of the Gullah culture, descendents from West Africans brought to the area as slaves who subsequently chose an isolated existence raising crops and living off the sea. African words and phrases are part of families' language and many homes are multigenerational. In another example of incorporating culture and instruction, one teacher who was African-American and fluent in Spanish created a "Spanish Corner" in the classroom with activities devoted to learning Latino culture, music, and literature. The video-tapes clearly showed that teachers created learning opportunities that cut across the academic curriculum (i.e. incorporating Language Arts, Science, Math, and Art in one project). For example, one teacher instructed his students to create an Animal Science Book. The teacher had the students incorporate information they learned from their science teacher into a research project about various reptiles and mammals. In addition, students did independent research about their particular animal and made oral class presentations about their animal. In these sessions, the teacher and students were free to question and probe fellow students for details, and students helped each other decide what information was necessary and what information was not. The teacher provided some students with opportunities to revisit the school library to gather more information and to enhance their final product. This teacher did not insist on "one" correct way to complete the project but rather gave students many opportunities to become successful in class and communicated to them that there are multiple ways to be successful. The teacher also helped children recognize their individual strengths, and would assign students project jobs according to the student's strengths; for example, having artistically gifted students do animal illustrations and having good writers provide narratives about the animals.

4. Discussion

This study closely examined the teachers and teaching practices in one American school that had been particularly effective in overcoming educational barriers faced by poor and minority children. At the time the school was selected there were very few effective schools of this kind in South Carolina,

and this has not changed in recent years (Smith, 2004).

This study focused primarily on aspects of school climate, teacher expectations, and classroom practices. Using a combination of methods (surveys, interview, and class videos) data was obtained consistent with the American literature on effective schools. The OHI survey data showed that the school's climate emphasized academics. The PTQ survey data revealed that the teachers endorsed *both* traditionally oriented instructional methods and developmentally oriented (constructivist) methods with slightly more emphasis on the former than latter approach. Interviewing and videotaping the exemplary teachers showed how school climate, expectations, and instructional strategies were experienced and integrated. They felt that school climate influenced the overall environment and management of the school. This was noted in seven pervasive themes. The first theme was that teachers felt *a sense of cohesiveness and collegiality.* According to Hoy and Tarter (1991, 1997) collegiality promotes the perception of a safe and supportive environment in which teachers can learn from each other and strive to improve their skills. The teachers shared instructional ideas, and enjoyed and respected the work of their colleagues. This occurred formally by way of grade level "teaching committees" and informally by sharing ideas and advice in the teachers' lounge. Teachers discussed instructional strategies incorporating hands-on experiences (the second prominent theme), accommodations for individual students, and integrating teaching across subjects. In the individual interviews teachers stated their need to be creative with the learning process in order to capture students' interests and to teach to students' strengths. Exemplary teachers believed that teaching required flexibility and originality in line with their endorsement of constructivist instructional approaches to learning (cf. Means et al., 1991), sought to individualize instruction, and focused on end goals when teaching a certain skill. In this regard individual approaches predominated for math instruction whereas reading, language arts, and behavior were shaped heavily in groups. For example, behaviors such as attendance, homework completion, and serving as a good role model for others were individualized and charted on boards and posters. Reading instruction was predominantly led by the teachers and focused on acquisition of discrete skills. Approaches also were individualized for the more advanced students so

that they confronted more complex concepts rather than going over mastered material.

Two areas in particular were heavily taught using group instruction: writing and cultural awareness. In groups students discussed and brainstormed writing topics; questioned each other about their ideas; and edited one another's work and provided feedback. In groups as well teachers incorporated aspects of Gullah culture which represented many of the community's families. For example, students would talk and problem solve about the meaning and importance of community festivals. Nevertheless, it should be noted that most instruction, whether group or individual, cut across and integrated content areas such as language, science, reading, math, and the arts. Similarly, students often did individual research projects but received feedback on the efforts within supportive groups.

The *third* theme prevalent was a teaching philosophy shared among teachers that ''all children can learn'' and that it was their responsibility to make sure that children themselves believed this and to ensure that this occurred. Exemplary teachers emphatically reported that when their students enter into the classroom that it is their responsibility to communicate to them that they will succeed (the fourth major theme). Some teachers' classrooms were filled with students' name and pictures on bulletin boards for various achievements and two teachers had a bulletin board with students identified as ''Making Outstanding Progress.'' These teachers appeared to have gone the extra mile to make sure that all of their students experienced success in multiple ways. Teachers not only had high student expectations (the fifth major theme) but they acknowledged that students would progress at different rates and in different ways. These teachers accepted the idea that they must be ready to engage students in instruction that varies modality and appeals to different interests. These teachers ensured that a student competed against a challenge rather than against others in order to help all students advance, grow, and succeed academically (Gregory & Chapman, 2002; Tomilson, 2001). Exemplary teachers believed that curriculum should be not watered down but rather that they should conduct an assessment of the students' strengths and build upon those in order to move the student forward. These teachers did not rely solely on traditional teaching methods but rather balanced traditional and constructivist approaches. Even the more traditional approaches were used in a ''non-traditional'' way. For example, teachers were flexible with group assignments, utilized ongoing student assessment, and freely moved students to new instructional levels as gains were demonstrated. Even students assigned to lower ability level groups were exposed to constructivist instructional methods (problem-solving). While the field is undecided about the appropriateness of ability grouping, the teachers who participated in the study all reported that they used ability grouping as a way to structure the classroom in a way that would facilitate small group and individual instruction when necessary and not for the purpose of student tracking. According to Taylor, Pearson, Clark, and Walpole (2000), small group and ability group instruction can be an effective approach with low-income students. In addition, Taylor et al. found that accomplished teachers who utilized this technique engaged their students in higher-order thinking skills. Teachers reported using systematic assessment to prevent groups from being too rigid and inflexible, shifted group membership regularly, and stated that students rarely stayed in the same group for the entire semester or year. Teachers reported that they often provided direct instruction, then made sure that the students understood the concept being taught, and finally spent extended time with small groups individualizing the instruction. Once a child in a given group displayed acquisition and proficiency of certain skills, the teacher integrated the student into the larger group. Many teachers made use of peer group support to encourage academic learning. These teachers were sensitive to the fact that minority children often encounter attitudes and forces that discourage educational effort (because it does not pay) or discourage behaviors that are viewed positively by majority cultures (Ogbu, 1994). Hilliard (1995) also argued for the use of peer support for learning and high teacher expectations to promote academic success among minority students. In addition, the teachers studied created learning opportunities where students took information acquired through reading and applied it to new situations and other projects. They utilized instructional methods considered most likely to prevent reading difficulties in young children and those with proven success (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

