Reading, Writing, ' Rithmetic and Relationships: Advisories, the Fourth R in Enhancing Student Achievement?

Marilynn Patterson Grant
St. John Fisher College

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Abstract

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By

Marilynn Patterson Grant

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by

Dr. Jason Berman, Dissertation Chair
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May 2010
We recommend that the dissertation by

Marilynn Patterson Grant

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Be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Education Doctorate degree.

Jason Berman, Ed.D., Chair

William Stroud, Ed.D., Committee Member

03/23/10
Date
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Biographical Sketch

Marilynn Patterson Grant is the former Deputy Superintendent for Teaching and Learning in a mid-sized urban public school system. She formerly served as Lead Principal of a 2,000-student (dual complex) comprehensive high school from 2002-2006. During her tenure, the school was ranked #24 among America’s Top High Schools in a Newsweek-Washington Post Poll. Mrs. Patterson Grant is a native of Washington, D.C. She attended the University of Rochester from 1971 to 1975 and graduated with a B.A. in History. She earned her M. S. in Education Curriculum from the University of Rochester in 1982. Mrs. Patterson Grant attended S.U.N.Y. Brockport from 1985 to 1987, earning her Certificate of Advanced Study-School Administrator/District Supervisor Certificate. She joined the second cohort of the Ed. D. program in Executive Leadership at St John Fisher College in the summer of 2007. Mrs. Patterson Grant’s research focused on an exploratory examination of the predictive capacity for AVID Elective (advisory) students’ sense of membership, coupled with academic press, to influence some measure of proficiency in student academic achievement. Her research was conducted under the direction of Dr. Jason Berman, Committee Chair, and Dr. William Stroud, Committee Member.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction and Purpose

Two-fifths of the nation's secondary schools enroll more than 1,000 students. Secondary schools with more than 1,500 students have doubled in the last decade (Institute for Local Self Reliance, 2008). In 2006, a mid-size urban school district laid claim to a 39% cohort graduation rate. Urban communities are challenged by increasing numbers of young people dropping out of high school. Ideas are emerging around the degree to which large schools breed student isolation, alienation, poor achievement, violence, and increased dropout rates. The small school movement's focus on personalization represents a response to social, economic, and political forces that require new approaches to educating young people. Personalization is an effort to take into account individual student characteristics and needs in organizing the learning environment (Cotton, 2001). Research appears to support a positive connection between a personalized learning environment and improved student outcomes (Feldman, Tung & Ouimette, 2003). While small size may nurture relationships, it cannot create or guarantee students' academic focus and achievement. Limited research focuses on examining how the social support given to students, coupled with a sustained focus on student learning, might result in greater student engagement and improved levels of student achievement.

This first chapter of this dissertation introduces the purpose, the statement of the problem, the theoretical rationale, the significance of the study, research questions and
null hypotheses, definitions of terms, and a summary of the remaining chapters.

**Statement of the Problem**

Schooling in America has been shaped by a range of social, political, and economic forces (Murphy, Beck, Crawford, Hodges, & McGaughy, 2001). The emergence of the small schools movement in the 1970’s represented yet another response to social and political forces that required novel approaches to educating young people, particularly those in an urban context. Small schools exist based on the premise that each child should be known, viewed, acknowledged, and charged to the care of at least one caring adult. “Qualitative studies of smaller schools have observed a genuine sense of belonging (membership) for both students and teachers, higher expectations for student engagement, and fewer distractions within the learning environment” (Myatt, 2004, p. 770). Across America, communities are challenged by increasing numbers of young people dropping out of high school. Alienated youth are seeking solace in gang affiliation and associated acts of violence. Their lack of engagement is further exemplified by declines in student learning and too few young people exposed to challenging curricula (French, Atkinson, & Rugen, 2007). Advocates for small schools perceive the movement as an antidote to disengaged, alienated, and low-achieving youth who are primarily confined to the large, impersonal social organization and structure of comprehensive high schools.

