CREATING A COHERENT SYSTEM: KEY LEARNINGS FROM A SCHOOL
REFORM IN PURSUIT OF EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE

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In
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Rosario Ambriz
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SIGNATURE PAGE

DISSEPTION: CREATING A COHERENT SYSTEM:
KEY LEARNINGS FROM A SCHOOL
REFORM IN PURSUIT OF EQUITY AND
EXCELLENCE

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ABSTRACT

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2016), presently, the majority of children in our nation’s schools are students of color. With poverty rates rising among public school children, and America continuing its demographic shift to a majority-minority population, the task of scaling up and better supporting the practices and interventions that effectively close gaps and promote positive achievement outcomes is more urgent than ever.

The purpose of the study was to describe the journey of a high needs elementary school, leadership, staff, and parents, a School Improvement Grant (SIG) awardee, engaged in transforming into a learning organization focused on continuous improvement in pursuit of equity and excellence for all students. This case study used a theoretical framework, the Coherence Framework: Focusing Direction, Cultivating Collaborative Cultures, Deepening Learning, and Securing Accountability, to identify the challenges and successes within school reform.

Three themes emerged as key learnings in the school improvement process by the district, school leadership, and staff, which were: Professional Development, Collaboration, and Dedicated Time to Grow Educators. Five themes emerged as successes and/or breakthroughs in transforming into a learning organization focused on continuous improvement, which were: Leadership, Setting Direction, Building Capacity, Teaching and Learning, and Safe, Positive, and Supportive Environment. Three themes emerged as barriers and/or challenges in transforming into a learning organization focused on continuous improvement, which were: Mindset, Ineffective Practices, and
Nonexistent District-Site Partnership. Significant and/or representative examples are provided for each theme.

The significance of this study is that the findings have the power to influence whole system change in education for students of color in low performing schools. Practitioners in the education field may find the study useful if they are interested in improving educational opportunities for students of color.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Historically, the goals of public schools in the United States have been influenced by local, state, and the federal government. According to Spring (2018), from the 1820s to the 1840s, the goals of public schools were to unite Americans by instilling common moral and political values. Spring (2018) stressed, “It was believed that if all children were exposed to a common instruction in morality and politics the nation might become free of crime, immoral behavior, and the possibility of political revolution” (p. 5). A persistent educational goal of schooling, during this time, was providing equality of opportunity. Spring (2018) stated, “Equality of opportunity refers to everyone having the same chance to pursue wealth. It does not mean that everyone will have equal status or income, but just an equal chance to economically succeed” (p. 5).

Spring (2018) shared that from the 1880s to the 1920s, the Americanization of immigrants, public schools attempted to strip Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Mexican Americans of their languages and cultures and replace them with the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture. Spring (2018) also noted that public schools were also turned into welfare agencies to address the “whole child,” due to industrialization, urbanization, and increased immigration. According to Spring (2018), cafeterias, school nurses, playgrounds, extracurricular activities, after school programs, intervention, and kindergarten became part of the expanded goals of schooling, as a result of the concerns about the health, family, and neighborhood conditions affecting students. Public schools then introduced vocational education, vocational guidance and high schools programs to educate and prepare students for particular jobs in the labor market.
from the 1920s to the 1940s (Spring, 2018). From the 1950s to the 1980s, the civil rights movement, the teaching of multiculturalism and racial harmony was highlighted in public schools. After the 1960s, the goal of education was to prepare students for jobs in the global economy and increase economic growth. Spring (2018) stated that today, “…mass testing and national standards are considered the key to global economic competition” (p. 7). Yet, when compared to other countries, the academic achievement of U.S. students’ still falls behind that of their peers in many other countries.

**Background to the Problem**

How do U.S. students compare with peers around the world? According to National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2018), the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), is an international assessment that measures 15-year-old students’ reading, mathematics, and science literacy every three years. PISA was first administered in 2000, and the major domain of study rotates between reading, mathematics, and science in each cycle. PISA is coordinated by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), an intergovernmental organization of industrialized countries, which the United States is a part of. According to the most recent PISA results, from 2015, the U.S. placed an unimpressive 38th out of 71 countries in math and 24th in science (Desilver, 2017). Among the 35 members of the OECD, the U.S. ranked 30th in math and 19th in science.

Another international assessment, the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), assesses students in grades four and eight every four years. TIMSS was first administered in 1995 and is coordinated by the International Association for the Evaluation of Education Achievement (IEA), which is an international
cooperative of national research institutions, governmental research agencies, scholars, and analysts working to research, understand, and improve education worldwide.

According to the most recent TIMSS results, from 2015, 10 countries, out of 48 total, had statistically higher average fourth-grade math scores than the U.S., while seven countries had higher average science scores (Desilver, 2017). In the eighth-grade tests, seven out of 37 countries had statistically higher average math scores than the U.S., and seven had higher science scores (Desilver, 2017).

Over time, the nation’s population as well as the student population has become more racially and ethnically diverse. According to de Brey, Musu, McFarland, Wilkinson-Flicker, Diliberti, Zhang, Branstetter, and Wang (2019), the percentage of students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools increased between fall 2000 and fall 2015; in particular the percentage of students who were White went from 61 to 49 percent, and the percentage of students who were Black went from 17 to 15 percent. During the same period, in contrast, the percentage increased for students who were Hispanic, from 16 to 26 percent, and Asian/Pacific Islander, from 4 to 5 percent.

d e Brey et al. (2019) stressed, “…living in poverty during early childhood is associated with lower-than-average academic performance that begins in kindergarten and extends through high school, leading to lower-than-average rates of school completion” (p. 38). Blankstein and Noguera (2015) stated, “Our nation has higher levels of child poverty than most other wealthy nations, with 23%, or almost one in four children, coming from households in poverty” (p. 4). Therefore, the persistence of disparities in learning opportunities and academic outcomes has contributed to America’s decline in educational performance in comparison with other nations.
How do students across the United States compare with one another? According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2018), which was first administered in 1969, California continues to perform near the bottom in reading and math as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>California Compared to the Nation, 2015 to 2017 Rankings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2015 Ranking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 4 – Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 4 – Math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 8 – Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 8 – Math</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Adapted from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2018.

According to the California Department of Education (CDE, 2015), there are 6.2 million students in California; 53 percent are Latino, 25 percent are White, 8.7 percent are Asian, and 6.1 percent are African American. In addition, 58 percent, or about 3.6 million students, qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. Thus, failing to offer a high-quality education to every student means failing to prepare the future leaders who will fuel our state’s economy, strengthen our communities, and maintain our state’s cultures, traditions, and values.

According to Education Trust-West (2018), while Black-White and Latino-White gaps have narrowed over time, they are not closing fast enough. In California, 50 percent of Latino students and 57 percent of Black students below basic in 4th grade reading, compared to 38 percent and 36 percent in Massachusetts, which is the number one ranked state in 4th grade reading for Latino and Black students. O’Day and Smith (2016) claim students from low-income families, students of color, English learners, and immigrant
students, are more likely than their White middle-class peers to experience school inequities. Inequities are described as unequal resources and dysfunctional practices and systems, such as,

...to be taught by inexperienced or ineffective teachers, to be presented with watered-down and uninspiring curricula, to be situated in a chaotic school environment with high turnover rates among the adults, and to be excluded from meaningful instruction by discriminatory disciplinary policies and practices.

(O’Day & Smith, 2016, p. 1)

Boykin and Noguera (2011) stated, “The NAEP long-term trend assessment reading scores show that the performance gaps between Black and White students and Latino and White students are only slightly better than two decades ago” (p. 13).

According to NCES (2013), the reading gap for Black-White 9-year-old students and 13-year-old students were statistically the same in 2008 as they were in 1988 as shown in Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 2
Nine-Year-Old Reading Achievement, NAEP Long-Term Trend

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Latino</th>
<th>Black-White</th>
<th>Latino-White</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>229</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>-23</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>228</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>-24</td>
<td>-21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>-27</td>
<td>-25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004b</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>-26</td>
<td>-21</td>
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<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>193</td>
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<td>-28</td>
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<td>1996</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>195</td>
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<td>1994</td>
<td>218</td>
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<td>1990</td>
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<td>1988</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>194</td>
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<td>1984</td>
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<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>-32</td>
<td>-31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>-35</td>
<td>-34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Adapted from the National Center for Education Statistics, 2013.

a In 2004, two assessments were conducted. This one used a revised format that includes accommodations for students with disabilities and for English language learners. b This assessment used the same format as in previous years.
Similarly, the Latino-White reading gap for 9-year-old students was almost the same in 2008 as it was in 1988, and the reading gap for 13-year-old students was almost the same in 2008 as it was in 1975.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Latino</th>
<th>Black-White</th>
<th>Latino-White</th>
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<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>270</td>
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<td>2008</td>
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<td>1975</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>-36</td>
<td>-30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Adapted from the National Center for Education Statistics, 2013.

*a In 2004, two assessments were conducted. This one used a revised format that includes accommodations for students with disabilities and for English language learners. *b This assessment used the same format as in previous years.

Despite gains in reading and math achievement among Black and Latino students, the national reading and math achievement gap today is similar to what it was almost 30 years ago. Lyndon B. Johnson, the 36th president of the United States was clear about the path that America should take, “Education is not a problem,” he declared, “Education is
an opportunity.’” Ryan and Ryan (2010) shared that achievement gaps from preschool to college show up. According to the NCES (2017), educational disparities continue to exist as shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Percentages of 25 to 29 Years Old by Educational Attainment, 2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>High School Degree</th>
<th>Associate’s Degree</th>
<th>Bachelor’s Degree</th>
<th>Master’s Degree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>95.6%</td>
<td>53.5%</td>
<td>42.1%</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>92.3%</td>
<td>32.7%</td>
<td>22.8%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>82.7%</td>
<td>27.7%</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>96.8%</td>
<td>69.9%</td>
<td>62.7%</td>
<td>25.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Islander</td>
<td>90.1%</td>
<td>35.8%</td>
<td>25.3%</td>
<td>b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/Alaska Native</td>
<td>84.6%</td>
<td>27.1%</td>
<td>16.3%*</td>
<td>b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or More Races</td>
<td>94.8%</td>
<td>45.6%</td>
<td>32.8%</td>
<td>5.0%*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Adapted from the National Center for Education Statistics, 2017. 
*The coefficient of variation (CV) for this estimate is between 30 and 50 percent. bThe reporting standards were not met because either there were too few cases for a reliable estimate or the coefficient of variation (CV) is 50 percent or greater.

Boykin and Noguera (2011) shared that the idea that Black, Latino, and Native American children are not as smart or capable as White students is deeply rooted in U.S. history. Historically, minorities have experienced racism within systems of oppression in practice and policy across the dominant culture. Valencia (1997) coined the term deficit thinking to discuss the experiences of minorities. This way of thinking explains the persistent school failure among minority students and low-income homes. Deficit thinking rests on the idea that students who fail in school do so because of alleged internal deficiencies. Internal deficiencies are defined as cognitive, motivational limitations or shortcomings, familial deficits, and/or dysfunctions, which Valencia (1997)
defined through six characteristics: 1) Blaming the victim; 2) Oppression; 3) Pseudoscience; 4) Temporal changes; 5) Educability; 6) Heterodoxy.

The U.S. Department of Education website (2011) states, “Our mission is to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access.” With poverty rates rising among public school children, and America continuing its demographic shift to a majority-minority population, the task of scaling up and better supporting the practices and interventions that effectively close gaps and promote positive achievement outcomes is more urgent than ever. Boykin and Noguera (2011) stated,

Unless a deliberate effort is made to provide those who are behind with additional learning time, better instruction, and more resources (especially funding), it appears highly unlikely that the gap will close. From a policy perspective, if we were serious about closing the gap, then federal, state, and local policies would need to promote greater equity in learning conditions and greater external support to Black and Latino students to mitigate the effects of disadvantage. (p. 15)

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify key elements a high needs elementary school implemented to address the underperformance of students using the Coherence Framework in pursuit of equity and excellence. The local education agency (LEA) chose the state’s whole-school reform model, California’s State-determined Intervention Model under the School Improvement Grant (SIG) program.

Research Questions

The overarching question for this study was what were the key learnings in the
school improvement process by the district, school leadership, and staff that can make an impact on the entire K-12 education system for successful and sustainable coherent change in pursuit of equity and excellence for all students using the Coherence Framework: Focusing Direction, Cultivating Collaborative Cultures, Deepening Learning, and Securing Accountability? Specifically, the two research sub-questions were:

1. What were the successes and/or breakthroughs in transforming into a learning organization focused on continuous improvement in pursuit of equity and excellence for all students?
2. What were the barriers and/or challenges in transforming into a learning organization focused on continuous improvement in pursuit of equity and excellence for all students?

**Definition of Terms**

The following terms, the researcher will define to clarify their meanings as they apply to this study.

**Achievement Gap.** “Any significant and persistent disparity in academic performance or educational attainment between different groups of students, such as white students and minorities, for example, or students from higher-income and lower-income households” (Great Schools Partnership, 2014).

**California State-Determined Intervention Model.** California’s State-determined Intervention Model (CA SDIM), “…provides a framework for linking student growth and performance outcomes to impactful decisions that drive continuous improvement for all students, including but not limited to, socio-economically
disadvantaged students, English language learners, and students who receive special education services” (CDE, 2016, p. 7-8).

**Coherence Framework.** The Coherence Framework is a comprehensive model made up of four essential components, with leadership at the center of each component.

- Focusing direction: to build collective purpose.
- Cultivating collaborative cultures: is at the heart of system transformation. It clarifies the relationship of teamwork and the role collaboration plays in producing both strong groups and individuals.
- Deepening learning: addresses the relationship of pedagogy and technology.
- Securing accountability: is based on developing internal capacity to be effective, to be responsible within the group or system (internal accountability), and to respond and engage system priorities and performance therein (external accountability) by developing capacity. (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 12-14)

**Continuous Improvement.** “The capacity of an organization to produce valued outcomes reliably for different subgroup of students, being educated by different teachers and in varied organizational contexts” (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015, p. 10).

**Education Equity.** Education equity refers to,

The educational policies, practices, and programs necessary to (a) eliminate educational barriers based on gender, race/ethnicity, national origin, disability, age, or other protected group status: and (b) provide equal educational opportunities and ensure that historically underserved or underrepresented
populations meet the same rigorous standards for academic performance expected of all children and youth. (Great Schools Partnership, 2014)

**School Improvement Grant (SIG).** The School Improvement Grants (SIG) program is authorized by section 1003(g) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA).

The Secretary must award grants to States to enable the States to provide subgrants to local educational agencies for the purpose of providing assistance for school improvement consistent with section 1116. From a grant received pursuant to that provision, a State educational agency (SEA) must subgrant at least 95 percent of the funds it receives to its local educational agencies (LEAs) for school improvement activities. In awarding such subgrants, an SEA must give priority to the local educational agencies with the lowest-achieving schools that demonstrate: (A) the greatest need for such funds; and (B) the strongest commitment to ensuring that such funds are used to provide adequate resources to enable the lowest-achieving schools to meet the goals under school and local educational agency improvement, corrective action, and restructuring plans under section 1116. The regulatory requirements implement these provisions, defining LEAs with the “greatest need” for SIG funds and the “strongest commitment” to ensure that such funds are used to raise substantially student achievement in the persistently lowest-achieving schools in the State. (CDE, 2015, xi).

**Whole-School Reform.** Whole school reform is a model that is designed to: (1) Improve student achievement or attainment; (2) Be implemented for all students in a school; and (3) Address, at a minimum and in a comprehensive and
coordinated manner, each of the following: School leadership; Teaching and learning in at least one full academic content area (including professional learning for educators); Student non-academic support; and Family and community engagement. (U.S. Department of Education, 2015, p. 64)

Assumptions

This study was based on three assumptions that had potential to impact the study. First, it was assumed that teachers who chose to stay at the selected SIG school understood the demands associated with being a SIG school. Second, it was assumed that teachers who chose to stay at the selected SIG school wanted to improve and grow professionally in their craft. Finally, it was assumed that all participants answered honestly and openly during interviews and focus groups authentically due to their relationship with the researcher.

Limitations and Delimitations

The scope of this study was limited to one identified SIG school that was drawn from a single state, California, and a region within California. Therefore, results may not be generalizable to other regions within California or to other states. Also, the sample was drawn from schools that were high poverty and elementary; therefore, the results may not be generalizable to other settings or levels of schooling.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is that the findings have the power to influence whole system change in education for students of color in low performing schools. Practitioners in the education field may find the study useful if they are interested in improving educational opportunities for students of color. Depending on the findings of
the study, they may be able to identify key elements, effective practices that may be useful to eliminate school inequities for students of color.

**Summary and Organization of the Study**

This dissertation is five chapters in length. Chapter 1 introduced the historical and political goals of public schools, the achievement gap experienced by students of color, low-income, English Learners, and disable students and the need to eliminate inequities. The following chapter, Chapter 2, provides a review of the literature significant to this study. Chapter 3, focuses on the methodology used for this study, which was a qualitative case study research. Chapter 4 presents the data and its findings. The final chapter, Chapter 5, provides conclusions, a discussion, implications, and recommendations for further research.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

America’s persistent educational goal of schooling was providing equality of opportunity, which has been influenced by local, state, and the federal government. Horace Mann, who served as secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education from 1837 to 1848, believed schools, “…would ensure that everyone receives an education that will allow them to compete for wealth on equal terms, “equality of opportunity” (Spring, 2018, p. 70). Spring (2018) stated, “Equality of opportunity is based on the idea of an unequal society where individuals compete with one another, with some becoming wealthy and some failing to the bottom of the economic scale” (p. 70).

According to Valenica (1997), from the early 1600s to the late 1800s, deficit thinking ideologies stemmed from racist discourses, which further influenced whether all students received a quality education. The viewpoints of these racist discourses were that racial minorities were physically, cognitively or culturally inferior to the dominant culture, whites. Deficit thinking was used to rationalize why the economic exploitation of minorities was just and why minorities were denied social and political rights (Valencia, 1997). Valencia (1997) argued, “Millions of low-socioeconomic status (SES) minority students (particularly, African Americans, Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans) attend schools that are segregated, inequitably financed, vapid in curricula delivery, teacher-centered and generally hostile in any sense of a learning environment” (p. 1). While some improvements among students of color have occurred a culture of failure in schools is still pervasive (Ladson-Billings, 2006).
Knight (2017) stated, “Decades of research have documented unequal funding and inequitable access to experienced, high-quality educators across student race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status” (p. 2). Heilig, Romero, and Hopkins (2017) shared that the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) was created, “to address the historical inequities that have existed in the U.S. education system including low-quality pedagogy, low levels of teacher quality, and inequitable education funding present in urban schools” (p. 3). Knight (2017) stated, “…the greatest control over the distribution of educational opportunity most likely rests with state legislatures who determine human capital management policies, school funding levels, funding allocation patterns” (p. 28).