A *sixth* theme noted was that teachers valued parental input and involvement and thus created ways to facilitate home-school communication. The exemplary teachers characterized parent

involvement as an important relationship that they were ultimately responsible for building. These teachers placed high value on parents helping their children with homework, and recognized that the parents did not need to be physically present at school to make a significant educational impact in their children's lives.

A *seventh* important theme was the need for teacher education training programs to restructure themselves and include coursework and experiences specific to teaching and educating minority students. One of the most remarkable findings of the teacher interview data was the unanimity of response that their teaching education programs ill-prepared them to educate culturally and economically different students such as they encountered in this school even though half of the teachers were members of the same minority group as many of their students. These teachers, all of whom had considerable teaching experience, believed that it was important to be trained how to teach minority students and lamented their lack of teacher preparation in this area and their need to learn these skills on the job. Teachers admitted that they made major mistakes and only learned through trial and error, getting to know the students well, and self-initiated professional development seminars designed to increase their skills and ability to work effectively with their student population. These teachers engaged in self-assessment and sought out experiences (seminars, specialty courses) to address their deficits and enhance their skills.

A *final* theme that was evidenced primarily in terms of actual teaching observations was the importance teachers placed on integrating culture and an appreciation of multiculturalism into the existing curriculum. These teachers sent the message that they valued and cared about the different cultural backgrounds of their students and, through this curriculum, encouraged the students to become more actively engaged (Gregory & Chapman, 2002).

While these results underscore the importance of climate, expectations, and instruction as key variables in reaching potentially disadvantaged students, the themes and data may not necessarily generalize to other effective schools. This study merely captures key aspects of one school that was so unique in South Carolina (USA) that no control or comparison sites could be studied. Teachers were aware that they were selected as exemplary teachers and might have responded with socially desirable themes although many of these themes were noted

in the actual classroom videotapes. Teachers interviewed were volunteers, and there may have been some differences in study volunteers versus non-volunteers. Finally, this study only investigated the perceived school climate and expectations experienced by the teachers and did not directly investigate how the principal, parents, and students experienced school climate and expectations. Despite these limitations this study does provide a needed glimpse into practices and beliefs that characterize one school that was recognized for its academic success with minority students.

In closing, this study provides a preliminary look as to what works in a geographic region of the United States that historically has had difficulty fully engaging students with educational disadvantages. These students, poor and typically minorities, are not dissimilar from students with educational disadvantages in other parts of the world. These findings suggest that teachers can best address students' educational needs by working to create mutually supportive educational environments, using flexible instructional approaches that utilize peer support, to encourage, whenever possible, a close working relationship betweens schools and families, and to advocate for additional training and in-service experiences to fully prepare oneself for the challenge of teaching diverse groups of children.

Appendix A. Individual Teacher Interview Questionnaire

1. Please provide me with some information about your educational and professional background. When did you first begin teaching?
2. What is your philosophy of teaching? What, in your opinion "works"? What doesn't?
3. Are there any special qualities that African-American children as a group bring to the classroom?
4. What sorts of things have you done in your classroom that has enabled the academic success of African-American students? What would you like to do better?
5. Did you learn about teaching African-American students in your educational training? Through experience?
6. If you could create a teacher education program so that teachers would be more effective with African-American students what changes would you make? What skills would be a necessity?

7. What role do you believe parents play in the success of African-American students? How would you describe the relationships you have had with parents of students you have taught?

8. What forms of discipline do you utilize? Are there any special things teachers of African-American students should understand about discipline?

9. Give an example of one of your greatest challenges/triumphs while working with this population?

10. How do you see the match between available resources and your teaching curriculum, the match between what you want to teach and what is required?

11. How do you think the schooling experience of African-American students differs from that of white students in middle-class communities?

12. How would you describe your work environment? Your relationship with your colleagues? With your administrator?

13. How does the school communicate success to the students?

14. In what ways do you assess the students' beliefs about his or her academic potential?

15. How do you communicate to your students that they can achieve?

16. If you had to choose your profession again, would you still consider teaching?

17. Do you believe that there is enough information available to teachers about how to be successful with this population?

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