The 20th century was the era of urbanization and the foundation for the establishment of large high schools. These comprehensive high schools were characterized by “more than a thousand students, dozens of teachers of many specialties and facilities that would not have been practical without the enormous increase in scale”
These facilities served as the cornerstone of urban neighborhoods. Conant (1959) characterizes the traditional purpose of the comprehensive high school as an arena in which: a basic education is provided to those assuming the mantle of citizenship, students are introduced to a plethora of skills to support their gainful employment, and a foundation for post-secondary education is established.

The small schools movement fosters personalization, an effort to take into consideration individual student characteristics and needs in organizing the learning environment (Cotten, 2001). An emerging body of research appears to support a positive connection between a personalized learning environment and improved student outcomes (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). Deborah Meier (1998), a pre-eminent leader in the small schools movement, describes these schools in these ways:

It helps if schools are of a reasonable size, small enough for everyone to be known well by everyone else, and for schools and families to collaborate face-to-face over time. Small enough so that children belong to the same community as adults in their lives instead of being abandoned in adult-less subcultures. Small enough to both feel safe and be safe. Small enough so that phony data can be easily detected by any interested participant. Small enough so that the people most involved can never say they weren’t consulted (p. 89).

Applying this laser-like focus on personalization in the mid-1970s, Meier facilitated the establishment of Central Park East Elementary School in Harlem, New York. Central Park East and similar schools premised their existence on the desire to know, view, and acknowledge each child individually and to charge at least one caring
adult with the responsibility for the academic, social, and emotional development of each student. Through the financial support of organizations (such as the Carnegie Corporation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation), small school advocates and urban school districts (such as Boston, Chicago, and Philadelphia) led the charge in advancing a new vision for how, and in what spirit, students are educated, particularly at the secondary level. Michelle Fine and Janis Somerville (1998) contend that small schools support the cognitive and social maturation of students, their parents, and their teachers. They maintain that the small school environment sustains student achievement at exemplary levels and provides educators exceptional pedagogical experiences; as such, the small school is a powerful mechanism for urban educational reform.

Within the small school model is a keen attention to the social and structural organization of the school. The social and structural dimensions of the school are perceived as “integral parts of a relationship-driven, collaborative way of running a high school” (Gewertz, 2007, p. 23). A key dimension of the small school focus on personalization is the concept of advisory. Forte and Schurr (1993) define advisory as “An affective educational program designed to focus on the social, emotional, physical, intellectual, psychological, and ethical development of students” (p. 117). According to Osofsky, Sinner, and Wolk (2003) key elements of an advisory include:

1. Each student has an adult advocate to personalize the student’s learning experience.

2. The high school attends to students’ academic progress in varied ways to support their ability to show what they know and are capable of accomplishing.
3. The decision-making process is inclusive and supports the involvement of students, parents, and staff. Members of the school community experience a sense of ownership, participation, and a vested interests in the atmosphere of the school.

4. Educators generate a sense of caring to their pupils and exhibit a responsibility for student learning.

Research supports a positive connection between a personalized learning environment and improved student outcomes (Gladden, 1998; Raywid, 1999; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999; Cotton, 2001; Feldman, Tung, & Ouimette, 2003; Gewertz, 2007).

Advisory is perceived as a means by which learning is intimately tied to the development of relationships between adolescents, educators, and the subject areas taught (Strike, 1998).

Meeting at specific times, groups of students in advisory interact with a key adult during the course of the school day. In most instances, students remain connected to the same adult over the course of several years. This time is devoted to providing young people and adults a forum for engaging in study in a small-group setting. Advisory time includes these areas of focus: student engagement in academic activities, communal activities, dialogue centered around the holistic development of students, and a keen focus on shared concerns or interests (French, Atkinson, & Rugen, 2007).

AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) is a national program incorporating dual attention to the affective and cognitive dimensions, as is the case with small school advisories. The term AVID is derived from the Latin term avidus, meaning "eager for knowledge." Established in 1980 in a San Diego English classroom by Mary
Catherine Swanson, AVID is a fourth- through twelfth-grade system focused on supporting the development and college readiness of under-achieving students in the academic middle. Two critical components of the AVID program are: the Student Success Path, a sequential program focused on building academic skills, and the Peer Support (AVID Elective) where students work in groups in which there is a focus on shared goals (AVID, n.d.). Swanson’s answer to supporting the academic achievement of underserved students was the establishment of the AVID Elective—a program that establishes high standards and provides students with the social and academic support to be successful. This program currently serves approximately 300,000 students in 4,000 elementary and secondary schools. Students enrolled in AVID have been identified as having the potential to enroll in college and achieve academic success. Student potential is advanced through a keen attention to academic instruction and the provision of supports specifically designed to prepare them for a 4-year college entrance and experience.

AVID is structured to enhance learning within a school in a systemic manner. The focus on students in the middle, particularly those traditionally least served in public school systems, is designed to ensure that students “will succeed in rigorous curriculum (Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate), will enter mainstream activities of the school, will increase their enrollment in 4-year colleges, and will become educated and responsible participants and leaders in a democratic society” (Swanson, Contreras, Coto, Furgeson, & Gira, 2006, p. vii). A key element of AVID is the AVID Elective class. This class meets for five hours every week. During the course of the week, two hours are devoted to ensuring students have exposure to the skills required for college
entry. Two hours are also devoted to the use of study groups that are often facilitated by college students (frequently AVID Alumni) serving as tutors. The remaining hour is used to engage students in motivational activities, field trips, and the acquisition of academic survival skills. A typical AVID Elective curriculum would include: test-taking strategies for college and career; a focus on math/reading concepts and strategies, instruction on note-taking, time management, and research skills; writing for learning; inquiry learning strategies (Socratic Seminar); college/career speakers; service learning experiences; and portfolio development (Swanson, Contreras, Coto, Furgeson, & Gira, 2006).

The AVID Elective teacher does not engage in the traditional notion of impassive students being the recipients of knowledge. The role of the AVID Elective teacher is one of a “guide, facilitator, and coach in a learning community of teachers, students, and tutors working together for the success of the group” (Swanson, Contreras, Coto, Furgeson, & Gira, 2006, p. 116). The social support associated with advisories in the small school setting are also present in the context of the AVID Elective and the primacy given to collaboration. The AVID Elective class serves as an arena in which students are encouraged and pushed. “Whether working in study groups, sharing their writing in reader-writer workshops or read around, students know they can trust other students to support their learning and to provide another source of feedback and new ideas” (Swanson, Contreras, Coto, Furgeson, & Gira, 2006, p. 3). It is believed that this type of context engenders within students an appreciation for their collective intellect and further promotes a collective thirst for knowledge. This social support augments individual learning and a powerful synergy within the AVID classroom as students support, challenge, and learn from each other. High school represents a period when acceptance
from peers carries real significance in the lives of students. AVID is designed to engender within students a sense of community among similarly minded and focused students. Some AVID programs perpetuate this sense of membership and community through the display or wearing of the AVID logo among students. Consistent recognition of individual student accomplishments is yet another tool used to support a sense of membership and pride.

Several research studies support the efficacy and success of AVID as a tool to support student achievement and college readiness. The success of the program has resulted in schools in California receiving state funds to support AVID programming. The Research, Evaluation and Technology Division of the California Department of Education has conducted longitudinal studies of AVID since 1986. Some data reflective of the impact of AVID in California include: “95 percent of AVID students enroll in college; 77 percent enroll in four-year colleges/universities; 84 percent of AVID students statewide completed the ‘a-g’ curriculum (college preparation); 98 percent of AVID students graduate from high school.” (California Department of Education, n.d.)

Do advisories and similarly constituted programs such as AVID hold out the possibility of greater academic success, particularly for urban youth?