**Deficit Thinking in Education**

According to Valencia (1997), it was not until the early 1900s that most racial minorities were finally allowed to attend school as a result of deficit thinking that impacted policies that were in place. Deficit thinking rests on the idea that students who fail in school do so because of alleged internal deficiencies (Valencia, 1997). Internal deficiencies are defined as cognitive, motivational limitations or shortcomings, familial deficits, and/or dysfunctions, which Valencia (1997) defined through six characteristics: 1) Blaming the victim; 2) Oppression; 3) Pseudoscience; 4) Temporal changes; 5) Educability; 6) Heterodoxy.

According to Kramer and Enomoto (2014) deficit thinking is detrimental to social justice because when educators have low expectations of students who are marginalized or hold negative beliefs about their families, it translates into less effective, less committed teaching and learning. Marx (2006) noted that deficit thinking was evident in
some college’s educational courses where future educators learn, via stereotypes, that students of color have low educability and are difficult to teach. In the research conducted by Marx (2006), she found that future educators expressed deficit thinking in: a) culture; b) language; c) families; d) self-esteem; and e) intelligence. This way of thinking has contributed to the persistent school failure among minority students and low-income homes (Marx, 2006). In addition, inattention to culturally relevant teaching practices, inadequate preparation in meeting the needs of English learners, and a lack of engagement with parents and the community in high need schools have also contributed to the opportunity gap that many students from low-income homes have experienced (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Historically minorities have also experienced racism within systems of oppression in practice and policy across the dominant culture (Valencia, 1997).

O’Day and Smith (2016) claim students from low-income families, students of color, English Learners, and immigrant students are more likely than their White middle-class peers to experience school inequities. Inequities are described as unequal resources and dysfunctional practices and systems, such as,

…to be taught by inexperienced or ineffective teachers, to be presented with watered-down and uninspiring curricula, to be situated in a chaotic school environment with high turnover rates among the adults, and to be excluded from meaningful instruction by discriminatory disciplinary policies and practices.

(O’Day & Smith, 2016, p. 1)
Influence Over Education

According to Weiss and McGuinn (2017), initially the U.S. Office of Education relied on state education agencies (SEAs) to enforce federal guidelines, impacting the education of all students. According to the Aspen Institute (2015), a State Education Agency (SEA) operates under the authority granted by a state’s constitution as well as enabling legislation and regulations. Initially, the federal guidelines were primarily focused on ensuring more equitable school funding and educational access rather than on improving educational outcomes of students and schools (Weiss & McGuinn, 2017).

According to Weiss and McGuinn (2017), SEAs were not entirely involved in K-12 education policymaking or directly oversaw school districts. Instead, school districts and local school boards within each state were the ones responsible for making decisions for elementary and secondary schools. As a result, the federal government began to intervene because they felt that state and local education authorities had failed to ensure equal educational opportunities for all students (Weiss & McGuinn, 2017). Weiss and McGuinn (2017) stated, “The distrust of local education authorities and mounting evidence that states and localities were diverting federal funds to purposes for which they were not intended, ultimately led Congress and federal bureaucrats to increase the regulation and supervision of federal aid” (p. 4). As a result, a cabinet-level federal Department of Education was created in 1979.

Legislation

Federal legislation has influenced changes in educational practices in schools. The 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), in which its objective was, “the War on Poverty” impacted instructional improvement (Spring, 2018). Spring (2018)
stated, “Funds were targeted for reading and arithmetic programs that would supposedly provide equality of educational opportunity for students from low-income families” (p. 252).

Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act prohibited any school agency that was receiving federal funds to practice racial, religious, or ethnic discrimination (U.S. Department of Education website, 2018). The U.S. Department of Education’s website (2018) states for Title VI that, “No person in the United States shall, on the ground of race, color, or national origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program receiving Federal financial assistance.” Next came Title IX of the 1972 amendments to the Higher Education Act (U.S. Department of Education website, 2015). The U.S. Department of Education’s website (2015) states for Title IX, “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal Assistance.”

In 1983, a report titled *A Nation at Risk* shared by President Reagan, documented results by the National Commission on Excellence in Education on behalf of Secretary of Education Terrel Bell, the poor quality of education in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 1983). This report drew national attention to the quality of education, specifically the deficient performance of American students compared to their international peers. As a result, states began to engage more in making educational policy for their schools (Weiss & McGuinn, 2017).
No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Weiss and McGuinn (2017) stated, “A new federal and thus state focus on accountability for student achievement and school reform was outlined in the Improving America’s Schools Act of 1994 and was given more “teeth” in the NCLB Act in 2001” (p. 4). Public Law 107-110 shared that under NCLB states were allowed to determine their own academic standards and testing programs, but states were required to implement a range of activities, such as requiring test scores to be reported publicly, identifying and improving schools failing to meet adequate yearly progress, using particular types of reading programs, offering choice plans, and ensure that 100 percent of students were proficient in reading and math by 2014 (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

According to Weiss and McGuinn (2017) one of the most important law mandates as a result of NCLB, was requiring school report cards to disaggregate student test score data for subgroups based on race or ethnicity, economically disadvantaged status, limited proficiency in English, and special education. A school that did not meet the proficiency target for any one of these groups was placed in “in need of improvement status” (Weiss & McGuinn, 2017, p. 4). States were then required to take a mounting series of steps and interventions including the offering of public school choice, tutoring, technical assistance, and restructuring aimed at schools and districts that persistently failed to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets (Weiss & McGuinn, 2017). According to Spring (2018), NCLB increased the federal government’s power over local schools. As a result of NCLB, states were more involved with school governance, such as academic

**Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)**

States gained more flexibility and authority in K – 12 education with the ESSA of 2015 (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). According to Weiss and McGuinn (2017), states had fewer federal mandates, which allowed states to be creative and innovative, but with this reduction in federal direction and oversight, it became the obligation of SEAs to define and implement a vision for a state’s educational future. States were required to continue testing students in grades 3 to 8 and once in high school in math and language arts, test them in science at three different points in time, publicly report student data for schools and disaggregate the data by subgroups of students (special education, English language learners, racial minorities, and students in poverty), test at least 95 percent of student population, and have academic standards aligned to the tests administered (U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

ESSA’s most significant difference from NCLB is around accountability, which means that states determined how to identify struggling schools and what states have to do if and when that process reveals that students in a school are performing poorly (Weiss & McGuinn, 2017). Thus, ESSA gave states an opportunity for power, but it required that equity be at the center of this vision, which meant that states were responsible to support the improvement of educational outcomes for every student.

**American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009**

President Obama signed into law the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), which was designed to stimulate the economy, support job creation,
and invest in critical sectors, including education (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). It paved the way for education reform by supporting investments in innovative strategies that were most likely to lead to improved results for students, long-term gains in school and school system capacity, and increased productivity and effectiveness (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). With a divided Congress unable to reauthorize NCLB or propose new education legislation, President Obama presented his educational agenda, which consisted of $4.35 billion Race to the Top (RttT), $3.5 billion School Improvement Grant (SIG), and $650 million Investing in Innovation programs. In order to receive funds from these programs, states and districts needed to apply through a competitive grant process and follow federal goals and guidelines.

**Funding for School Reform**

Spring (2018) shared that the learning goals and instructional methods found in American schools are politically determined by local, state, and federal officials. According to Spring (2018) categorical aid was primarily used by the federal government to influence state education and local schools towards particular educational programs. Categorical aid is defined as money provided to support specific federal programs and legislation (Spring, 2018). Once funds were accepted by states or local school districts, they also were required to accept the regulations and requirements (Spring, 2018). According to Weiss and McGuinn (2017) national policymakers used the grant-in-aid system to push states to pursue federal goals in public education.

Spring (2018) shared that in 1958 Congress passed the National Defense Education Act (NDEA), which “…targeted funds for specific purposes, such as improving mathematics, science, and foreign language instruction” (p. 252). In 1964,
Title VI of the Civil Rights Act mandated that any school agency receiving federal funds that practiced racial, religious, or ethnic discrimination funds would be withheld (U.S. Department of Education website, 2018).

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2009) the ARRA created a competitive grant named RttT, in which the purpose was to encourage or reward States that were focused on: creating avenues for education innovation and reform; significant improvement in students outcomes were being achieved, “…including making substantial gains in student achievement, closing achievement gaps, improving high school graduation rates, and ensuring student preparation for success in college and careers, and implementing ambitious plans in four core education reform areas” (p. 2). The four core education reform areas were:

- Adopting college and career ready standards and assessments that will prepare students to be successful and compete in the global economy;
- Developing district and school data systems that measure and monitor student growth and success, and provide information to teachers and principals about their student’s progress and how they can improve instruction;
- Creating a system of effective educators (teachers and principals); and
- Turning around the lowest-achieving schools. (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, p. 2)

Critics of RttT reviewed it as an example of the federal government’s increasing control over schools (Spring, 2018).

Each ESEA reauthorization has had limited success at improving low-achieving schools due to the excess of “flawed rules for placing schools in improvement status,
mismatches between actual needs and pre-prescribed service types, and capacity for designing services that lags well behind the numbers and needs of schools in improvement” (Forte, 2010, p. 76). According to Childs and Lin Russell (2017), RttT gave states an opportunity to have a greater role in advancing school improvement efforts at the local level in the form of subgrants.

**School Improvement Grant (SIG)**

According to the California Department of Education (CDE, 2016), the purpose of SIG was to enable eligible LEAs to implement selected intervention models to raise academic achievement levels of students attending these identified persistently lowest-achieving schools. In 2009, the four intervention models provided to school districts to select from for turning around their lowest-achieving schools were: (1) Turnaround Model; (2) Restart Model; (3) School Closure; or (4) Transformation Model. According to Wong (2013), the Turnaround Model required that the principal of the school and half of the teachers in the school be replaced. The Restart Model required the school to be closed and reopened as either a charter school or a school ran by another organization not part of the district (Wong, 2013). The School Closure Model required the school to be closed down and not reopened, causing the need to place the students in neighboring high performing schools. The Transformation Model allowed the school to focus on strengthening professional support, teacher evaluation, and capacity building (Wong, 2013).

On February 9, 2015, the daily journal of the United States government known as the Federal Register published Document Citation 80 FR 7223, in which the Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education shared the adopted final requirements
for the SIG program (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The final requirements made changes to the SIG program requirements and implemented language in the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2014, that allowed LEAs to implement additional interventions, provided flexibility for rural LEAs, and extended the grant period from three to five years (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). As a result of the final requirements made, an LEA that wished to receive a school improvement grant now was able to choose one of the following seven school intervention models: (1) California State-determined Intervention Model; (2) Restart Model; (3) Evidence-based, Whole-school Reform Model; (4) Turnaround Model; (5) Transformation Model; (6) Closure Model; and (7) Early Learning Model (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Additionally, the final requirements reflected lessons learned from the previous four years of SIG implementation and regardless of the intervention model selected, LEAs must implement one or more evidence-based strategies. SIG policy made school turnaround a school-level problem, limiting the role of LEA, neglecting a long-term vision.

**Intervention models.** According to Meyers and Darwin (2017), all models were disruptive, including the idea that half of the staff and school leader turn over, but none was based on evidence. The CDE (2011) stated, “California has a vibrant, diverse student population that represents people from all parts of the world” (p. 7). As a result, the CDE recognized that each school’s needs were different based on demographics and geography, and thus a State-determined Intervention Model (SDIM) was developed in partnership with the California Comprehensive Center at WestEd, the Center on School Turnaround at WestEd, and the American Institutes for Research. According to the CDE (2016),
The California State-determined Intervention Model (CA SDIM) is a Whole-school Reform Model designed to:

1. Improve student academic achievement or attainment;
2. Be implemented for all students in a school; and
3. Address, at a minimum and in a comprehensive and coordinated manner, each of the Focus Areas. (p. 38)

**Historical Highlights of Educational Reform**

According to Hayes, Fulcher, Hogg, Ramsey, and Proscia (2017), turnaround became known during the 1980s, which was an organizational management strategy used in corporate sector. Educational policymakers adopted this strategy idea, as a result of the poor educational outcomes, to improve the nation’s low-achieving schools (Hayes et al., 2017). With an increase on accountability and consequences for school performance, turnaround emerged within education and influenced the practices of SIG schools (Peck & Reitzug, 2012).

**Comprehensive School Reform**

Orland (2011) shared that the Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) program was established as a demonstration program. According to Desimone (2002), the CSR demonstration program in 1998 emphasized two major concepts. First, school reform should be comprehensive and strengthen all areas of a school, curriculum, instruction, organization, professional development, and parental involvement (Desimone, 2002). Second, school reform should involve the use of scientifically based research models (Desimone, 2002). Under CSR, in order for schools to receive the funding, they agreed to implement the 11 legislatively mandated components, which were:
1. Proven methods and strategies based on scientifically based research and effective practices that have been successful in schools with diverse characteristics.

2. A comprehensive design for effective school functioning.

3. Professional development and training.


5. Support from staff members.

6. Support for staff members.

7. Parent and community involvement.

8. External assistance from a comprehensive school reform entity.

9. Evaluation of school reforms and student results.

10. Coordination of resources.

11. Scientifically based research to improve academic achievement of students.

(Desimone, 2002, p. 1)

According to Orland (2011), the CSR program did not produce comprehensively reformed schools. The CSR program was also not associated with mathematics or reading achievement improvements, but researchers did find targeted sustained efforts that appeared to lead to achievement gains (Orland, 2011). Some of the key findings about school improvement/turnaround were that new leadership styles, practices to improve school climate, new instructional strategies and practices, and strategies to secure external support were vital factors to focus on (Orland, 2011). These factors were implemented in a variety of ways, such as one factor at a time or a few strategies over time (Orland, 2011). Also, sustaining school improvement was challenging as achieving
it in the first place because of student mobility and staff and leadership changes (Orland, 2011). Lastly, Orland (2011), shared the importance of external support, “…in the form of consultation and professional development for instructional coaches and teachers” (p. 3).

Wong (2013) shared that during the mid-1990s, because there was no focus on accountability, a newly elected Republican majority in the U.S. Congress tried to eliminate the U.S. Department of Education. Supovitz and McGuinn (2017) stated,

The major national reform of the 2000s, that is, the test-based accountability approach of NCLB 2001, focused attention primarily on schools that were low performing. As performance is strongly correlated with socioeconomic status, NCLB shone its spotlight brightest on schools that were in urban and rural areas, and largely left suburban middle- and upper-class public schools alone. (p. 19)

Accountability is important and those who are responsible for educating our children should have high standards and high expectations of their students. McGuinn (2016) shared, “…schools and teachers should be held responsible for improving the academic performance of all students, even (and especially) those whose educational prospects are hampered by poverty” (p. 2).

Manna and McGuinn (2013) emphasized that unfortunately in the United States, educational reforms and promising innovations fail because there are, “…too many cooks in the education kitchen, and nobody is really in charge” (p. 21). Meyers and Darwin (2017) stressed, “…incorporating fewer schoolwide changes at one time allows teachers to be fully supported in their work, and to obtain some mastery or facility with specific strategies or programs” (p. 226). Meyers and Darwin (2017) stated,
A school that has a coherent approach to school change is one that has adopted a limited number of interventions well-aligned to performance problems, that resists new initiatives that do not align with shared goals (even if associated with tempting funds), and that does not drop initiatives when they become challenging in the short term. (p. 98)

Also, Meyers and Darwin (2017) shared that one of the mistakes we continue to make in education is tackling all problems at once in low-performing schools. The Consortium for Chicago School Research labeled this type of thinking as “Christmas tree schools.” Christmas tree schools are described as, “schools that seek to do everything at once, and latch on to shiny new intervention that promise to solve their problem” (Meyers & Darwin, 2017, p. 97).

The Getting Down to Fact II report by Loeb, Edley, Imazeki, and Stipek (2018) summarized 36 separate studies of the state education system and looked at what is working well and where improvement is still needed. Loeb et al. (2018) focused on six key findings, which are: (1) capacity building; (2) persistent achievement gaps for students of color, English learners, and low income students; (3) children behind before they enter kindergarten; (4) funding levels are inadequate; (5) pensions, special education, and facilities can potentially worsen inequities; and (6) data systems still fall short of producing information on what makes an excellent education for its students.

Meyers and Darwin (2017) explained that the national conversation around school turnaround has focused on drastic reform strategies. Instead, schools must consider internal capacity to drive improvement (Meyers & Darwin, 2017). Meyers and Darwin (2017) suggested that schools are able to turn around by thinking strategically about their
specific needs, and employing changes that are aligned to those needs and challenges. Meyers and Darwin (2017) further added that school change was more likely attributed to principals who were strategic leaders. Weiss (1995) defined a strategic leader as, “…one who has identified a “theory of action,” or an explanation of the problems in a school and how they may be solved” (p. 99).

**SIG Efforts**

According to American Institutes for Research, AIR (2017), in order for a school to improve outcomes for students, what has to be at the heart of it is a teacher’s knowledge and skills in the improvement process. According to Dragoset, Thomas, Herrmann, Deke, James-Burdumy, Graczewski, Boyle, Upton, Tanenbaum, Giffin and Wel (2017) concluded that low-performing schools are not blank slates on which new interventions and individuals could create better outcomes for students. The study also provided evidence that change occurred in short term ways, with many efforts focused on building capacity (Dragoset et. al, 2017). The 5 key findings were:

- No evidence was found that schools implementing SIG-funded models reported using more SIG-promoted practices than other schools.
- Schools implementing SIG-funded models promoted practices highest in comprehensive instructional reform strategies and lowest in operational flexibility and support.
- No significant differences between SIG-funded model and other schools in the use of English Language Learner focused practices.
No significant impact in SIG-funded model was made to reading or math scores, high school graduation rates, or college enrollment across all grades. (Dragoset et. al, 2017, p. 2-3)

There was no evidence that one SIG model was associated with larger gains than another when student achievement gains were compared in elementary grades, 2\textsuperscript{nd} through 5\textsuperscript{th} (Dragoset et. al, 2017). For the higher grades, 6\textsuperscript{th} through 12\textsuperscript{th}, larger student achievement gains in math were associated with the Turnaround model than the Transformation model (Dragoset et. al, 2017).

**Driving Educational Change**

Hord and Roussin (2013) stated, “…school improvement or school reform really means that the school and its staff are changing how they do business” (p. 13). Change is dependent upon the staff and school learning how to do things differently (Hord & Roussin, 2013). Fullan and Quinn’s (2016) Coherence Framework is supported by Hord and Roussin’s (2013) six strategies for change, which are: 1) Creating a Shared Vision of the Change, 2) Planning and Identifying Resources Necessary for the Change, 3) Investing in Professional Development/Professional Learning, 4) Checking or Assessing Progress, 5) Providing Continuous Assistance, and 6) Creating a Context Conducive to Change.

Fullan (2016) stated, “The total time frame from initiation to institutionalization is lengthy; even moderately complex changes take from 2 to 4 years, and larger-scale efforts can take 5 to 10 years, with sustaining improvements still problematic” (p. 58). Duke (2008) stated, “Principals and teachers in successful turnaround schools understand the need to improve their literacy programs, increase parental involvement, focus
interventions on low-achieving students, and develop new approaches to school
discipline” (p. 299). In driving educational change, the role of the principal, the
importance of a positive culture that emphasizes college access for all students, an
emphasis on teaching and learning, professional development, curriculum and instruction,
instructional coaching, continuous improvement, collaboration, and data-driven decision
making are important. Each of these important elements of school improvement will be
discussed in the sections that follow.

The Principal

In an ever-changing educational reform environment, a principal must focus on
culture and teaching and learning. According to Mendels (2012), the individual who leads
a school’s improvement efforts is the “effective principal.” Fullan (2016), shared that the
principal at the school site has become increasingly important in school change and
success. Leithwood and Louis (2012) stressed, “Although there can be multiple sources
of leadership in schools, principals remain the central source” (p. 42). A principal’s role
is to support teachers, improve the instructional program to impact students. Leithwood
and Louis (2012) concluded, “Successful principal leadership includes careful attention
to classroom instructional practices, but it also includes careful attention to many other
issues that are critical to the ongoing health and welfare of school organizations” (p. 67).

Finding a balance between all important factors is something a principal must
continuously work on each and every day. Robertson and Timperley (2011) specified,
“…effective leaders establish goals, support pedagogic change, reform the institution,
distribute leadership, spread the reform, use evidence strategically and take ownership of
the reform” (p. 28). Mendels (2012) shared schools need successful leaders due to the
increased focused on student achievement and demands of turning around failing schools and producing college and career ready graduates. According to Leithwood and Strauss (2008), the focus needs to be on leadership practices around direction setting, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional program.

**Culture**

Sebring, Allensworth, Bryk, Easton, and Luppescu (2006) emphasized the importance of changing adult mindsets, even though it is a difficult task for both parents and staff, but it’s an important component to improving student achievement. Fullan (2001) stated, “As I have said elsewhere (Fullan, 1993, 1999), restructuring (which can be done by fiat) occurs time and time again, whereas reculturing (how teachers come to question and change their beliefs and habits) is what is needed” (p. 34). Ladson-Billings (2006) shared that successful teachers:

- Set a high bar for all students and then help individual kids to meet it.
- Differentiate instruction with kids of varying skills and interests.
- Create bonds with students that resemble family.
- Get to know their students’ backgrounds.
- They give students agency and authority. (p. 7)

Ladson-Billings’ list does not require much in terms of funding. All it takes are educators who believe in students and see themselves as change agents, changing one student at a time.

Skrla, McKenzie, and Scheurich (2009) argued the importance of teachers being aware of, accepting, and acting on four central beliefs:
1. That all children are capable of high levels of academic success with an exception of a very small percentage.

2. That all children means all, regardless of a child’s race, social class, gender, sexual orientation, learning differences, culture, language, religion, and so on.

3. That the adults in the school are the ones responsible for student learning.

4. That traditional school practices may work for some students, but not all; thus, in order to eliminate the achievement gap, it requires a change in our practices. (p. 82-83)

Changing beliefs of educators and stakeholders to a joint vision of opening access to college for all students is important in the school improvement process and is possible to achieve.

**College-going.** The lack of underrepresented minorities (URM) to four year colleges and universities through the front door is what drove the University of California San Diego (UCSD) to act. UCSD laid the groundwork for two new interrelated facilities: the Center for Research in Educational Equity, Access, and Teaching Excellence (CREATE) and The Preuss School, a grades 6-12 charter school for URM students. CREATE conducted basic and design research to improve teachers’ professional effectiveness and students’ academic preparation. The Preuss School is located on the UCSD campus and enrolls only low-income students with high potential but underdeveloped skills. Neither parents nor guardians of Preuss students can be graduates of a four-year college or university.

The Preuss School also incorporated a detracking principle, which meant that all students who attended took only college-prep and AP classes. With the establishment of a
rigorous curriculum, the school provided academic and social supports. Extending the school year and having university students be tutors throughout the day, after-school and on Saturdays were some of the academic supports provided by The Preuss School. As for social supports, counseling services were also provided to Preuss students. As Mehan (2012) acknowledged, “We need to help the state’s K-12 educational system prepare more students to enroll and succeed in college as one important means of improving the life chances of underrepresented students” (p.120).

The new practices and learnings proved that life possibilities for students of color from low-income backgrounds can be improved when a college-going culture of learning is made an essential part of the school students attend, as demonstrated by the success of The Preuss School, for Gompers Preparatory Academy, and the initial promise of Lincoln High School. Mehan (2012) shared,

The Preuss School’s exceptional college enrollment rate of 84 percent (approximately twice the national average for low-income youth) and high API scores (the school ranks above schools in well-to-do neighborhoods in San Diego) suggest that low-income youth can succeed in academically rigorous college-prep and AP courses when certain critical conditions are met. (p. 115)

For school improvement, this ongoing emphasis on improving teaching and learning matters.

**Teaching and Learning**

According to William (2016), the quality of teachers and their teaching influences student achievement. Thus, professional development initiatives would be beneficial to be based in motivation, continuous improvement, collaboration, and building the
professional learning culture of schools (Fullan, 2011). According to Hattie (2009), differences in teachers make a difference to student learning and thus, student learning is improved by teacher professional learning. Jensen, Sonnemann, Roberts-Hull, and Hunter (2016) shared lessons from British Columbia, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Singapore, high performing educational systems of professional learning. The approach taken by these educational systems required all professional learning to be developed around an improvement cycle that is tied to student learning (Jensen et al., 2016).

**Professional Development**

Curriculum and instruction are at the heart of professional development, but instructional coaching and collaboration are ways to ensure reform efforts are sustained. Hord and Roussin (2013) shared that change is promoted in a risk taking environment where everyone is committed to learning. First, learning begins for the staff and then learning for students and then reflection becomes part of that change. The school should strengthen professional capacity by providing professional development in changing beliefs and understandings. Professional capacity is defined in the report by Sebring et al. (2006),

To elaborate, professional capacity encompasses the quality of the faculty and staff recruited and maintained in a school, their base beliefs and values about responsibility for change, the quality of ongoing professional development focused on local improvement efforts, and the capacity of a staff to work together as a cohesive professional community focused on the core problems of improving teaching and learning. (p. 12)
Professional development is more effective when it involves direct intensive forms of support (Devine, Houssemand, & Meyers, 2013).

**Curriculum and instruction.** According to Odden, Picus, Archibald, Goetz, Mangan, and Aportela (2007), schools that produce high levels of performance for all students focus on what they can control and not on what they cannot control, such as poverty, lack of healthcare, and the state testing system. Instead, these schools focus on the curriculum and the delivery of the instruction. These schools begin with a new educational vision, around the adoption of new curriculum, usually in reading and/or math, and a school-wide view of what effective instruction looks like in the classroom; ultimately, building capacity.

The literature on schools that establish success for all students align curriculum and instruction to state standards (Barth, Haycock, Jackson, Mora, Ruiz, Robinson, & Wilkins, 1999). According to McGee (2004), there is a clear emphasis on learning targets, instruction is project-based, and there is a strong focus on early literacy. The National Research Council’s seminal report *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, provided research based recommendations on what could be done to better position students in prekindergarten through third grade for success in grade four and above. The six recommendations given were: (1) Access to kindergarten for all; (2) Explicit word-reading skills instruction; (3) Explicit vocabulary instruction; (4) Engage in building linguistic, conceptual and content knowledge; (5) Instruction in comprehension strategies; and (6) Promote outside of school reading.

Duke and Block (2012) examined whether these key recommendations had been implemented in U.S. schools. They found that two of the six recommendations have been
widely adopted, such as increased access to kindergarten and instruction in word-reading skills. Duke and Block (2012), found that explicit instruction in vocabulary and comprehension have and continue to be neglected. Duke and Block (2012) stated, “Contrary to the report’s recommendations, attention to building conceptual and content knowledge in science and social studies has actually decreased in the past fifteen years” (p. 55). Therefore, as Duke and Block (2012) shared, fourth-grade students’ comprehension achievement is stagnant is not unsurprising.

**Instructional coaching.** Devine et al. (2013) stated, “Coaching is a powerful tool for personal change and learning” (p. 1383). According to Knight (2000), teachers resist change programs that offer too little support. According to Knight (2009), instructional coaching focuses on four areas in providing a comprehensive framework for instructional excellence, which are classroom management, content planning, instruction and assessment for learning.

Devine et al. (2013) emphasized instructional coaching has been shown to be an effective form of intensive and differentiated support, “…and has been shown to have a positive impact on attitude of teachers, increases in skill transfer and implementation of new strategies in the classroom, increased feelings of teacher-efficacy, as well as improved student achievement” (p. 1385). Thus, instructional coaching ensures that instructional teaching practices are being implemented with fidelity, ensuring systematic, high-quality implementation (Knight, 2011). Mourshed, Chijioke, and Barber (2010) studied 20 school systems from different parts of the world and found that 78 percent focused primarily on professional learning which caused their systems to go from great to excellent.
Continuous Improvement

In pursuit of equitable outcomes for students, data-decision making and equity audits can be conducted to ensure continuous improvement for all. Jensen et al. (2016), an improvement cycle is effective when it, “…requires a broad strategy with strong linkages between how leadership roles are structured, how resources are allocated, and the focus of evaluation and accountability measures” (p. 4). According to Jensen et al. (2016), the improvement cycle is what high-performing systems lead schools into becoming learning organizations. A school focuses on the following key components:

1. Effective professional learning is organized around adult learning.
2. Professional learning is led by distinct roles in schools and throughout the system.
3. School-based research is used to develop teacher’s expertise.
4. Teachers and school leaders are responsible for their own learning and the learning of others.
5. Professional learning is collaborative and continuous. (p. 4)

Mandinach and Jackson (2012) stressed that when educators use data to inform practice, they are helping all students improve over time.

Collaboration

The principal creates structures and opportunities for teachers to collaborate amongst grade levels and around specific students, so that there is collectively sharing, planning, acting on curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Leithwood and Louis (2012), stated, “Leadership effects on student achievement occur largely because effective leadership strengthens professional community– a special environment within which teachers work together to improve their practice and improve student learning” (p. 25).
Data-Driven Decision Making

Ultimately to improve student performance, teachers must use data (Mandinach & Jackson, 2012). Mandinach and Jackson (2012) define data use as “...the process by which an individual collects, examines, and interprets empirical evidence for the purpose of making a decision” (p. 27). Therefore, the goal is to transform data into knowledge, onto which actions can be taken and used in the classroom. The CDE (2015) shared that schools and districts in California now had an opportunity to reconfigure themselves as learning organizations focused on continuous improvement and accountability systems. Continuous improvement is supported by Mandinach and Jackson (2012) who shared, “It is no longer acceptable to base decisions on anecdotes; for without data, decisions are only based on opinions” (p. 28).

Hamilton, Halverson, Jackson, Mandinach, Supovitz, and Wayman (2009) posed five recommendations to help educators understand how to use achievement data to make decisions, which were:

1. Data should be part of an ongoing cycle of instructional improvement.
2. Students should be taught how to examine their own data and then how to set their own learning goals.
3. Districts should have an explicit vision on how data can be used throughout the system.
4. Supports and resources should be provided in order to establish and sustain a data school culture.
5. Districts should develop and implement a districtwide data system. (p. 5)
Beyond the systemic nature of enculturating data-driven decision making, data can be seen through an equity lens. Skrla et al. (2009) developed a systematic way for school leaders to assess the degree of equity or inequity in schools and/or districts in three areas: teacher quality, programs, and achievement, which is termed equity audits. An equity audit is a tool that allows educational leaders, such as, principals, superintendents, curriculum directors, and teacher leaders, to truly reflect and assess the quality of education for their students.

Skrla et al. (2009) provided a common set of explicit expectations for student achievement for all student groups that is not based on deficit assumptions; focuses public attention on achievement gaps; publicly provides accountability data for use by civic, community, and civil rights activists; parent groups; researchers; and the media; and focusing district and school leaders on their responsibility for educating equitably all students and holding them accountable for achieving equity and excellence.

The first area of assessment in Skrla et al. (2009) is teacher quality. The purpose of the equity audit in the area of teacher quality is to examine how teacher quality is distributed within a particular school. Darling-Hammond (2001) shared that a teacher’s knowledge, skills and overall qualifications is what makes a difference for student learning than any other single factor. Skrla et al. (2009) chose four indicators for which data are commonly available and for which there is research showing student achievement effects: 1) teacher education (college degrees), 2) teacher experience (years working as a teacher), 3) teacher mobility (teachers changing campuses annually) and 4) teacher certification (teachers assigned in or out of area of teaching expertise).
The second area of assessment cited by Skrla et al. (2009) is quality of programs. Skrla et al. (2009) state that programmatic equity looks at the quality of the educational programs, such as instructional settings, into which students are placed in or excluded from. The four programs of interest are: 1) special education, 2) gifted and talented education, 3) bilingual education, and 4) student discipline.

The last area of assessment in Skrla et al. (2009) is achievement equity. The following categories are included in achievement: a) state achievement tests, b) dropout rates, c) high school graduation tracks, and d) SAT/ACT/AP/IB results.

Educational Equity

In order to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for students of color educational leaders must seek educational equity. The Wisconsin’s Department of Public Instruction defined educational equity as the educational policies, practices, and programs necessary to: a) eliminate educational barriers based on gender, race/ethnicity, national origin, color, disability, age, or other protected group status; and b) provide equal educational opportunities and ensure that historically underserved or underrepresented populations meet the same rigorous standards for academic performance expected of all children and youth. Equity strategies are planned, systemic and focus on the core of the teaching and learning process (curriculum, instruction and school environment/culture). Educational equity activities also promote the real possibility of equality of educational results for each student and between diverse groups of students.

High-Need Schools

The majority of our students of color attend high-need schools. Duke (2008) noted the characteristics of “high-need schools” as,
• High levels of ethnic minorities, immigrants, mobility, homeless families, children in foster care, incarcerated students, drug abuse, and English Language Learners (ELLs);

• Large percentage of students not achieving at expected levels of achievement;

• High numbers of student truancies, suspensions, and dropouts coupled with low attendance and graduation rates; and

• Significant problems with the learning environment, including high teacher and leader turnover, high teacher absenteeism, and low staff morale. (p. 297)

The U.S. Department of Education’s website states, “Our mission is to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access” (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Although, California has made some improvement failing to offer a high-quality education to every student means failing to prepare the future leaders who will fuel our state’s economy, strengthen our communities, and maintain our state’s cultures, traditions, and values.

Weiss and McGuinn (2017) stated, “Driving educational change from the state capitol all the way down to the classroom is extraordinarily difficult” (p. 1). Weiss and McGuinn (2017) shared that in order for reform to succeed, state policy must change the practices within districts, the behavior of principals and teachers must change as a result of district practices, and all of these actions must deliver improved student performance. Weiss and McGuinn (2017) further stressed, “To close the country’s longstanding racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps and address concerns about the nation’s overall educational performance, states and SEAs will increasingly need to lead the effort” (p. 1). Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, and Easton (2010) found that many high need
schools had subsystems that lacked organization and coherence and thus, the focus should be on practices to build a highly developed, coordinated educational infrastructure encompassing culture, stakeholder capacity, and structure.

**Leading for Coherence**

How do you lead change? Fullan and Quinn (2016) believe that the “right drivers” build capacity and focus on pedagogy, collaboration, results, and a coherent system. According to Fullan and Quinn (2016) to bring about change what is needed is consistency of purpose, policy, and practice. Fullan and Quinn (2016) emphasized, “The solution requires the individual and collective ability to build shared meaning, capacity, and commitment to action” (p. 1).

**The Coherence Framework for Achieving Successful Reform**

Fullan and Quinn (2016) identified that the Coherence Framework has four components: focusing direction, cultivating collaborative cultures, deepening learning, and securing accountability with leadership at the center (see Figure 1).

*Figure 1. The Coherence Framework*
Focusing Direction

According to Fullan and Quinn (2016), in a time where achievement gaps continue to exist, school leaders must build a clear path to improve learning. Leaders must have, “…the ability to develop and sustain focused direction in a time of competing and complex demands internally and externally” (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 17). The four elements of focused direction are: purpose driven, goals that impact, clarity of strategy, and change leadership (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). Fullan and Quinn (2016) stated, “Leaders need the ability to develop a shared moral purpose and meaning as well as a pathway for attaining that purpose” (p. 17). Regardless of background or circumstance the moral imperative focuses on deep learning (Fullan, 2010). According to Fullan and Quinn (2016), humans need to experience success to keep going and unfortunately, constant overload and fragmentation overwhelms educators.

Fullan and Quinn (2016) explained that one of the problems today in education are the presence of numerous goals placed upon schools from the district and the state, which at times are unconnected and ever-changing. A result of too many goals, it is impossible for educators to develop depth and coherence. Fullan and Quinn (2016) suggested that leaders, schools need to develop limited goals, stay focused on those goals, and avoid distractors that come along. According to Fullan and Quinn (2016), it is much more effective to implement action and learn from it, which allows the vision to become grounded recognizing, “It is learning by purposeful doing” (p. 21).