The ultimate examination of any high school, large or small, lies in its ability to graduate students and prepare them for post-secondary success. This challenge to educate and graduate more students has become more of an imperative in light of the federal legislation known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). NCLB purports to establish a foundation to improve the academic achievement of all students by 2014. The standards and test requirements associated with an extensive accountability system lead
some small school advocates to question the degree to which the plight of urban youth is indeed made better. Better schools, increased equity, and more accountability for results were the articulated by-products of this federal legislation. Despite the promises conveyed, small school advocates identify a range of issues that spell peril for schools, particularly those serving poorer urban students:

1. Reducing all school success measures to one test [reading, math, science] score, will result in the quality of schools declining;

2. A focus on testing the curriculum is narrowed, leading to the most ineffective teaching practices becoming the norm;

3. Under NCLB, the children of the poor will receive even more limited instruction, curriculum, and school experiences because their schools will be the first reported in need of improvement; and,

4. NCLB with its mandates will make public schools even less accountable to the publics they serve and will further erode public trust and extend greater control as schools are forced to meet testing standards set by state bureaucrats (Meier et al., 2004, pp. xii-xiii).

Increasingly, urban educators supportive of the small school movement see issues of equity as a hallmark for the spirit in which they work with students. The small, personalized autonomy associated with the small school movement and advisory is potentially challenged in urban districts where testing mandates, required protocols, and mandated programs and materials reign supreme. According to Dan French (2007), “Educational equity is today’s most crucial civil-rights issue. Yet, [urban] schools are increasingly constrained in their practices through the heavy hand of the No Child Left
Behind Act” (p. 4). NCLB presents significant policy implications for the small school movement and potentially calls into question this legislation’s perceived capacity to support students’ academic growth and greater equity in the urban public school sector. Galassi, Gulledge, and Cox (1998) state that “[t]he enduring effects of advisory programs are unknown at this time when judged from an empirical research perspective” (p. 16).

According to Lee and Smith (1999), “Reforms that are directed primarily to improving personal relationships between students and teachers as a means to improve student learning miss something important” (p. 937). Recent research examines the social support given to students and how this support, coupled with a sustained focus on student learning within the school community, results in higher achievement. McDill, Natriello, and Pallas (1986) refer to this sustained focus on supporting student learning within a school as academic press. Lee and Smith (1999) conclude that social support is positively associated with increases in student learning. Schools where academic press is a priority support student learning to a greater extent. However, high levels of social support in a school were insufficient in supporting student learning if academic press was not an inherently strong attribute in that school context. The findings suggest that “only in schools with an organizational thrust toward serious academics does social support actually influence learning” (p. 937).

The purpose of this study was to explore the predictive capacity for AVID Elective (advisory) students’ sense of membership (engagement/communality), coupled with academic press (academic emphasis), to influence some measure of proficiency in student academic achievement. The study examined students’ perceptions around the degree to which they experience a sense of membership (engagement communality) and
academic press (academic emphasis) in the context of a 9th grade AVID Elective (advisory) class. An 18-question survey and an analysis of scores on English Language Arts and Math benchmark assessments were used to determine what impact, if any, the two variables had on students' academic achievement levels. The results of the study will inform efforts to provide an optimal context in which to better engage, educate, and support the achievement of youth at the secondary level.

The next section of this paper highlights the key theories or theorists that inform this focus on membership and academic press.

*Theoretical Rationale: Caring/Membership*

A sense of membership or belonging has long been perceived as a critical element of American education. John Dewey (1924), the Father of Modern Education, identified these two roles for American schools: to meet the needs of the greater community by nurturing students into their roles as citizens and to support students' ethical, moral, and social skills; and habits of mind. Indeed, social interaction serves as a platform for learning. Yet the attributes originally associated with the comprehensive high school were devoid of any attention to the affective domain. Conant (1959) describes the comprehensive high school as historically a context in which students were recipients of a basic education designed to prepare them to assume the mantle of citizenship. It was an arena in which students were introduced to a plethora of skills to support their gainful employment or their transition to post-secondary institutions. The small schools movement's focus on personalization has dual implications for educators as they open themselves personally and professionally to knowing about and caring for their students. The personal implications reside in individual educators extending themselves to their
students as concerned and caring adults. The professional side resides in educators' ability to critically assess often discreet nuances associated with the learning process and with how individual students make meaning and sense of knowledge.