Fullan and Quinn (2016) stated, “Clarity and coherence are not just about goals; crucially, they are also about strategy” (p. 24). According to Fullan and Quinn (2016),
clarity should provide clearness in people’s minds and actions. With clarity and coherence, people should be able to talk the walk. Fullan and Quinn (2016) stated,

Leaders remain crucial in creating a North Star for action, establishing enabling conditions, and shaping a pathway for change; however, the new process of change shifts from a notion of sequential, discrete stages of the traditional alignment of policy, resources, skill development, and supports (getting the pieces aligned) to a more organic process of diffusion and continuous learning. (p. 26)

Thus, a leader’s role is to manage people’s transition from the current state to the future state. People hesitate to transition because of two factors; confidence and competence.

Cultivating Collaborative Cultures

The second component in the Coherence Framework is cultivating collaborative cultures. According to Fullan and Quinn (2016), collaborative work is fundamentally important in shifting behavior. The four elements of cultivating collaborative cultures are: culture of growth, learning leadership, capacity building, and collaborative work. Fullan and Quinn (2016) stated, “We need leaders who create a culture of growth; know how to engage the hearts and minds of everyone; and focus their collective intelligence, talent, and commitment to shaping a new path” (p. 47). Meaningful work pulls people together and will cause the group to change when people are immersed in deep collaborative work. A culture of growth supports learning and innovation (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

According to Fullan and Quinn (2016), everyone in the organization is a learner. Professional capital is built across the organization by modeling learning, shaping the culture, and maximizing the focus on learning. The key to a capacity building approach lies in:
- Developing a common knowledge and skill base across all leaders and educators in the system,
- Focusing on a few goals, and
- Sustaining an intense effort over multiple years. (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 57)

Collaborative work approaches must be intentionally designed and implemented to: incorporate whole systems, focus on learning, build capacity, have measurable impact, be flexible and dynamic, and be sustainable (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

**Building capacity.** In order to address the inequities for students of color, educational leaders must build the capacity of the educators. Le Floch, Garcia, and Barbour (2016) shared that there is an abundance of research that supports an important finding: “Strong school leadership is associated with higher student achievement levels” (p. 4). Le Floch et al. (2016) stressed that the turnaround school principals from these case studies attributed teachers as a critical component of their success.

Our biggest asset is one another; therefore, as a leader we must find that greatness is each of our teachers and build upon it. Without them, change will not take place. Fullan and Quinn (2016) argued that the solution requires the individual, the leader and collective ability to build shared meaning, capacity, and commitment to action. Le Floch et al. (2016) stated, “Research consistently points to the importance of human capital—namely, teachers and leaders- in schools, particularly in low-performing schools” (p. 4).
Deepening Learning

Another component in the Coherence Framework is deepening learning. According to Fullan and Quinn (2016), there must be a shift to a deeper understanding of the learning process and how we can influence it. The glue is knowledge-building.

Securing Accountability

The last component in the Coherence Framework is securing accountability. In order for accountability to be effective, there must be internal and external accountability (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). Internal accountability allows people to be accountable to themselves and to the group. External accountability are the standards, expectations, transparent data, and selective interventions. This framework will serve as a theoretical framework in analyzing the data for this study.

Summary

Failing school systems can achieve remarkable and lasting success by focusing on the right things and staying with them. “The history of American education includes a graveyard of good ideas condemned by pressure for fast results” (Hiebert, Gallimore, & Stigler, 2002, p. 5). The Coherence Framework will be the lens used to analyze the data collected through this study. Chapter 3 will provide the methodology of the study.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Although California has made some improvement, failing to offer a high-quality education to every student means failing to prepare the future leaders who will fuel our state’s economy, strengthen our communities, and maintain our state’s cultures, traditions, and values. Frey (2013) shared that by 2041 people of color are projected to make up the majority of the population in the U.S. Blankstein and Noguera (2015) explained that compared to other wealthy nations, 23 percent of our nation’s children live in poverty, which means that one in four children are coming from households living in poverty. With poverty rates rising among public school children, and America continuing its demographic shift to a majority-minority population, the task of scaling up and better supporting the practices and interventions that effectively close gaps and promote positive achievement outcomes is more urgent than ever. Boykin and Noguera (2011) declared that as a nation if we are truly serious about closing the achievement gap, then policy and reform must be centered on equity and excellence for every child.

Rationale for Selection of the Method

A case study is used in at least two types of situations. First, the case study method is pertinent when the research addresses either a descriptive question, like what happened? or an explanatory question, like how and why did something happen? Second, a case study method is pertinent when you want to get an understanding of a situation. According to Yin (2014), the case study method helps the researcher make a direct observation and collect data in its natural setting. Yin (2014) puts a great emphasis on the ability of the researcher as an investigator and believes a key demand of the case study
method is the investigator’s skill and expertise at pursuing an entire line of inquiry at the same time as data is being collected.

**Research Design**

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016) the term “case study” is used synonymously with “qualitative research.” Creswell (2013) defined case study as,

...case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audio-visual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case-based themes. (p. 97)

In qualitative research, the study is exploratory and the researcher seeks to listen to participants and build an understanding based on what is heard (Creswell, 2014).

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), a qualitative research design allows one to know more about one’s practice and/or improve in one’s practice. Merriam and Associates (2002) explained, “The case study is an intensive description and analysis of a phenomenon or social unit…” (p. 8). According to Merriam and Associates (2002), by focusing upon one single phenomenon or entity (the case), this approach allows to describe the phenomenon in depth.

Qualitative research allows meaning to be socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world (Merriam & Associates, 2002). There are four characteristics found in qualitative research. Merriam and Associates (2002) stated, “The first characteristic is that researchers strive to understand the meaning people have constructed about their world and their experience; that is, how do people make sense of their
experience?” (p. 5). According to Merriam and Associates (2002), the second characteristic of qualitative research is that the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis. The approach to case study research is when the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) over time, through detailed in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information, such as observations, interviews, documents, and reports (Creswell, 2013). The findings are then reported as a case description and case-based themes (Creswell, 2013). According to Merriam and Associates (2002), the third characteristic of qualitative research is that the process is inductive, which means, “…researchers gather data to build concepts, hypotheses, or theories…” (p. 5). The final characteristic of qualitative research is that it is richly descriptive (Merriam & Associates, 2002). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated, “A case study is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (p. 37).

Research Questions

The overarching question for this study was: What were the key learnings in the school improvement process by the district, school leadership, and staff that can make an impact on the entire K-12 education system for successful and sustainable coherent change in pursuit of equity and excellence for all students using the Coherence Framework: Focusing Direction, Cultivating Collaborative Cultures, Deepening Learning, and Securing Accountability? Specifically, the sub-questions were:

1. What were the successes and/or breakthroughs in transforming into a learning organization focused on continuous improvement in pursuit of equity and excellence for all students?
2. What were the barriers and/or challenges in transforming into a learning organization focused on continuous improvement in pursuit of equity and excellence for all students?

Setting

Pseudonyms were used for the name of the school, district, and participants. The pseudonym used for the name of the city was also used for the district. The selection of the district and school was based on the following four criteria. First, the school was identified as a Tier 1 school. The CDE (2016) defines Tier 1 as the lowest 5 percent of schools; thus, it is a low-performing school as measured by the state assessments in reading/English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics. Second, the school’s diverse enrollment included English Learners, Students with Disabilities and Foster Youth in a high socioeconomic disadvantaged community. Third, the district applied and received the School Improvement Grant (SIG). Fourth, the district and the school implemented the California State-determined Intervention Model.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2017), there are approximately 151,807 residents in this particular city off the West Coast. According to the U.S Census Bureau (2017), Citrus’s diversity between 2012 and 2016 could be described as: Hispanic/Latino (70.3 percent), Asian (9 percent), Black/African-American (6.7 percent), and White, not Hispanic (11.8 percent). In 2016, 68.2 percent of the residents age 25 and older had a high school diploma and 17.3 percent received a bachelor’s degree or higher. The median household income for residents in 2016 was $50,360, which is still below the California median of $67,739. The percent of people living in poverty is 21.5 percent, which is higher than the California median of 13.3 percent.
School Context

Using specific school selection criteria, I selected a K-6 elementary school located in Southern California. Mateo Elementary School is one of 27 elementary schools within a K-12 unified school district. Mateo Elementary’s socioeconomically disadvantaged student group makes up 93 percent of the total enrollment, the English Learner student group makes up 30 percent of the total enrollment, the Students with Disabilities student group makes up 8 percent of the total enrollment, and the Foster Youth student group makes up 6 percent of the total enrollment. Mateo Elementary School is a high needs school, which is rated below average compared to other schools in the state. Students here performed below average on state tests, were making about average year-over-year academic improvement, and this school had below average results in how well it was serving disadvantaged students.

During the 2015-2016 school year, Mateo Elementary School’s district applied for and received a 25 million SIG grant from the CDE. Three schools were chosen to each receive close to 8 million dollars over a five-year period, which began with the 2016-2017 school year.

Many social factors affect the students that attend Mateo Elementary. To support the families in need, the Department of Public Social Services is located in the north part of the city offering families a variety of social services as needed. Public agencies, near Mateo Elementary School, which provide comprehensive mental services to help families and individuals are Tri-City Mental Health Center and Pacific Clinics. In addition, near Mateo Elementary School, a percentage of students at Mateo Elementary reside at Prototypes. Prototypes serves women struggling with drug and/or alcohol addiction,
domestic violence, and mental illness. Prototypes serves both Residential clients and Community Prison Mother’s Program Clients (CPMP). CPMP allows women who are pregnant or have children under 6 to serve their sentence at Prototypes.

California recognizes that each school in the State comes with distinct local needs based in part on demographics and geography. California’s State-determined Intervention Model (CA SDIM) is more than a one-size-fits-all solution. It provides a framework for linking student growth and performance outcomes to impactful decisions that drive continuous improvement for all students, including but not limited to, socio-economically disadvantaged students, English language learners, and students who receive special education services.

**Data Sources**

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016) data are made up of ordinary bits and pieces of information found in the environment. Patton (2015) stated,

Qualitative data consist of direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge obtained through interviews; detailed descriptions of people’s activities, behaviors, actions recorded in observations; and excerpts, quotations, or entire passages extracted from various types of documents. (p. 14)

Qualitative researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand from, which is called purposeful sampling. The following individuals were interviewed: a SIG district administrator, a principal, an assistant principal, an external partner who is the principal’s coach, two academic coaches, classroom teachers (primary grade, upper
grade, special education), support staff (instructional aide, school counselor, resource teacher, and parent community facilitator), and parents.

**Data Collection**

According to Merriam and Associates (2002), there are three major sources of data for a qualitative research study, which are: interviews, observations, and documents. Once the Superintendent gave permission to conduct the case study and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was approved, data was collected over a two-month period in the spring of 2019. Table 5 highlights each data source that was collected.

Table 5

*Data Sources*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Individual Interviews | - 1 Principal  
|                    | - 1 Assistant Principal  
|                    | - 2 Academic Coaches  
|                    | - 1 District SIG Administrator  
|                    | - 1 External Partner, Principal’s Coach |
|                   | 6 hours                                           |         |
| Group Interviews  | - 5 Parents  
|                   | - 5 Teachers  
|                   | - 5 Support Staff |
|                   | 3 hours                                           |         |
| Field Notes       | - School  
|                   | - Classrooms  
|                   | - Professional learning opportunities  
|                   | - Parent Meetings  
|                   | 4 hours                                           |         |
| Document Review   | - SIG related events and materials  
|                   | 4 hours                                           |         |

**Interviews**

The first major method of collecting data was through interviews. There were a total of eighteen participants. Only one individual interview was conducted with the following six participants: the school principal, the school assistant principal, two school
academic coaches, one district SIG administrator, and one external partner that is the school principal’s coach. The interviewed participants chose pseudonyms to provide confidentiality as shown in Table 6. Only one interview was conducted with each of the focus groups. Each focus group had a total of four participants. The support staff participants included: the school counselor, the school family community facilitator, the school resource teacher, and a special education instructional aide from the school. The participants of the focus groups were not assigned pseudonyms because they were not named as individuals but as participants of the group. For instance, the participants of the focus groups were referred to as one of the following: a parent from Mateo, a support staff from Mateo, or a teacher from Mateo.

Table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Pseudonyms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Principal Amparo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Principal</td>
<td>Assistant Principal Lucinda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District SIG Administrator</td>
<td>Mr. Abel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External Partner (Principal’s Coach)</td>
<td>Mr. Isaiah</td>
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<tr>
<td>Academic Coach</td>
<td>Coach Mia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Academic Coach</td>
<td>Coach Jordan</td>
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</table>

Field Notes

The second major method of collecting data was through observations, which will be captured through field notes. Merriam and Associates (2002) stated, “A very active participant observer might be someone who is a member of the group or organization who is thus participating while observing” (p. 13). Creswell (2015) defined observation
as, “…the process of gathering open-ended, firsthand information by observing people and places at a research site” (p. 211).

According to Creswell (2015), a participant observer is when a researcher takes part in activities in the setting they observe. Thus, the researcher’s role was that of a participant observer, who took field notes. Descriptive field notes as well as reflective notes were taken. According to Creswell (2015), a researcher records a description of events, activities, and people, which is known as descriptive field notes. Reflective field notes allowed the researcher to capture her personal thoughts about her insights, ideas or themes that emerged during the observation.

**Document Review**

The third major method of collecting data was through documents. Merriam and Associates (2002) stated, “These can be written, oral, visual (such as photographs), or cultural artifacts” (p. 13). Documents consisted of public and private records that researchers obtain about a site or participants in a study (Creswell, 2015). The school principal shared several documents as shown in Table 7 dating prior to the commencement of the SIG plan until this current school year.

**Table 7**

*List of Documents Reviewed*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Document Number</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Memorandum of Understanding for School Improvement Grant (SIG) Schools</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mateo Elementary Site Leadership Team Agenda/Minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>SIG Professional Learning Survey Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>G.L.A.D. Unit 1 Reflection Form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>SIG Partner Walkthrough Feedback Notes</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Technology Site Visit Walkthrough Feedback Notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Capturing Teachers’ Voices: Understanding the SIG Experience Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>School Improvement Grant (SIG) Plan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Analysis

Interviews and focus group interviews were recorded. Transcriptions of the interviews and focus groups were coded and organized into themes under each research question. Each coded quote was entered into a Microsoft Word table with identifying information and the location of the quote.

Provisions of Trustworthiness

The researcher took the necessary steps to ensure validity of descriptive and interpretive data (Maxwell, 2004). The researcher audio recorded and transcribed all individual and group interviews to ensure descriptive validity. In addition, the researcher inquired with clarifying questions as needed to secure interpretive validity. All data collected were completely confidential. According to Saldaña (2013), there was no identifying information during or after this study, such as individual names, districts, or groups. To protect the identities of the district, school, and all participants, pseudonyms were used to present findings of this study. Additionally, all audio recordings, transcripts, documents containing data were secured in the researcher’s password-secured laptop.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher was the primary instrument of data collection and had a critical role throughout the study (Litchman, 2013). According to Glesne and Peshkin (1992), backyard research involves studying researchers own organization, or friends, or immediate work setting. Green (2014) stated, “Qualitative research is about much more than one-dimensional statistics or people. It is an effort to understand and make meaning of situated and complex human actions and experiences through sustained engagement within a particular context” (p. 158). Thus, considering the researcher’s unique
opportunity of implementing the state’s SIG grant allowed the researcher to provide a
detailed account of the school’s reform challenges, successes and key learnings. This
information can guide the entire educational system that is looking for positive change
for underperforming schools and districts that serve students of color. Cushman (1998)
states that qualitative educational researchers, “…without immersion in the community
would not have access to the private ideologies” of the research participants. According
to Mehan (2012), researchers do not simply observe and report the “brute facts.” Mehan
(2012) explained that researchers shape materials into interpretations because of their
engagement with individuals and artifacts in research settings.

As the researcher, I was aware of my personal biases and understand how my role
at the chosen site, where I am one of two prime evaluators of the entire staff, that I am
responsible for communicating the views, ideas and learnings of all participants. I also
communicated to the participants that I would be conducting this research in order to seek
their experiences and communicate them objectively. Finally, I described my role, as the
researcher, to aid the readers in understanding my analytic process and conclusions.
Mehan (2012) borrowed a journalist strategy, “on the record” and “off the record”
comments, to try to eliminate the ambiguity presented by access to insider knowledge.
Mehan (2012) explained that any information acquired not formally understood as a
research encounter would be categorized as off the record. According to Mehan (2012),
only the information that was acquired through announced interviews, public
presentations, or published documents would be used for data interpretations and
conclusions. At times, when the researcher received information off the record, the
researcher would introduce into a formal interview question and only if the interviewee
was willing to discuss the issue, then the information would be accessible as on the record (Mehan, 2012). Mehan (2012) stated,

In design research, the special relations developed between researchers and practitioners cut two ways. On the one hand, they facilitate entrée because some degree of trust has been established; on the other hand, readers may worry that our objectivity has been compromised. Rather than ignore or downplay these close relations, we acknowledge and make them visible in the analysis that follows. Therefore, our findings should not be viewed as a disinterested representation of the “truth.” Instead, they are our most thorough and informed representations of our interpretations, gathered from interviews, focus groups, and hours of participation in schools and communities. (p. 13)

Summary

The case study methodology was used for this research to identify the key learnings a high needs elementary school endured during the school improvement process to address the underperformance of students that can help the entire K-12 educational system seeking equity and excellence for all students. The following chapter will provide a rich description of the research findings.
CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The purpose of the study was to describe the journey of a high needs elementary school, leadership, staff, and parents, a School Improvement Grant (SIG) awardee, engaged in transforming into a learning organization focused on continuous improvement in pursuit of equity and excellence for all students. The goals, objectives, and outcomes of this study were to identify the challenges and successes using the Coherence Framework: Focusing Direction, Cultivating Collaborative Cultures, Deepening Learning, and Securing Accountability and understand how a SIG school successfully used additional funds to change student outcomes and address the underperformance of students.

The following overall research question guided this case study: What were the key learnings in the school improvement process by the district, school leadership, and staff that can make an impact on the entire K-12 education system for successful and sustainable coherent change in pursuit of equity and excellence for all students using the Coherence Framework: Focusing Direction, Cultivating Collaborative Cultures, Deepening Learning, and Securing Accountability? Specifically, the sub-questions were:

1. What were the successes and/or breakthroughs in transforming into a learning organization focused on continuous improvement in pursuit of equity and excellence for all students?

2. What were the barriers and/or challenges in transforming into a learning organization focused on continuous improvement in pursuit of equity and excellence for all students?
There were a total of three themes that emerged with the overall research question, which were: Professional Development, Collaboration, and Dedicated Time to Grow Educators. There was a total of five themes, subtopics varied among the themes, that emerged for research question 1, which were: Leadership (Personal Capacity, Lead the Change Know the Way, Develop Leaders), Setting Direction (Single Focus Over Time, Inspire and Align with Mission), Building Capacity (Instructional Coaching, Culture of Growth), Teaching and Learning (Curriculum, Aligning Resources, Learning Walks, Data-Driven Decision Making), and the last theme was a Safe, Positive, Supportive Environment. There were a total of three themes, subtopics varied among the themes, which emerged for research question 2, which were: Mindset, Ineffective Practices (Pedagogy, Teaching Practices), and Non-existent District-Site Partnerships (Lack of Understanding, Lack of Support, Lack of Systemness). Significant and/or representative examples are provided for each theme.

**Overall Research Question**

What were the key learnings in the school improvement process by the district, school leadership, and staff that can make an impact on the entire K-12 education system for successful and sustainable coherent change in pursuit of equity and excellence for all students using the Coherence Framework: Focusing Direction, Cultivating Collaborative Cultures, Deepening Learning, and Securing Accountability?

Three themes emerged as the key learnings in the school improvement process by the district, school leadership, and staff that can make an impact on the entire K-12 education system for successful and sustainable coherent change in pursuit of equity and
excellence for all students using the Coherence Framework: Focusing Direction, Cultivating Collaborative Cultures, Deepening Learning, and Securing Accountability which were: Professional Development, Collaboration, and Dedicated Time to Grow Educators.

**Professional Development**

Curriculum and instruction are at the heart of professional development. Hord and Roussin (2013), shared that change is promoted in a risk taking environment where everyone is committed to learning. Mateo Elementary needed to address the reading deficit problem at hand, and Coach Mia shared:

> We focused on helping teachers change their understanding of what reading is, which is still evolving. The teachers are delivering mini lessons. That was a very big change for teachers, but I think it is helping them become better teachers of reading.

Mateo Elementary’s achievement data depicted the need to focus on building the capacity of the educators in the building; thus, professional development provided an avenue in accomplishing this task. The administrative team was committed to strengthening the teaching and learning, which then affected teacher’s beliefs and understandings. Principal Amparo stated:

> The training first involved the teachers learning about GLAD, the research behind this program and its strategies. Then, while the academic coach taught a demonstration unit to a group of our students, the teachers sat in the same classroom with the second academic coach who was coaching the teachers during the live demonstration. It was great to see the teachers taking notes, observing and
writing down questions to ask, but the best part was seeing the students engaged and eager to learn the content.

It is evident that professional development has provided the teachers at Mateo Elementary with a better understanding of literacy. They have learned more effective strategies and practices to implement in their classroom which has brought back the fun in teaching and learning for all.

**Collaboration**

According to Principal Amparo, every Wednesday, school is dismissed early in order for teachers to collaborate, plan and/or prep materials if needed. Principal Amparo shared, “I’ve been here at Mateo Elementary for the last 5 years and I have never seen teachers work together, so I was excited to know that SIG would require teachers to collaborate.” According to Fullan and Quinn (2016) collaboration involves the development of social capital, which is the quality of the group. Mr. Abel added, “You can see evidence of folks working in PLCs without actually seeing the PLC because folks are speaking the same language, and when you go into every classroom, folks are using the strategies that they're learning.”

Leithwood and Louis (2012) stated, “Leadership effects on student achievement occur largely because effective leadership strengthens professional community— a special environment within which teachers work together to improve their practice and improve student learning” (p. 25). The school improvement process is an overwhelming task that requires commitment and dedication. The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), document number 8, which was created in partnership by the school district and the teacher’s union, outlined this expectation for all teachers who wished to stay on and
embark on the SIG journey at Mateo Elementary. A teacher from Mateo stated, “We are all doing the same thing. It's promoting collaboration within the staff, I feel that this year for sure I was able to plan more with my partner teachers.” Another teacher from Mateo stated:

During the PLCs, the academic coaches are there when we break off to address individual needs. They’ve been so helpful with my moderate to severe kids, like able to break down the curriculum to where I can teach it at their level.

**Dedicated Time to Grow Educators**

Hord and Roussin (2013) stated, “…school improvement or school reform really means that the school and its staff are changing how they do business” (p. 13). Mr. Abel shared:

Within SIG, we have an opportunity, once a week, to have more time for collaboration. Already within our district, we have late start Fridays, and we have six professional development days, so we have the structures in place, but we don't always have the appropriate system in place, and that's where we get bogged down again. Are we intentionally going through the cycle where we're not skipping any steps? The additional time allotted within SIG allows for teachers to go through that cycle more so than a non SIG school. What I'm seeing at Mateo again is the structure is there, the collaboration is happening, and the teachers are having conversations around teaching and learning.

Change was not easy, but SIG provided an opportunity to set high expectations of the teaching and staff and hold them accountable to the work that needed to take place at Mateo Elementary. The assistant principal shared that along with having an hour and a
half each week, the principal had decided to enforce the use of after school meetings a minimum of two hours a month, so the principal decided to connect it with the weekly SIG meetings twice a month. Coach Mia stated, “That hour and a half of SIG that the teachers are paid is invaluable! I don't think we would have the effect that we are having right now if we didn’t provide the ongoing professional development during that time.” Assistant Principal Lucinda stated, “It's all about giving that time. We need time to deepen the knowledge on best instructional practices, time to implement, time to work collaboratively, and time to analyze data and make instructional decisions.”

**Research Question 1**

*What were the successes and/or breakthroughs in transforming into a learning organization focused on continuous improvement in pursuit of equity and excellence for all students?*

Five main themes emerged as successes and/or breakthroughs in transforming Mateo Elementary into a learning organization focused on continuous improvement in pursuit of equity and excellence for all students, which were: Leadership, Setting Direction, Building Capacity, Teaching and Learning, and Safe, Positive, and Supportive Environment.

**Leadership**

The theme of Leadership was stated in all of the individual interviews, 6 out of 6 and stated in 2 of the 3 focus group interviews. “Although there can be multiple sources of leadership in schools, principals remain the central source” (Leithwood & Louis, 2012, p. 42). The Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services asked me if I wanted to continue at Mateo Elementary as the principal with SIG coming on board the following
year. Without hesitation I affirmed that I wanted to see SIG to the end because I wanted to witness and experience the transformation at Mateo Elementary. The theme of Leadership was furthered divided into three subcategories: Personal Capacity, Lead the Change Know the Way, and Develop Leaders. “

**Personal capacity.** Developing oneself is vital to any profession, but especially important in education because of the direct impact we have on children’s futures. As educators, it is important to continuously be an active learner, not only for ourselves but for our students. Mr. Abel stated:

Principal Amparo is currently working on her EDD, which has been helpful because she's constantly in research. She’s putting it into practice what she’s learning at her school site. She once said to me that we as educators should constantly be pushing ourselves to learn, to stay sharp, to renew our minds around what's out there, if not, we will get stagnant. SIG forces you to be a continuous learner.

**Lead the change, know the way.** Mr. Abel shared, “When Principal Amparo co-taught this year with a teacher, it was huge. It showed the staff, I'm not going to let you all actually do anything that I wouldn't do. That’s huge!” Coach Jordan stated, “Our site leader is willing to risk as well. Some of the strategies, foundations, and structures were new to her as well, but she was willing to go to the conferences and learn side by side with us.” It is impossible to know it all. As a leader, picking the right people is important. Everyone has different talents and skills. As a leader, you must surround yourself with people who will make you better. The instructional coaches I chose were very
knowledgeable candidates. They have a great reputation as teachers in the school district and believed in the philosophies as I did.

**Develop leaders.** As a leader, I have learned that most teachers want principals to make all the decisions so they have someone to blame or fault. Now, I understand that in order to have buy in, commitment and dedication, teachers need to take ownership; therefore, teachers need to be part of the decision making. Mr. Isaiah stated:

The leadership team is more helpful now. They actually help out in making decisions and explaining things to their peers sometimes. The first leadership group meeting was like crickets. You’d ask them to make a decision, and they could not make a decision. They wanted to ask everybody, but now they are much more willing to step in and make decisions. You have teacher leadership, and that’s important.

A teacher from Mateo stated, “Both administrators have been guiding us through this whole entire process, at least for me being new to the profession, they’re like a lifeline. They’ve helped me with the implementation of all these new strategies/models of learning into the classroom.”

**Setting Direction**

The theme of Setting Direction was stated in all of the individual interviews, 6 out of 6 and stated in 3 of the 3 focus group interviews. Meyers and Darwin (2017) stated, “…incorporating fewer schoolwide changes at one time allows teachers to be fully supported in their work, and to obtain some mastery or facility with specific strategies or programs” (p. 226). At the commencement of SIG, I had one instructional coach focused on reading and the other on math. This was overwhelming not only for the teachers, but
for the administrative staff as well, since we were responsible for professional
development and supporting teachers. After a semester, the team decided that reading
would be the priority and this continues to be a focus. Literacy is the foundation for all
other content areas and the students were struggling in this area, therefore, reading
because our focus. The goal was and continues to be that all students at Mateo
Elementary read at grade level. The theme of Setting Direction was furthered divided into
two subcategories: Single Focus Over Time and Inspire and Align with Mission.

**Single focus over time.** A support staff from Mateo stated, “It's not just do this,
and the next year it’s something different, and the year after it's something different.”

Mr. Isaiah stated:

If I had to pick one thing, I would say in this district it's a singular focus on one
thing for 2 years. Not just having a workshop and then we talk about it for a week,
and then we go to another workshop. That coherence by the leadership has been
the one thing that’s kept the eyes on the prize.

The administrative team was really focused on reading. We wanted to show our district
what it takes to transform a low achieving school’s reading achievement. Our goal was to
stay focused on what the research has been saying for the 30 years. The teaching of
reading is to teach: comprehension, phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary and
fluency, and it was important to teach all these components to the students every day.

**Inspire and align with mission.** Meyers and Darwin (2017) added that school
change was more likely attributed to principals who were strategic leaders. Weiss (1995)
defined a strategic leader as, “…one who has identified a “theory of action,” or an
explanation of the problems in a school and how they may be solved” (p. 99). As a
principal, who was pursuing a doctoral degree in educational leadership, the Coherence Framework by Fullan and Quinn became my beacon in leading the change at Mateo Elementary. Mr. Abel stated:

So, from my vantage point I think it always starts with leadership, and I think that at all levels there has to be a vision. Leadership has to know where they want to go, and so I think because Principal Amparo has been consistent about where she wants to go, and that hasn't wavered, that's very helpful. She has high expectations, and that hasn't wavered. She hasn't wavered because a challenge comes up, and she may get pushback here, or the PD may not go exactly the way she anticipated; yet, it hasn't changed the focus. I think because of that and focusing on a few things, it’s allowed the school, the site, to go deeper in regards to their own learning.

A support staff from Mateo shared:

The thing that has been instrumental in making change is the leadership, and it starts at the top and trickles down. Without a head, the rest of the body is just flaying around until all life is gone. We have a phenomenal leader here, our Principal Amparo. There will always be resistance to change, as humans are complex creatures of comfort. We like working from our comfort zone; however, if ‘comfort zone maneuvers’ are not moving Mateo Elementary School’s students forward academically, Principal Amparo will lovingly, empathetically, and assertively massage the ‘resistance to change kinks’ right out. So even though there's push back, she just keeps encouraging the staff and moving us forward inch by inch until we see the light at the end of the tunnel. When the leader has a
vision and is willing to go the distance to support the staff’s successful transition from point A to point B, by any means necessary, it’s going to happen, and it’s to be great for students, families and staff!

As the leader, I always tried to continuously remind the staff the reason we were doing this work. I also made time to celebrate the wins periodically to continue to inspire and encourage the staff. Mr. Isaiah stated:

One of the things that was decided early on was to have a focus on literacy, built on the idea these kids could not read at grade level. Very small numbers between 10 and 20 percent were reading at grade level. So, until they could read at grade level, they didn’t have a chance to do well on any of the standardized measures or any of the district measures or other things.

A parent from Mateo shared:

Well, the school’s goals, first of all, is to involve the students in reading, so that they will have a wide reading ability so that they can understand math problems and the rest of the stuff the school has, but the first thing is reading.

Coach Jordan stated, “Principal Amparo is part of the process and anticipates what the challenges might be and provides direction and inspiration along the path to success.”

**Building Capacity**

The theme of Building Capacity was stated in all of the individual interviews, 6 out of 6 and stated in 3 of the 3 focus group interviews. Fullan and Quinn (2016) stated, “Capacity building refers to the skills, competencies, and knowledge that individuals and groups need in order to be effective at accomplishing the goals at hand” (p. 6). Building Capacity was furthered divided into two categories: Instructional Coaching and Culture
of Growth. Building the capacity of teachers was not easy because many teachers feel that what they have been doing for the last 15 years is right. You have to build relationships and trust and show them that you know what you are talking about. Mr. Abel shared:

We had some teachers that were willing to take a risk, and that was part of the breakthrough. That you had teachers that were willing to have academic coaches in their classroom mattered, because when they saw their kids respond to the academic coaches around these strategies, it turned some folks into believers. They began to believe in their kids, and that started to spread.

Instructional coaching. Devine et al. (2013) stated, “Coaching is a powerful tool for personal change and learning” (p. 1383). A teacher from Mateo stated, “I don’t know how feasible it is to have academic coaches at every school site, but I think that’s what's made the biggest difference here and were able to see them model strategies.” Another teacher from Mateo stated, “The knowledgeable coaches have brought excellent best practices and have scaffold these best practices in our classrooms alongside us.” Coaching played a significant role at Mateo Elementary. The great thing was that the teachers at Mateo were accepting of their ideas and valued them. Another teacher from Mateo shared:

The academic coaches came in like a coach in any sport. They got close, pushed and prodded to show you things you never knew you could do. It was possible to be to be pushed out of your comfort zone to try better ways to approach instruction. They showed you things or habits you did not know you had.
Fullan and Quinn (2016) stated, “High-quality learning designs also incorporate opportunities for participants to use the new skills or knowledge in safe environments and then in their roles get feedback from peers or coaches (practice)” (p. 61). Joyce and Calhoun (2010) shared that coaching increases the likelihood that the behavior will be sustained as a regular practice by 90 percent, which should be valued as an essential. Mr. Abel stressed, “The impact of the academic coaches has been significant. They're working directly with teachers. They're modeling, they’re co-teaching. That slow release is happening, which allows teachers to build their confidence and take risks.” Coach Mia shared, “We were able to model for teachers, ways that they could teach their kids to be independent. So, getting the teachers to go from students being in rows the whole class, to seating students in small collaborative groups, was HUGE!”

**Culture of growth.** According to Fullan (2001), reculturing is a focus on how teachers come to question and change their beliefs and habits. A teacher from Mateo shared, “Educating our school on growth mindset was the first step to seeing significant academic growth in most of our students. Many misconceptions on how students learn and who can learn have been broken. The future looks promising!” Principal Amparo stated:

I remember last year one of my kindergarten teachers became very emotional in front of me. She said, “I can’t believe what a disservice I have been doing all these years.” Hearing a teacher reflect as a result of all the learning she was acquiring from our weekly Wednesday SIG professional development meetings, to me, signifies success. When a teacher can reflect and recognize that maybe
they haven’t been using the most effective strategies is great. Being able to see teachers make a change and grow from one year to the next is a success.

Coach Jordan shared, “All levels of staff have acknowledged that in order to meet our student’s needs, the only thing we can control is what is going on in the classroom.” Once teachers began to take a risk and change their teaching and learning, they began to believe in their students. Changing their mindset took time but is needed in order to move a school forward. Coach Mia shared:

Teachers are now saying, “Ok, the students can be independent, ok they can learn, ok maybe they are not the worst in this city.” I have not heard that not one time this school year, that these students are the worst kids in this city, I’ve not heard it once.

Assistant Principal Lucinda further added:

Another success is even though teachers are receiving ongoing professional development on CAFE, Daily 5, and GLAD, when we offered a book talk, which was optional, we had a large number of teachers wanting to do it. So, you have teachers now owning their learning, and that's huge because if you own your learning, you're wanting to grow and get better.

**Teaching and Learning**

The theme of Teaching and Learning was stated in all of the individual interviews, 6 out of 6 and stated in 3 of the 3 focus group interviews. According to William (2016), student achievement is influenced by the quality of the teacher and their teaching practices. The theme of Teaching and Learning was furthered divided into four
subcategories: Curriculum, Aligning Resources, Learning Walks, and Data-Driven Decision Making.

Mr. Isaiah stated:

I would definitely say without reservation that Mateo Elementary is a much different place two years down the road then it was two years ago, much, much different place. There are many classrooms that I would give the highest compliment I can, and that is, “I would have my child in those classrooms without reservation. I would put my kids in those classroom because I can see the instruction that is going on.”

Coach Mia shared:

The teaching has really come a long way. We now have small group instruction. We now have kids grouped in teams. They’re collaborating together. We have kids talking to each other. It’s less teacher-centered, and it's becoming more student-centered. We are still teacher-centered, but we are slowly seeing the teachers give kids more independence as they work in team tasks, as they are do their read to self, or as they work on their independent activities.

The focus for the first year of SIG was developing teacher’s pedagogy according to the administrative team. Almost everyone I interviewed spoke of the transformation the school has made within a short amount of time which coincides with what the administrative team shared. A teacher from Mateo shared:

For my moderate to severe kiddos, this year, especially, they really have had access, more than any other year that I’ve been here, to the general education curriculum. Implementing GLAD in my classroom has not only exposed my
students to the content, but they are understanding it and they are benefiting from it so that alone is huge for my special education SDC class.