Larrivee (2000) contends that caring must be a purposeful school goal and serve as an antidote to the often fragmented lives of many students. Perhaps the most prolific theorist to write on the concept of caring in the education arena is Nel Noddings. Noddings (2005b) states: “The desire to be cared for is almost certainly a universal human characteristic. In schools, kids want to be cared for. They do not want to be treated ‘like numbers,’ or by recipe” (p. 17). Noddings firmly places the discussion of caring in the realm of an ethical and moral requirement (Flinders, 2001). Noddings frequently alludes to an authentic caring that emerges from every human remaining cognizant to having been the recipient of such affective characteristics. Noddings emphasizes a higher order of caring, *ethical caring*. This level of caring reflects an acknowledgement on the part of the recipient that they are in a relationship with another that is characterized by “receptivity, relatedness and engrossment.” Noddings (2005) states: “The cared-for recognizes the caring and responds in some detectable manner. Without an affirmative response from the cared-for, we cannot call an encounter or relation caring” (p. 2).

Noddings (2005) readily admits that caring relationships alone are not the answer to all that ails students and our public educational system. Yet she holds firm to the idea that caring relations provide sustenance to pedagogical endeavors. For Noddings (2005b), ethical caring inherently embodies a commitment to implementing changes in the way in which education is structured, particularly the curriculum and the manner in
which it nurtures a context supportive of relationships. As such, caring becomes the foundation for successful educational endeavors and a tool for educational reform. Education guided by an ethic of care would be characterized by:

1. A recognition that there are centers of care and concern in which all people share and in which the capacities of all children must be developed;
2. An education should nurture the special cognitive capacities or intelligences of all children and that this requires a scheme of multiple intelligences [as suggested by] Howard Gardner;
3. A focus on centers of care and the development of capacities must be filtered through and filled out by a consideration of differences associated with race, sex, ethnicity and religion; and,
4. Not only respecting the various talents of our children and the occupations they will fill as adults but, if we are doing the work of attentive love, we must care deeply for them (Noddings, 2005b, p. 62).

With caring relationships as a foundation, some contend that students acquire greater belief in the authenticity and integrity of teachers’ efforts. Caring relationships potentially support dialogue that reveals students’ innate skills and talents and that further informs instruction. Still further, as teachers become more knowledgeable about their students, their propensity to look beyond the standard curriculum increases, and their commitment to their own personal development and growth becomes more apparent. Of particular significance for urban school contexts, Geneva Gay (2000) affirms the ability of caring teachers to push children of color and low-income students beyond minimal levels of academic and social performance. Students who believe that their academic
work is within their grasp, that their instructors maintain a caring and supportive relationship with them, and who perceive the school context in a positive light tend to view their life experiences in a more affirming manner (Suldo, Riley, & Shaffer, 2006). This is aligned to Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) Ecological Theory that reinforces the critical role played by adults in the lives of students in the school context.

The concept of caring is inherently tied to concepts of community and belonging. A sense of belonging is one of Maslow’s (1962) Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow (1962) contends that this need must be met prior to any learning occurring. According to Capps (2003), “Until a school is able to establish in its students a sense of belonging, community, and a sense of place, a struggle to maximize the learning potential of the students within the school will not occur” (p. 2). A sense of belonging or community is not an independent entity, but a by-product of the interaction between the individual within the school environment. Battistich and Solomon (1995) contend that classrooms and schools where individuals are valued, where a sense of belonging and engagement are nurtured, translate into a range of positive outcomes for students. Recent research supports the idea that an effort to generate a sense of caring, along with other attributes, potentially nurtures students’ academic and social development. Enhanced levels of academic motivation and achievement, in addition to a greater inclination towards completing high school, are aligned to a strong sense of school belonging (Osterman, 2000). While a sense of belonging is relevant for all students, it may have real significance for children of color, particularly African American males. African American males’ academic self perception is intimately tied to daily interactions in the school environment. If they feel as though they are not valued as contributors to the
school community, there is a greater likelihood that they will disengage and drop out (Ogbu, 1988). According to Finn's (1989) Identification Model, unless students feel a connection to their school, their education participation will always be limited. Some social theorists ascribe the current alienation so pervasive in American schools as an outgrowth of the degree to which students lack a sense of belonging and purpose. Social cognitive theory attends to the intersection of human motivation and human learning. “This theoretical framework maintains that individuals have psychological needs, that satisfaction of these needs affects perception and behavior, and that characteristics of the social context influence how well these needs are met” (Osterman, 2000, p. 323). Does a school’s diminished focus on academic pursuits further alienate some students and their capacity to achieve? The next section examines the theoretical underpinnings for a focus on academic press.