At the beginning of the second year, the administrative team now wanted to ensure that the teaching and learning was in fact improving. Thus, the team chose several literacy assessments that all teachers were going to administer to measure progress. Mr. Isaiah stated:

As a result, the students are now achieving at a much higher rate. Kids are not falling farther and farther behind the longer they're here at Mateo Elementary. Kids that were a year behind are about a year behind now or a little less. But the kids who have been in this new system are doing very, very well with 90 percent of those kids achieving at grade level. That would be the kindergarten and first graders because we’ve been at it for two years, which is real encouraging.

Along with improved teaching goes improved learning. Students are more engaged and interested in their learning. A parent from Mateo shared, “I see that my daughter is more motivated to read when she did not read enough before, and today she is more focused on what she is reading because the teachers have motivated her.” A support staff from Mateo shared:

A couple of our kids who felt no success with their reading were just struggling and they felt that they couldn't do anything. Student A and Student B have now seen and felt the success because we are teaching them at their level. Now they're both at the point where they can read a book on their own, take a test, and pass it on AR.
**Curriculum.** According to Odden et al. (2007), schools that produce high levels of performance for all students focus on what they can control and not on what they cannot control, such as poverty, lack of healthcare, and the state testing system. Instead, these schools focus on the curriculum and the delivery of the instruction. A teacher from Mateo shared, “Having the CAFE model for teaching strategies was fantastic. CAFE allowed me to create and develop a curriculum that *would* fit for the students. It allowed a custom fit for the students I support.” Another teacher from Mateo Elementary spoke about the reaction her students made once she began using the different frameworks, structures, and strategies in her classroom. A teacher from Mateo stated:

> In the beginning of the year, we were using the district program for English language arts and then we switched over to the CAFE literacy model, and I just saw a huge difference in motivation and engagement in what we were doing for English language arts and even in writing with The Writers Workshop.

According to Odden et al. (2007), schools that are focused on improvement begin with a new educational vision, around the adoption of new curriculum, usually in reading and/or math, and a school-wide view of what effective instruction looks like in the classroom; ultimately, building capacity. When I first became a principal I had learned about Daily 5 and CAFÉ. It is amazing to see my teachers bring it to life in their classrooms. Students are more engaged and teachers are continuing to get better at it. A support staff from Mateo shared:

> SIG made it possible to hire additional staff (e.g., coaches for our teachers) that introduced new curriculums such as GLAD, Daily Five and CAFE, which created
opportunities for teachers to learn rigorous new methods of engaging children in learning, while making it fun.

A parent from Mateo stated, “The programs that you have the CAFE, the GLAD you're bringing all these programs now that probably you wouldn't have been able to if you guys wouldn't have had this grant. I see there's improvement. It's helping out.”

**Aligning resources.** With an infusion of money, it is vital that resources be aligned to a focused direction. Mr. Abel noted, “I think the additional resources allowed classroom learning environments to change because the new furniture that was brought in fostered more of a collaborative setting within the school.” Coach Mia stated, “Some of the important purchases were books for the classroom libraries. If we want kids to be readers they need to have access to books at all different levels to meet their needs, so that's been wonderful.”

Mr. Abel further added:

Also, teachers were starting to feel like, “Ok, I am valued because they're providing me with the resources that I need in order to implement these site initiatives.” Unfortunately, sometimes we have these site initiatives but it can't exactly be what we want it to be because we don't have the money to back it up with, but with SIG that's different.

Unfortunately, at times teachers do become frustrated because the things that they need to do a lesson are not always things they have. Asking teachers to incorporate daily read alouds and mentor text into their teaching meant we needed to provide those means. Teachers are definitely thankful for having all the materials at their fingertips. Mr. Isaiah shared:
Part of the thing is just being focused on literacy and not waiving all over the place for two years and continuing to build on that. So, when GLAD came in I know we were very cognizant about making sure that it was how GLAD fit in with the Daily 5 and CAFE, that they were already doing, so that it wasn't another thing. It was part of the same consistent, coherent program that you were offering to kids because when teachers see something as a new thing, they don't do what they used to do.

**Learning walks.** I learned that one of the actions in the SIG plan requires teachers, administrators, coaches, and parents to be a part of ongoing learning walks to see the progress the school is making. The principal shared that the first learning walk did not take place into the middle of the second semester. She felt that because the teachers needed time to grasp the pedagogy and work with the academic coaches, they would not be ready to participate in reflecting on the school’s initiatives and their practice. Mr. Isaiah shared:

> The learning walks was something that was transformative. When the teachers on leadership got a chance to go into other teacher’s rooms and see them teaching CAFE and Daily 5, it was like we’re all doing this. I think that was a real turning point because when they saw everybody was doing it. It wasn't just something people were told to do. We are a team, and we were doing it together. Then, they saw that everybody was doing it pretty well. People said, “Wow, I've never been in these classrooms. They do a great job.” and I thought that was good feedback for the teachers who were doing it. When the other teachers got a chance to go through classrooms, I thought that was really a turning point too, and it continues
to go on. There are some rooms that I would say made leaps and bounds, gains from this time last year to where they are this year, and the learning walks is what set that along.

As a principal, I have seen a tremendous value in teachers visiting and observing each other’s classrooms. Teachers are resources as well and they can learn from one another. Coach Jordan added:

The classroom walkthroughs that we do with our consulting staff and with other teachers have had a huge impact not only on teachers because they see what's going on in different classrooms, but on me as well. It's a continual ongoing process of what is really going well here. Walkthroughs have been an impetus for learning and trying new strategies and programs for teachers and coaches. I think it's good for all of us to continually be a part of the walkthroughs as it provides formative data for improvement.

**Data-driven decision making.** Ultimately to improve student performance, teachers must use data (Mandinach & Jackson, 2012). At Mateo, the administrative team developed a timeline of the different literacy assessments teachers were going to administer every eight weeks and then immediately after analyzing the data to make instructional decisions moving forward. The CDE (2015) shared that schools and districts in California now had an opportunity to reconfigure themselves as learning organizations focused on continuous improvement and accountability systems. Mr. Isaiah stated, “The assessment program have all been part of things that helped make breakthroughs.”

Principal Amparo stated:
Seeing the actual data for kindergarten and first grade is amazing! It’s impressive to see that the students who began their school experience under CAFE and Daily 5 are scoring on the literacy assessments in the 80s, the 90s and that they're reading at grade level. It’s awesome to see that these students who come from a high needs community and are affected by the different things that go on in their lives are able to do it.

The goal is to transform data into knowledge, onto which actions can be taken and used in the classroom. The state’s assessment data does not always convince the teachers the need to reflect on their teaching, but the literacy data we were asking teachers to collect and analyze allowed them to reflect and take ownership. Teachers were seeking more effective ways to teach particular concepts to their students. Assistant Principal Lucinda stated, “Now, teachers have the data and are able to recognize what deficits their students might have. They are also able to provide the support that is needed, which may be decoding, fluency, word study skills, etc...”

Safe, Positive, and Supportive Environments

The theme of Safe, Positive, and Supportive Environments was stated in 5 of the 6 individual interviews, and stated in 3 of the 3 focus group interviews. Schools that provide a comprehensive web of support for the whole child ensure that students become successful. Part of the SIG plan was that Mateo Elementary would have a full time assistant principal and a counselor who would assist with the demands of the high-needs schools and engage staff in addressing any barriers that were impeding their learning. Mr. Abel stated:
I think that having the counselor was huge. Having her on board to help support the social emotional learning piece and some of the just day-to-day things that our students are dealing with that we need to support and handle.

Assistant Principal Lucinda shared:

We have a counselor who works in conjunction with the administrators to provide guidance to achieve behavior expectation and resources for students who need social emotional support. The school counselor also provides valuable lessons within the class to ensure students learn valuable social skills.

Addressing the needs of the whole child are important nowadays if you want to affect a student’s academic progress. When I interviewed the parents, they spoke about how safe the school felt and how comfortable they were if their child was under any danger. A parent from Mateo stated:

I feel that my kids are very well taken care of here, not just by the principal but by the rest of the staff. I don't have to worry at home. I have a peace of mind with everything that goes on in the schools all over the world. When something happens, things are taken care of. There's already been, I don't know how many lockdowns. You know things, and the kids tell me, or I'm at home and I don't feel like I have to run over to the school or call or anything. I feel it'll be fine.

Parents also spoke about how the school feels like a home to a lot of these children. A parent from Mateo stated:

The students feel more welcomed here, unfortunately, than their own home. They feel safer here. They feel more cared for, I even, I want to say loved. This is why
they always want to be here. They come and learn, and they know that, but they also know that this is a safe place for them.

Mateo Elementary has been implementing Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) for the last few years. This school year, the PBIS team decided to rebrand their behavioral expectations to coincide with the instructional initiatives being taught to the students. The principal shared that everything we do here at Mateo Elementary needs to connect to each other, a coherent system. A support staff from Mateo shared:

I notice that kids are always so rude to each other. That's one of the things that I really, really hate when they are bullying each other. Now that we have this program, it's like the way I thought it should be, but the principal made it so vividly that everybody can see it. It's so easy and once you try it yourself, you change the words you're going to say. The students look at you like you're crazy, but once you start talking to them in that manner, when they are not behaving, “Ok, so how are you going to solve the problem? This is how I would solve the problem.” It took me a long time, but they're stopping and they're thinking. In the old days, they would get mad and that was it. You couldn't help them, and we were being too loud too, but now we are trying to use a positive approach, a softer voice, being more lovable, and more kind. I noticed the way the counselor talks to them it's like, “Wow! I want to learn from her.” When I see her teach a lesson in the class, it is with so much ease. We're getting to the point that instead of bullying, we can do the opposite and help others be more kind to each other, and I love that. I love that!
Research Question 2

What were the barriers and/or challenges in transforming into a learning organization focused on continuous improvement in pursuit of equity and excellence for all students?

Three main themes emerged as barriers and/or challenges in transforming Mateo Elementary into a learning organization focused on continuous improvement in pursuit of equity and excellence for all students, which were: Mindset, Ineffective Practices, and Nonexistent District-Site Partnership.

Mindset

Mindset was stated in all of the individual interviews, six out of six and stated in two of the three focus group interviews. Mindset revealed that the staff had a fixed mindset prior to the SIG implementation, especially since the school was on a downward trajectory which has impacted the school’s staff beliefs, ideas, and attitudes. Mateo Elementary was chosen because they were identified as a Tier 1 school. California defines Tier I schools as the lowest 5 percent of elementary, middle, or high schools. Mr. Isaiah stated:

All that put together; kids achieving at low levels led to a belief that these kids had a difficulty in learning. I think that was a pervasive belief here at Mateo. Not all teachers, but even people who wouldn't say it out loud would say it to themselves.

As an educational leader it is important to have high expectations and believe that all your students can achieve success. A teacher from Mateo shared, “A great challenge
and at the same time a barrier to overcome for the students, staff, and whole school in
general was a poor growth mindset.” Brock and Hundley (2016) stated:

Those with a fixed mindset have bought into the idea, often from a very early age,
that things like intelligence and other talents and abilities are of a fixed nature –
they cannot be changed. A fixed mindset believes people have a certain amount of
talent and intelligence in any given area. In other words, if you aren’t naturally
gifted at something or don’t catch on to it right away, you might as well forget it.
Often people of the fixed mindset work very hard to shed light on those areas in
which they “naturally” excel and cover up areas in which they don’t. (p. 12)

Coach Mia stated, “It was really hard for the teachers, because part of it was their belief
system. Teachers would say to me, “These kids are difficult. They can’t learn. They can’t
behave. These are the worst kids in this city!” Teachers’ mindset began to shift when the
the instructional coaches began to work in their classrooms and model for them. Teachers
were surprised and amazed to see their students attentive, engaged and eager to learn.

Ineffective Practices

The next theme that emerged was Ineffective Practices which was stated in six of
the six individual interviews and two of the three focus group interviews. Ineffective
practices was furthered divided into two subcategories: Pedagogy and Teaching
Practices. The data collected exposed the use of outdated instructional practices which
explains why the students at Mateo Elementary were underperforming. The principal at
the site, who had been there prior to the implementation of the SIG plan described the
coming of SIG as a blessing for Mateo Elementary. Principal Amparo spoke about how
change needed to occur for these children. Assistant Principal Lucinda described it as,
“You could see that it was very worksheet driven and the kids were basically copying, not learning, copying what the teacher put on the board, and everybody was doing exactly the same thing.” Coach Mia described it as:

It was just whole group teaching, I can’t think of one classroom that was not. All the desks were in rows, so it was very teacher centered. I would say all the rooms had very few charts, anchor charts. There was also a lack of print rich environments.

During my observations, I was able to see small group instruction occurring in the classroom. I also saw students working in groups and collaborating with peers.

**Pedagogy.** Teachers play a vital role in the lives of students. One of the prevalent ideas that was continuously shared among the interviews was that the teachers lacked knowledge. Principal Amparo stated, “The majority of the teachers do not know instruction or how to teach reading.” An action in the SIG plan requires teachers to work an additional hour and a half per week which will take place outside of the school day, for Professional Learning Community collaboration and/or professional development activities. Mr. Abel stated, “One of the challenges was the amount of training, the amount of professional development that was needed. There was some frustration from the teachers because they didn’t feel they needed it, even though they did.”

Prior to SIG, teachers had become stagnant in their own professional learning. They were not continuous learners and they did not believe they needed to be. Teachers are now asking for specific types of professional development. Their classrooms have transformed. The students’ desks are no longer arranged in rows but in groups to allow
for collaboration. Store bought posters no longer decorate the walls. Instead, classroom walls flourish with anchor charts made by the teacher with their students.

**Teaching practices.** Teaching practices are shaped by a teacher’s mindset, which in turn, impacts on how students see themselves. Assistant Principal Lucinda shared:

I think that, at first, the challenge was teachers didn’t understand what was needed to take place in this transformation. Teachers thought, “How can we get outside support to help these students?” and not so much, “I’m the one that needs to change.” Slowly, teachers began to understand that it was some of their own instructional practices that had to change and that's when it was like, “Oh, I'm not ready for that change!”

A teacher from Mateo stated:

I think, for me, the most challenging part has been change. I had my schedule set, and I've only been teaching for five years, so I can only imagine how some of these teachers that have been teaching for 15 or 20 felt. Through SIG, we’re really revamping and taking a look at what our instruction looks like all day, so I think change has been a big one.

Another teacher from Mateo stated, “It’s difficult to process that you need change and that it will begin today. That process makes your self image wonder what you have been doing for years.”

**Nonexistent District-Site Partnership**

The next theme that emerged was Nonexistent District-Site Partnership which was stated in six of the six individual interviews and one of the three focus group interviews. Nonexistent District-Site Partnerships was furthered divided into three subcategories:
Lack of Understanding, Lack of Support, and Lack of Systemness. Nonexistent district-site partnerships revealed how the site was working in silo and their frustration because they want the district to learn from this grand opportunity, SIG.

**Lack of understanding.** A common idea that was shared among the interviews was that at the beginning teachers did not understand what reform was going to look like, feel like, and entail. Mr. Abel shared, “Not having the union really understand what SIG was about caused some challenges as well because now they're getting pushback from some of their members around what SIG is, and they don't understand it either.”

Johnson, Marietta, Higgins, Mapp, and Grossman (2015) stated, “…policies and practices succeeded when they were continuously informed by the knowledge, skills, and experiences of educators from all levels of the system” (p. 49). Johnson et al., (2015) further added, “The essential ingredients for success was whether a district could implement a theory of change effectively” (p. 20). Mr. Abel stated:

The last piece is that within our system, the whole continuous improvement process, and what that looks like is new for us, the district. Some of us have an idea because of the Plan, Do, Check, and Act cycle. We have an idea, but that's not all of it. That's just a component of it. So, it was just understanding that the continuous improvement process is slow, and there is a method to it and certain steps. If you skip a step, you’re more likely not going to get it right. There are certain tools that you can use, but it's going to require you to go through a cycle where you're going to pull data or study data and we're not used to doing that. So, it was wanting to go from just what we think we know, not necessarily what's out there in regards to the research because we have dollars. The thinking in the
district is, just align some things that we want to do without really going through a brainstorming process, really looking at what implementation will look like from every vantage point including all stakeholders and then monitoring. So, those are some of the large challenges that we have been getting and still continue to work through.

Unfortunately, the district is more preoccupied with raising test scores instead of building a strong literacy foundation. If students cannot read or write, then how will they be successful on the state’s assessments, CAASPP? Coach Mia stated, “I don’t even know if the district supported the Daily 5 or the CAFE because I don’t think they understood it.”

**Lack of support.** The administrative team shared that part of the SIG plan was that teachers would receive an hour and a half of professional learning weekly and how they felt unsupported at times because of how the district messaged certain actions within the SIG plan to the staff. Assistant Principal Lucinda explained that elementary schools have early release days on Wednesdays and per the contract between the district and teachers, that time is designated as your planning or prep time. Principal Amparo shared:

The year before implementing SIG, the planning year, we had district administrators speak to the staff and they said, “Oh you'll be able to plan on a Saturday at Starbucks and get paid for it. This was not necessarily true, because as a leader, collaboration must take place between peers in isolation at Starbucks. So, the challenge with the staff, at first, was they didn't want to have to come on Wednesdays to room 30 which is our professional development room and receive professional development. Teachers were under the impression that they could decide how to use the weekly SIG time.
Assistant Principal Lucinda further added, “If the SIG time would have been on a Tuesday or Thursday, ok, you still have your planning or prep time and then our professional learning SIG time would be at a separate time.”

Mr. Isaiah shared,

The district leadership varies. Sometimes it’s to the point of almost micromanagement and at other points non-existent, and next month, you don’t know what it's going to be. It could be one or the other or both from different people.

Coach Jordan stated, “The district needs to at least step in once in a while and actually witness what is going on and pay attention to how our data looks differently than it did before. Unfortunately, as a principal I have encountered the district’s lack of support a numerous of times. At the end of year 2, I had a teacher vacancy to fill and instead of allowing us to set a criteria, the district’s stance was that the position must first be offered to teachers labeled “mandatory transfers”.