**Theoretical Rationale: Academic Press**

Murray (1938) was one of the pre-eminent voices to promote a consideration of the environmental impact on the actions of individuals. The potency of the environment was referred to as press. The normative dimensions of a school environment include an academic press or emphasis. According to Goddard, Sweetland, and Hoy (2000), academic press or emphasis serves as a frame for the actions of teachers and students within the confines of the school environment. The exertion of a significant influence on the capacity of students to achieve and the persistence on such achievement by educators, academic press or emphasis potentially becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy or reinforcing entity.
As with the case in assessing the significance of belonging in the school environment, Social Cognitive Theory comes into play with academic press or emphasis. Educators’ perceptions of their individual and collective efficacy and that of their students relative to academic capability influence their actions, beliefs, and the perceived importance of academic pursuits (Bandura, 1997). Hoy, Sweetland, and Smith (2002) state, “Academic press in a school enhances organizational performance, and reciprocal causality suggests that resulting performance improvements in turn strengthen academic press in the school” (p. 79). Goddard et al. (2000) contend that the collective efficacy that emerges from such circumstances correlates to student achievement in mathematics and reading, and it diminishes the impact of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender. Hoy, Sweetland, and Smith (2002) explain such a scenario:

Teachers are more persistent in their efforts, they set higher goals, they plan more; they accept personal responsibility for student achievement, and temporary setbacks or failures do not discourage them. Thus, strong collective efficacy perceptions not only enhance individual teacher performance but also affect the pattern of shared beliefs held by organizational members [teachers, students] (p. 81).

Through the socialization process of the school environment, students learn to attend to specific tasks. Exposure to challenging tasks enhances students’ intellectual development. Complex, challenging tasks that significantly nurture a sense of self-direction promote students’ positive self perceptions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Ted Sizer and Nancy Sizer’s (2000) The Students are Watching: School and the Moral Contract raises as a line of inquiry what propels students to engage in particularly challenging
academic endeavors. What gives students the tenacity to persist in the midst of challenges and ambiguity? Sizer and Sizer (2000) identify these seven contextual factors that contribute to students engaging in challenging academic endeavors:

1. There must be a challenge, a clear target that is perceived as worthy both by the adolescents and the larger society;
2. The work [must] be theirs, not an exercise assigned by someone else;
3. There are tolerant and interested teachers and parents [who encourage the pursuit of academic endeavors];
4. There is a knot of like-minded kids, youngsters for whom the ascent into the struggle with an academic abstraction is a special joy;
5. There is a safe place to work and the rudiments to get started;
6. There is a school that cares about what you are doing and a teacher who nurtures students, getting them to think [forward]; and,
7. There is a je ne sais quoi (indefinable quality) found in these adolescents, a spark that ignites both curiosity and stubborn ingenuity to pursue the answers to arresting questions (pp. 5-6).

The authors contend that an educational institution must consistently convey a message of their inherent belief in the capacity of their students to achieve academically. Sizer and Sizer (2000) believe this consistent message has academic implications and serves as an impetus for engendering within students a “moral agency.”

The next section of this paper outlines the significance of this line of research.