**Lack of systemness.** The purpose of SIG is to reform the school and in that process learn from it so that it can impact the entire system. In my opinion, I do not think the district really understands what is going on at Mateo Elementary. As a SIG school, I feel as though we are not valued or important. The district needs to be more involved so that they can learn from this opportunity and create systems to improve the entire district. For instance, one thing the district has learned from our SIG experience is the need for instructional coaches at the site. Thus, the district is now hiring and placing an instructional coach at each of the elementary schools. The instructional coaches at Mateo Elementary first had to start with building teacher’s pedagogy. Instead, the district has
hired a publishing company, of our newly adopted ELA materials, to train the
instructional coaches on their program and how to implement it. We continue to make the
same mistakes. We continue to train and expect our teachers to become textbook
dependent instead of making sure they truly understand how to teach reading and how to
diagnose when a student is struggling and how best to support the student. Mr. Isaiah
shared:

The district needs to be more coherent with the goals here at Mateo. The district
and the union all have agendas, and they have staff development the teachers go
to. It's not all on one thing so you could really focus. It's like this or that, let's go
to PLCs, or we’ll go to this or we’ll go to that. It would be helpful if all the things
were all lining up.

Coach Jordan stated:

The professional development that has occurred to create the changes in mindset,
instruction, PLC, and student successes is imperative, as well as the support staff
not only when it comes to coaches but counseling professionals to serve and
match student SEL needs. The sustainability of mindset change happens when
teachers know they know they are going to have that continued support. It is what
is best for our students, and the district's focus should match that.

Summary

The themes related to the Overall Research Question were: Professional
Development, Collaboration, and Dedicated Time to Grow Educators. For Research
Question One not only did themes emerge but subtopics as well, which were: Leadership
(Personal Capacity, Lead the Change Know the Way, and Develop Leaders), Setting
Direction (Single Focus Over Time, Inspire and Align with Mission), Building Capacity (Instructional Coaching, Culture of Growth), Teaching and Learning (Curriculum, Aligning Resources, Learning Walks, Data-Driven Decision Making), and Safe, Positive, and Supportive Environment. For Research Question Two, themes and subtopics also emerged, which were: Mindset, Ineffective Practices (Pedagogy, Teaching Practices), and Non-existent District-Site Partnerships (Lack of Understanding, Lack of Support, Lack of Systemness). Chapter 5 provides conclusions, implications, recommendations for future research, and a final reflection based on the data presented in Chapter 4.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter 5 will begin with a brief overview of the purpose statement and research questions. Following will be the conclusions, discussion, implications, recommendations for further study, and concluding statements. The purpose of the study was to describe the journey of a high needs elementary school, leadership, staff, and parents, a School Improvement Grant (SIG) awardee, engaged in transforming into a learning organization focused on continuous improvement in pursuit of equity and excellence for all students.

The following overall research question guided this case study: What were the key learnings in the school improvement process by the district, school leadership, and staff that can make an impact on the entire K-12 education system for successful and sustainable coherent change in pursuit of equity and excellence for all students using the Coherence Framework: Focusing Direction, Cultivating Collaborative Cultures, Deepening Learning, and Securing Accountability? Specifically, the sub-questions were:

1. What were the successes and/or breakthroughs in transforming into a learning organization focused on continuous improvement in pursuit of equity and excellence for all students?
2. What were the barriers and/or challenges in transforming into a learning organization focused on continuous improvement in pursuit of equity and excellence for all students?

Conclusions

Based on the interview data and the documents I reviewed, five conclusions emerged to help guide a school that is going through the school improvement process
wanting to achieve successful and sustainable coherent change in pursuit of equity and excellence for all students. My first conclusion is school improvement begins with a principal’s vision, which must be purposeful, clear, focused, and consistent. As a leader, setting the direction is vital. It is a leader’s job to engage all stakeholders onto the same purpose. A purpose to eliminate the educational inequities that exist.

My second conclusion is that professional development plays a major role in the school improvement process, but the quality and consistency of professional development can either assist or impede progress. From my readings and experience, professional development always tends to be a solution to reform. Being identified as a school improvement school is not ideal but knowing that professional development will play an important role in this process provides a leader with hope for true improvement and progress. The data in this study supported that professional development must be focused on building the capacity of teachers through high quality and consistent professional development opportunities. It is the teachers that will make the difference and make an impact on student learning.

My third conclusion is that instructional coaches are a fundamental piece in creating change in a low achieving school. The instructional coaches at Mateo Elementary have created and delivered professional development under the guidance of the principal. They have also been able to support teachers to take their learning from theory to application. When literacy is a goal for the school, instructional coaches must be knowledgeable literacy coaches who can also work well with teachers.

My fourth conclusion is that in order for a school to transform into a learning organization there needs to be devoted, sacred time, weekly and ongoing, which is
dedicated for professional learning and collaboration. Much of what is heard and learned about in professional development is not put into practice because of the time needed to work alongside colleagues and coaches. Teachers are accustomed to working in isolation until the leader establishes the why. Once teachers understand the why, the leader must create the system, the how and what.

My final conclusion is that schools must be funded equitably. Schools can either succeed or fail, but the necessary components must be provided to address the inequities that exist. SIG funds made it possible to hire two instructional coaches and one school counselor at Mateo Elementary, who have made a great impact on staff and students. The instructional coaches have made an impact on teacher’s instruction and delivery. The counselor has provided social emotional support for students and families. These funds have also contributed to purchasing abundant classroom and school library books for students to create rich literacy environments. This grant shows the need to funds schools equitably in order to support the transformation of a low achieving school into a learning organization, which should be aligned to the focus, direction, and needs of the students.

Mateo Elementary School was identified as a low achieving school based on the 2015 California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) data. Based on my learnings of Mateo Elementary, the students and staff are progressing. Student’s performance and progress in reading is improving based on California’s statewide student assessment as shown in Table 8. The percent of students scoring Above Standard in reading increased for all grade levels. Grade 3 decreased the most percent of students scoring Below Standard in reading by 22 percent. Grade 4 has the largest percent, 46 percent, of students scoring Below Standard in reading and also was the only grade level
that did not decrease the percent of students scoring at Below Standard in reading in 2018. Grade 5 stayed the same in terms of percent of students scoring in the Below Standard in reading.

Table 8

Comparison of CAASPP Claim 1 Reading 2015 to 2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mateo Elem</th>
<th>Below Standard</th>
<th>Near Standard</th>
<th>Above Standard</th>
<th>Growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 3</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 4</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 5</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 6</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALL</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Adapted from the California School Dashboard.

The CAASPP system also provides achievement data by student group, in which Mateo Elementary’s English Language Arts data also shows improvement. There was an increase of 6 points schoolwide as shown in Table 9.

Table 9

Comparison of Percent Proficient on ELA SBAC by Student Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Groups</th>
<th>2015 ELA Percent Proficient</th>
<th>2018 ELA Percent Proficient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Schoolwide</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socioeconomically Disadvantaged</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Learners</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with Disabilities</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Adapted from the California School Dashboard.

The student group with the largest increase of 8 points was the Socioeconomically Disadvantaged student group. All student groups increased with the exception of the
English Learner and Students with Disabilities student groups. The groups with the most significant achievement gap are the Students with Disabilities, English Learners, and Black or African American student groups.

**Principal’s Vision Purposeful and Focused**

Unless a principal’s vision is clear, targeted, consistent, and purpose driven, it will not affect change. According to Bishop (2011) effective leaders reduce educational disparities when they have a clear sense of purpose and establish goals focused on improving student learning. This is done through inspiring collective efficacy. Principal Amparo stated, “It is our moral imperative to address the underperformance of these students.”

Hattie (2009) explains that collective teacher efficacy can make a positive difference if, in fact, the school staff believes it can collectively accomplish great things. Leithwood (2008) labels it as setting direction, which is, “…one of the main sources of motivation and inspiration for the work of the staff” (p. 46). Before SIG, setting the direction was difficult because I felt as though we were all over the place, especially with the overwhelming initiatives and expectations set by the district. Most of my time was not focused on instruction but on parent concerns and student behaviors. With the additional staff, I was now able to focus my direction on teaching and learning.

According to Leithwood (2008), the four specific practices in the school are building a shared vision, fostering the acceptance of group goals, creating high performance expectations, and communicating the direction. A teacher from Mateo shared,
The goal here at Mateo was to have growth as an educational organism in which there would be the selection of picking the best strategies for kids and letting less effective strategies cease, to have change and courage to update our practices and being willing to embrace that change.

All the participants I interviewed could articulate the school’s vision, which is literacy. The SIG Professional Learning Survey Analysis, document number 3, was given to the teaching staff of the three SIG schools. The survey asked teachers to describe what was working well at their respective schools. One teacher from Mateo stated, “Having SIG meetings allows for promotion of school goals.” As the principal, SIG ensured that time would be provided to address the student’s needs, but without a clear, targeted, consistent vision, nothing would have changed, and that is not the case at Mateo Elementary.

**Growing Educators through Professional Development**

Teaching and learning is directly linked to a teacher’s knowledge and skills. Southworth (2011) shared that a school can have the best people, leaders, standards, and programs, but it will never perform well, unless the teachers have the knowledge and skills to help every child learn. Not only did Mateo Elementary teachers lack knowledge or skills, but they also did not believe in their students. The majority of the teachers at Mateo are veteran teachers, who have only worked at Mateo Elementary their whole career. When I first heard that Mateo Elementary was selected to receive the SIG grant, I was not thrilled. Being identified as a low achieving school in the state is disheartening. As I began to read the state’s requirements for implementation, I became hopeful. This was an opportunity, so I thought, to remove all of the ineffective teachers at Mateo and
finally hire teachers who wanted to work and make a difference. This was not the case at Mateo Elementary. I, as the principal did not have any input on the teaching staff. Most of the teachers were entrenched with bad habits and believed that all work asked of them should take place between the hours of 8:00 am to 3:00 pm. They did not stay after school unless it was required of them. There was a profound lack of knowledge amongst staff. Fortunately, with the additional staffing who believed in the same vision made it easier to embark on the journey.

Fullan and Quinn (2016) stated,

Capacity refers to the capability of the individual or organization to make the changes required and involves the development of knowledge, skills, and commitments. Collective capacity building involves the increased ability of educators at all levels of the system to make the instructional changes required to raise the bar and close the gap for all students. (p. 56-57)

Principal Amparo shared that in order to build collective capacity professional development was going to address pedagogy and instruction. Part of building capacity is being able to reflect on progress. Principal Amparo shared,

Part of the SIG plan requires site Learning Walks to take place. I knew teachers were not ready to walk through each other’s classrooms to learn from or provide feedback until we built teacher’s knowledge and skills. We were not ready until the middle of the second semester to participate in a site Learning Walk. Not only did the first site Learning Walk go very well, but teachers along with the administrative team were able to learn from and plan next steps for the site as a whole.
According to Mateo Elementary’s Site Leadership Team Agenda/Minutes, document number 2, the team noted that many of the site’s initiatives were being implemented. The following list depicts what the team observed as evident on their first site walkthrough: evidence of CAFE, high student engagement, differentiation, positive happy classroom cultures, small group instruction, individual conferencing with students, individualized instruction at their level, and evidence of Daily 5 tasks. Mr. Abel stated,

It must bring a principal joy to go into every classroom and observe folks speaking the same language, or seeing them use the strategies that they're learning about through professional development and actually see them play out in the classroom.

As the principal, I saw the SIG as an opportunity to address the needs of the students as well of the teachers. We were able to design professional development to address those areas of need and build teacher’s capacity, grow educators.

**Knowledgeable Instructional Coaches Increase Sustainability**

Educational practices are unlikely to change just with the best professional development training. Ongoing coaching is needed. McIntosh and Goodman (2016) stated, “Although training is a key driver, it is important not to assume that providing quality training will lead to improved implementation” (p. 213). According to McIntosh and Goodman (2016) coaching not only assists teachers in developing skills to fluency, but it also supports in transferring the learned knowledge and skills from training to the classroom. Having a coach lessens the fear of doing it wrong or forgetting a step. It allows teachers to take a chance because the assistance and guidance is something they can count on.
As a principal, modeling for teachers is a challenging and daunting task, but with SIG Mateo Elementary was able to hire two instructional coaches under the direction of the principal. Prior to SIG, there were a lot of behavior issues in the classroom due to lack of classroom management strategies as well as engaging lessons. The teachers at Mateo Elementary did not believe that their students could work independently. Thus, with literacy being our focus we chose Daily 5 as a classroom management structure to help teachers along with CAFÉ, a literacy framework to help teachers teach reading. Once the instructional coaches began to model and support, teachers’ mindsets and beliefs began to change.

One of the key findings that was shared in the SIG Professional Learning Survey Analysis, document number 3, was that 100 percent of the staff indicated that academic coaching had been somewhat or very helpful in impacting their own practice and instructional support. Teachers also had an option to describe one component of the professional learning that is working well at their respective schools. The following are a few responses that were shared by a few teachers from Mateo Elementary:

- The technology support and professional learning has really helped me implement technology into my classroom on a daily basis.
- I have enjoyed the Academic Coaches coming in and sharing NEW strategies with us and modeling them in the classroom.
- The coach coming in and doing CAFE lessons.

Based on the interview data and document review, it is evident that coaching has had an impact on professional learning and teacher’s practices. Knowledgeable instructional coaches have supported the school’s transformation into a learning organization focused
on continuous improvement because they are there to guide and support the work of the teachers.

**Dedicated Time for Professional Growth**

It is vital that teachers have sacred dedicated, weekly and ongoing, time for collaboration. A principal must set aside time to build capacity or for internal accountability. How can we expect change to occur if time is not given for continuous improvement? Teachers need time to learn, implement, reflect, and then refine. Assistant Principal Lucinda stated, “Our SIG time is to deepen teacher’s learning, then have them implement the research based instructional practices and strategies with the students, and then monitor how the students are responding to their instruction.” Sustainability occurs when teachers have time to learn and continuously improve. Assistant Principal Lucinda stated,

Time has to be given to teachers to be able to collaborate. You have to have that opportunity to work on whatever day it is, Wednesday or Friday, but time to constantly go back and deepen your learning, reflect on your practices, and look at your student data.

**Collaboration.** According to Leithwood (2008), creating structures and opportunities for teachers to collaborate is a practice identified as instructionally helpful. Before SIG, elementary school early release days are Wednesdays. Students are released at 1:25 pm which allows teachers to plan or prep from 1:25 pm to 3:00 pm. Most of the teachers at Mateo Elementary rarely met with each other to plan. Teachers were more concerned about having to take work home, so whatever they could do to lessen that load
they used their Wednesday time for. SIG required time for teachers to learn and collaborate. A teacher from Mateo stated,

Lately, Assistant Principal Lucinda has really been helping both moderate to severe classrooms. We’re brainstorming, we’re like planning next steps, we’re taking a look at what our instruction will look like right away. At first, we were trying to decide what our sessions together were going to look like. We were just really taking that hour and a half of PLC to look at instruction, plan and then see what our next steps are.

If an initiative is not deemed important, the goals of the initiative will not be achieved. Thus, creating a system that allows for a structure of collaboration must be a priority. At the onset of SIG, teachers were not happy with coming together for meetings, I had to strategically assign seating so that teachers would sit among their grade level peers and begin to build a relationship. Today, teachers portray our SIG time, as if they have always worked this way. Building the structure was not easy and continues to improve, but the system was needed in order to allow for discussion, learning and improvement. SIG established the need for the system, and the district was able to work with the Teacher’s Union to use the weekly early release Wednesday for this work. Again, without this time, change would not have taken place at Mateo Elementary.

**Internal accountability.** Bishop (2011) stated that in order for data analysis to occur, “…collaborative problem-solving and decision-making discussions about the relationship between teaching practice and student outcomes” must take place (p. 32). Southworth (2011) refers to it as monitoring, which includes analyzing student progress and outcome data, visiting classrooms, observing teachers at work and providing them
with feedback. The focus is on the quality of instruction and the performance of students.

Two initiatives that have helped move Mateo Elementary School forward are literacy assessments and Learning Walks.

**Literacy assessments.** In education, we continue to make the same mistake over and over. Without proper data, we are clueless as to the best solution to a problem. As a principal, performance is crucial and raising test scores is a priority for any administrator. We grow impatient and begin to look for alternatives, such as the next new thing because of our state’s student achievement results. The teachers at Mateo Elementary were textbook driven and relied on the assessments provided by the textbook publishers. In order to know the student’s deficits in reading, we still were not asking the right questions or seeking the best answers. Once teachers had a better understanding of reading, the administrative team selected a number of literacy assessments for teachers to administer and analyze periodically to better meet the needs of their students. Coach Jordan stated,

> After the second cycle of testing and data collection, when teachers saw the results, it was made very obvious to them that these students can succeed, and this group might need a little bit more help. I think they realized how data informed their instruction. We're using the data collection more as a formative assessment, which is so critical to planning instruction in the classroom to meet all the students needs.

This process has been valuable in really building teacher’s capacity and focusing on addressing equity and excellence for all students. Mateo Elementary’s data shows an improvement in reading as shown in Table 10.
Table 10

**Mateo Elementary School’s Literacy Data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District Metric</th>
<th>District’s Expected Outcomes</th>
<th>Actual Outcomes</th>
<th>2017-2018</th>
<th>2018-2019</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ESGI Educational Software for Guiding Instruction (Language)</td>
<td>Kinder: 90</td>
<td>Kinder Status: 95</td>
<td>Kinder Status: 91.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DORA</td>
<td>Grade 1: 2.0</td>
<td>Grade 1 Status: 1.11</td>
<td>Grade 1 Status: 2.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagnostic Online Reading Assessment</td>
<td>Grade 2: 3.0</td>
<td>Grade 2 Status: 2.03</td>
<td>Grade 2 Status: 2.42</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Comprehension)</td>
<td>Grade 3: 4.0</td>
<td>Grade 3 Status: 3.46</td>
<td>Grade 3 Status: 3.58</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grade 4: 5.0</td>
<td>Grade 4 Status: 4.17</td>
<td>Grade 4 Status: 4.89</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grade 5: 6.0</td>
<td>Grade 5 Status: 5.88</td>
<td>Grade 5 Status: 5.66</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grade 6: 7.0</td>
<td>Grade 6 Status: 7.37</td>
<td>Grade 6 Status: 7.56</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STAR Star Assessments for Reading</td>
<td>Grade 1: 2.0</td>
<td>Kinder Status: 0.0</td>
<td>Kinder Status: 0.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Grade Equivalent)</td>
<td>Grade 2: 3.0</td>
<td>Grade 1 Status: 1.5</td>
<td>Grade 1 Status: 2.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grade 3: 4.0</td>
<td>Grade 2 Status: 1.9</td>
<td>Grade 2 Status: 2.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grade 4: 5.0</td>
<td>Grade 3 Status: 2.7</td>
<td>Grade 3 Status: 3.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grade 5: 6.0</td>
<td>Grade 4 Status: 3.2</td>
<td>Grade 4 Status: 4.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grade 6: 7.0</td>
<td>Grade 5 Status: 4.0</td>
<td>Grade 5 Status: 4.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Grade 6 Status: 4.4</td>
<td>Grade 6 Status: 5.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DIA/ELA BM1 District Interim Assessment</td>
<td>Percent of Students</td>
<td>Grade 1 Status: 44.4%</td>
<td>Grade 1 Status: 53.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benchmark 1</td>
<td>At or Above the Target</td>
<td>Grade 2 Status: 44.2%</td>
<td>Grade 2 Status: 42.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Grade 3 Status: 48.1%</td>
<td>Grade 3 Status: 42.9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Grade 4 Status: 51.7%</td>
<td>Grade 4 Status: 53.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Grade 5 Status: 55.5%</td>
<td>Grade 5 Status: 54.6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Grade 6 Status: 54.8%</td>
<td>Grade 6 Status: 59.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DIA/ELA BM2 District Interim Assessment</td>
<td>Percent of Students</td>
<td>Grade 1 Status: 75.3%</td>
<td>Grade 1 Status: 80.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benchmark 2</td>
<td>At or Above the Target</td>
<td>Grade 2 Status: 48.9%</td>
<td>Grade 2 Status: 58.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Grade 3 Status: 50.5%</td>
<td>Grade 3 Status: 41.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Grade 4 Status: 54.0%</td>
<td>Grade 4 Status: 57.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Grade 5 Status: 50.3%</td>
<td>Grade 5 Status: 43.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Grade 6 Status: 45.6%</td>
<td>Grade 6 Status: 42.9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Adapted from District’s Assessment and Accountability System, IO Education.*

**Learning walks.** Principal Amparo explained that part of the SIG plan was to conduct monthly classroom walkthroughs. Teams consisted of teachers, administrators, coaches, external partners, and district administrators. Before SIG, a Learning Walk was unheard of at Mateo Elementary. It has now become common practice. A teacher from Mateo stated,
I think the learning walks were great. I think one of the things teachers obtain are the really good ideas they see in other people's classrooms. It is not just good implementation on CAFE or GLAD but those differentiated inputs observed during the walkthroughs are so valuable. Seeing how the teacher is becoming an expert in an area of new curriculum spurs us on to greater works ourselves.

Learning Walks helped create a culture of learning and wanting to improve at Mateo Elementary. Teachers have now begun to not only look onto coaches for support but their colleagues as well. Learning Walks have sparked the teachers to begin building trusting relationships among themselves.

**Alignment of Resources**

A SIG grant provides an abundance of funds, but the alignment of how that money should be spent is critical to the work. It is necessary that resource allocation be aligned to the visions and goals of the school. Coach Jordan stated,

Having professional books and online resources for teachers to access and read is important for their professional learning. I can refer to resources when I'm having a discussion on planning or how CAFE looks in the classroom or how this literacy strategy should be taught in the classroom. I can refer back to the actual resource, it isn't just coming from me, this is coming from a research-based source. I can show the book and say, “Let's look at it together.” Not only do I have access to it but I can show the teacher you have access to this, this is how it works, and this is what it looks like in your classroom. The amount of reading material for students has had a huge impact and I think that's part of what makes teachers excited is that they actually have the materials they need to teach.
Thus, funding our most neediest schools will support the focus and create change, which is what these students deserve.

**Discussion**

The theoretical framework, the Coherence Framework, was the lens I used to analyze the data I collected in learning how Mateo Elementary School was able to transform into a learning organization focused on continuous improvement. The Principal used this framework to guide her work with the implementation of the School Improvement Grant plan.

**Focusing Direction**

From the interview data, setting a single focus over time was a subtopic under the theme Setting Direction. Many of the data interviews stated that being focused on one thing and going deeper each professional development or meeting on that same thing helped bring consistency, which began to change mindset and build a system of coherence within the school. Each year that the SIG plan was being implemented, a site visit was planned to hear about the school’s journey and then visit classrooms and see what has been happening at Mateo Elementary School. This visit was attended by all external partners. At the end of each visit, the partners would share their feedback on what they felt the school was doing well and their suggested next steps for the site with the administration team. Document number 5, the SIG Partner Walkthrough Feedback notes, stated the following:

- There is a clear focus on Daily 5, CAFÉ, and GLAD.
- The teacher’s language is the same in every classroom and it is evident that the staff is moving together.
As for their suggested next steps, it was good to hear that their suggestions were exactly in line with mine.

This is why Mateo Elementary has made growth and is transforming into a learning organization. The principal along with the administrative team were focused on a few goals that are aligned to research and are best practices for students. As Fullan and Quinn (2016) stated, “…it involves a combination of a small number of ambitious goals being relentlessly pursued” (p. 7). Coach Mia shared,

Principal Amparo is the one who’s saying we are going to meet together in this room. We are going to plan together. You’re going to be assigned a person. I'm going to support you and if it wasn't for her being consistent in that message I don't think it would work.

**Cultivating Collaborative Cultures**

Collaboration was a key learning in the school improvement process. Fullan and Quinn (2016) stated, “…collaboration, involves the development of social capital. Social capital is the quality of the group…” (p. 6). As a principal, you have to create opportunities for teachers to collaborate and once they experience it they will want to continue working in that manner. It’s about working smarter not harder. At Mateo Elementary I saw teachers who had never worked together before to now working alongside one another even on their own time.

This past year, the staff attended a week long professional development on the use of GLAD strategies. I knew teachers would need time to implement and time to practice on using the strategies. Each GLAD unit took about six weeks to teach. Since this was their first time teaching a GLAD unit, the staff decided as a school to teach the first unit
longer. At the end of the first unit, I had asked the teachers to reflect on their learnings and implementation. Document four, the GLAD Unit 1 Reflection Form, asked teachers to list three things that went well, two things they learned, and one thing they would do differently in the next GLAD unit. The following were some of the reflections made by a few teachers from Mateo Elementary:

- Planning with my team went well.
- Working with my grade level team is what went well.
- Planning details was helpful and collaborating with other teachers was beneficial.

On a separate occasion, the district’s technology department visited Mateo Elementary to conduct a site walkthrough. Based on the Technology Site Visit Walkthrough Feedback Notes, document number 6, the feedback they provided to the staff was:

- Grade levels were at the same place for pacing.
- There is evidence of planning and collaboration.

Again, as a principal it is critical to set up a system which allows for collaboration. Being mindful and strategic will develop an effective teaching and learning environment for all.

**Deepening Learning**

Fullan and Quinn (2016) state, “…if you mix in good pedagogy as the driver (versus technology) as part of the content of capacity building and social capital exchanges, you get a triple benefit” (p. 6). Teacher’s pedagogy and skills was an area of weakness for the teaching staff at Mateo Elementary School. Principal Amparo shared, “In order to transform the teaching and learning, we needed to focus on building
teacher’s knowledge.” Based on the SIG Partner Walkthrough Feedback Notes, document number 5, a feedback shared by the external partners was:

- It is evident that professional development is transferring knowledge into practice.

The teaching staff at Mateo Elementary School also have had the unique opportunity to attend conferences within and out of state to continue their professional learning due to SIG. Part of a principal’s job is to instill in teachers the internal drive and commitment to be a continuous learner. It has been gratifying to see that not only the students at Mateo Elementary are making progress, but to see that passion for teaching and a commitment to getting better is becoming part of the teaching staff. In document number 7, Capturing Teacher’s Voices: Understanding the SIG Experience Survey, a teacher from Mateo shared,

I didn’t think at my age or at this stage in my career I could learn more, but I can.

I’m much more focused with what I teach and how I lesson plan as well.

Everything is relevant and I focus a lot on literacy.

As a principal, we must model continuous learning. We must stay relevant and set high expectations of our staff.

**Securing Accountability**

From the interview data, many participants shared how data has played an important role this school year. According to Mandinach and Jackson (2012) a strong leader must make data as an essential and communicate clear expectations for data use.

Mandinach and Jackson (2012) stated,
The biggest barriers to data use include time, the lack of professional development, teacher preparation, the lack of technical skills for the data systems, the preparation of principals, the lack of a clear vision, system usability, data not considered useful, and the timelines of the data, all of which can be incorporated into district’s planning and vision.

Principal Amparo shared,

Data can be powerful, but with a clear vision and at a specific moment. Timing is everything. My teachers weren’t ready to collect data and analyze it the first year, but now the data has been very helpful because teachers are now prepared and the data is valuable to them.

Data begins to create a culture of ownership. Teachers begin to question themselves for students’ missed opportunities. They stop blaming the student and begin to reflect on what they could have done differently. I’ve seen some teachers seek suggestions and recommendations on their teaching from the instructional coaches at Mateo Elementary due to the data analysis they did. Principal Amparo shared,

I’m seeing that teachers are owning the data. For instance, one teacher in particular was analyzing his data. He was getting disappointed with himself, beginning to realize that his students had not made the progress he expected and instead regressed and thus, he needed to do something different.

The parent participants from Mateo Elementary spoke about the transparency the principal has created at the school. Parents are well informed about the schools initiatives, the data by grade level, and also participate in Parent Learning Walks, so they
too can learn and see the progress of the teaching and learning at Mateo Elementary. A parent from Mateo Elementary stated,

At the parent meetings, Principal Amparo give us information as to how we are doing. Where we are at. Where the students are at. What we need to do. What you guys are working on. What your teacher meetings on Wednesdays and Fridays are all about. What you're trying to get the teachers to learn so that they can then take it from there and they can teach it to our kids. Principal Amparo is letting us know all of that. She’s not keeping us out of anything, for example, she presented her data presentation that she prepared for cabinet, in which she compared our kinder data to the highest performing school within the school district and WE’RE UP THERE and that means a lot for us!

Leadership

According to Fullan and Quinn (2016), a leader is someone who works with others to determine how the four components of the coherence framework go together to create coherence. It is the principal’s role to take the site’s goals and build coherence. The principal must show the staff how the four components are all linked together and work with one another. Fullan and Quinn (2016) stated,

…being vigilant about reducing distractors, helping with professional capacity building, using student and other data transparently for developmental purposes, building in strategies for implementers to learn from each other on an ongoing basis, and marking progress with lots of feedback and supportive intervention.

(p.7)
As a leader, I have learned that it is important to focus on one thing at a time. Overwhelming the staff, will only be a set back and not a step forward in the right direction. Capturing Teacher’s Voices: Understanding the SIG Experience Survey, document number 7, noted “The professional development and training given to teachers through SIG has resulted in almost immediate changes to their teaching philosophies and lesson planning strategies.” The document also noted, “Teachers find the process of learning and implementing new materials and curricula with grade-level partners and coaching support on a weekly basis to be particularly effective.” Lastly, the document also stated, “SIG supports have led to teachers interacting with source materials and each other in new proactive ways, such as informal conferencing about what teaching strategies work best for specific students or challenging subject areas.” Thus, based on the interview data and document review, it is evident that the leadership at Mateo Elementary has been able to build coherence by taking all four components of the Coherence Framework to transform Mateo Elementary School into a learning organization. Principal Amparo last thoughts were,

Although many things are going in the right direction, we still encounter bumps in the road, but I don’t allow this to change my course. Equity and excellence for all students is what we are striving to achieve here at Mateo.

Implications

This section includes recommendations for changes in educational practices and policy based on the case study’s findings as it relates to transforming into a learning organization focused on continuous improvement. Sahlberg (2015) documents that the way Finland improved their education system was to improve the teaching force, limiting
student testing, placing trust and responsibility before accountability, a focus on equity in
education, and school- and district-level leadership to experienced education
professionals.

The United States must develop an inspiring vision of what good public education should be. Each state and LEA within each state must comply and provide the necessary resources and supports. Then, each site principal must be held accountable to that vision. According to Sahlberg (2015) once there is a vision of what good public education should be, politics and public service will make a commitment to having a great public school for every child, equity in education. Thus, all students will have access regardless of sex, status, or ethnic background.

This can be done, such as, Canada has done it. Fullan and Quinn (2016) shared Ontario’s story, which spoke about how the government set out to improve the whole system. According to Fullan and Quinn (2016), “Ontario used a focused capacity building strategy linked to all schools and districts, which has had significant gains in literacy, numeracy, and high school graduation rates” (p. 36). Therefore, Canada focused on having staff well-trained, and aligning their school’s resources on literacy. They also created tests and assessments to identify schools or individuals who were struggling and needed support. As of today, Canada’s population literacy rate is recorded at 99 percent.

Universities within each state that offer teaching degrees must train and prepare future teachers and administrators well in literacy instruction. Also, each state should require all educators to continuously engage in educational research and learning throughout their profession. According to Sahlberg (2015) there needs to be, “a systematic development of respectful and inspiring working conditions for teachers
and principals” (p. 9). The U.S. needs to build world-class teacher education programs. These programs must be rigorous, selective, and must have a focus on literacy. The profession must also require ongoing education, so that the educators of our children are knowledgeable and effective their entire career. Education is the foundation to so many other careers that it is important that teachers and administrators be respected and acknowledged for their work.

District-level leadership must use assessments to identify which schools or individuals are struggling and need support. Mediocrity should not exist in education. If an educator is not up to par, then dismissal of ineffective educators must take place. As it was shared in several interviews, the district in which Mateo Elementary is a part of isn’t really involved with the implementation of SIG. Principal Amparo stated, “They are more focused on putting out fires and not necessarily on the things that matter. They need to develop systems and structures and truly reflect on their moral imperative.”

As the principal, there are educators within our building who are ineffective. They lack classroom management, knowledge, and skills. District administrators depend on site administrators to correct the problem. As we begin to bring to light the inadequacies a teacher has, union leadership gets involved and then support from district administrators begin to fade away. As a result, we have low achieving schools.

Recommendations for Further Study

This case study described the journey of a school creating coherence and implementing a system of continuous improvement. Based on the conclusions of this type
of study, the following recommendations are made to expand the understanding of how learning organizations are developed and sustained:

- Further research into the specific development of adults’ growth mindset and how it relates to the process of continuous improvement. Change is difficult and at times unwanted, but is a necessity if progress is to be made. At the beginning of our SIG journey, many teachers were resistant and blamed the student for their low academic achievement. At the end of the third year, the teachers in the building were no longer blaming the student but applauding the work that was taking place and believing in their students and themselves.

- Further research into a longitudinal study to investigate the correlation of the transformation to state assessments. Once the students promoted from Mateo Elementary School and transitioned to the middle school, students were reading two or more years below their grade level; therefore, literacy instruction needed to be the focus. After the second year, we began to see the difference as a result of teacher’s reading instruction and beliefs. Another year is still needed to build teacher’s capacity, because of deficit skill set amongst the staffing. CDE (2016) stated,

> The LEA’s task is to develop or adopt a set of competencies and use them to conduct a rigorous selection process to identify teachers and staff who possess the knowledge, ability, and skills necessary to support all students in a school turnaround environment. (p. 4)

Although the state provided requirements, my district did not screen existing teachers. The majority of the staff were veteran teachers with most of them only having taught at Mateo Elementary. Instructional change has taken time at Mateo
Elementary and after the fourth year, once the majority of the students are reading at grade level, I believe the staff can focus on state standards.

- Further research into best practices for maintaining a culture of growth, especially with staff turnover, because the work of building coherent systems is never done. Sustainability depends on the administration, instructional coaches, and teacher leaders of a site. Site leaders are constantly changed and each one brings their experience and outlook on what the focus should be at the site. Thus, teacher leaders play a role in sustainability. Their role is to share the journey. Teacher leaders must lead the way by cementing those best practices and high expectations of each other and staying the course even with staff turnover. Instructional coaches can help support new teachers to the school with the learnings from the previous year or years and help with implementation moving forward.

- Further research into the specific skill sets leaders must possess to encourage an environment of trust and growth. As a leader, I am passionate about what I do. I try to inspire and motivate those around me through my core values, such as integrity and honesty. I promote shared leadership, yet building trust with the staff is still challenging. Over the period of SIG, the staff has called the union, but in the end, there has been no grievance because I was in the right. Assuming good will by all staff still is an issue. At times, I believe that gender can influence an environment of trust and growth.

- Further research into specific assessment data and its implications for use in decision making for instructional purposes. The teaching of reading is not an easy undertaking but is imperative in an elementary setting. A multiple subject
credential in California requires future teachers to learn about all content areas, which makes it problematic for prospective teachers to truly know how to teaching a student to read. Thus, were the literacy assessments selected by Mateo Elementary the best measurement tool used?

Concluding Statements

This research came at a time in my career where I got an opportunity to lead change. It was change that I had been seeking for years and at the same time had lost my focus on over the years. As an educational leader, we become interrupted with the daily busy stuff that does not make an impact on student’s education. As an educational leader we must not become blinded or distracted by the many things that come at us, but stay morally grounded on what our beliefs are and what are hopes are for the children we serve.

In high school, I never met my counselor nor had they reached out to me as well. I never had the opportunity to take honor courses let alone AP classes. Going to college wasn’t talked about in my home. It wasn’t until one day in the fall of my senior year, I attended a presentation in the auditorium. He shared information and new insights to something I had never thought of nor dreamed about. An early admissions event for high school seniors with a 3.0 grade point average or higher.

Education is very important, and we know it can open the door to many possibilities. Not only do my own children know the world of possibilities at their feet, but I want the same thing for each of the students I serve. Despite the barriers, my students can achieve the unimaginable. Educators and parents must stop creating roadblocks. We should be working together to guide our students to success. I didn’t get to where I am at because of luck but because of hard work and determination. I was given
an opportunity and I took it. I do not want to continue hearing, “These kids can’t do it.” I want to help and support educators see the need and believe in the need and provide an opportunity to all the students I serve.
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APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

1. What has been your role in Mateo Elementary’s school improvement process?

2. What has been happening here at Mateo?

3. What were or are the barriers/challenges in transforming Mateo into a learning organization focused on continuous improvement?

4. What have been or are the successes/breakthroughs in transforming Mateo into a learning organization focused on continuous improvement?

5. What has been instrumental in making change?