Significance of the Study

A free public education for American citizens is a hallmark of our society and indeed a
tool associated with the advancement of individuals, various groups, and society in general. The current state of affairs in America’s secondary schools is a source of significant concern for educators and policymakers. Nationally, 30% of all high school students fail to complete high school; 50% of disadvantaged children of color graduate from high school (Swanson, 2009). “Educational equity is today’s most crucial civil-rights issue. Progress in raising student achievement has been incremental on virtually every measure of student engagement and performance, particularly for Black, Latino, and low-income students” (French, Atkinson, & Rugen, 2007).

The current and potential plight of urban students and our society as a whole is further exacerbated by several other factors. According to the World Resources Institute (2009), the majority of Americans reside in urban areas. More than 50% of our citizens are concentrated in urban areas with a population of 1 million citizens or more. These urban centers are primarily populated by people of color who are also challenged by issues of poverty and unemployment. “More than 26 percent of all urban children live in poverty” (World Resources Institute, n.d.). Dr. Martin Haberman, a renowned researcher on urban educational practices, bemoans the existence of 120 of the largest public school districts within our urban centers that consistently produce fewer children of color with high school diplomas. This consistent pattern of miseducation sounds a death knell for generations of young people and imperils our collective future as a society. Dr. Haberman (2004) succinctly captures our current state of affairs and engenders a sense of urgency in attending to the plight of secondary students when he states:

On September 11th, 2001, terrorists’ attacks in New York, Pennsylvania and Virginia claimed the lives of over 2,795 innocent civilians. But every day of the
school year an average of 7,000 innocent civilians drop out of high school and very few take notice. America's crisis is a silent one. While a majority of these youngsters are white, African American and Latino students are conspicuously over represented. By the end of the school year as many as 500,000 tenth to twelfth graders will have "disappeared" (i).

As an urban educator with over thirty-four years of experience, the researcher holds a senior management position as the Deputy Superintendent for Teaching and Learning in the Rochester City School District. In the last two years, the attention of the Board of Education, Superintendent, and the larger community galvanized around the shocking revelation of a 39% cohort graduation rate for the class of 2006. A sense of urgency exists in providing an optimal learning environment for urban students who are primarily low-income students of color.

Perhaps the most pervasive debates in educational policy exist in regard to the fundamental purposes of schools. Some proponents perceive the fundamental role of schools as one driven purely by academic goals for students. Still others advocate for a more responsive stance and approach to addressing the plethora of social, emotional, and psychological needs of students. In order to establish reasonable approaches and programs for increasing students' engagement and achievement at the secondary level, educators must engage in reflection around those elements that fall within our sphere of influence and control. Such efforts are nurtured by legal mandates, such as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, public clamoring for academic results, and the inherent idea that schools can influence educational outcomes for students. Schools [or school districts] desiring to enhance the context in which they educate youngsters must develop
a comprehensive plan to address the nuances of the educational environment (Teddlie & Stringfield, 1993). The strength of this proposed study is its clear reliance on the perspective of students relative to their exposure and experience with two variables within the context of the secondary school environment: a sense of membership (engagement/communality) and a sense of academic press (academic emphasis). The success of students in schools and classrooms and their commitment and engagement to academic pursuits are more than mere reflections of individual attributes. Situational and contextual elements also contribute to variations in individual student success and achievement. Identifying measurable characteristics ascribed to student achievement and understanding the theory behind how these variables interact is imperative in crafting effective school improvement structures, policies, and practices.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the predictive capacity for AVID Elective (advisory) students' sense of membership (engagement/communality) and exposure to academic press (academic emphasis) in influencing some measure of proficiency in students' academic achievement. The study examined secondary students' perceptions around the degree to which they experienced a sense of membership (engagement/communality) and exposure to academic press (academic emphasis) in the context of a 9th grade AVID Elective (advisory). A quantitative research design using an 18-question survey instrument revealed students' perceptions in these areas. Furthermore, an analysis of students' test scores on a series of English Language Arts and Mathematics benchmark assessments was used to determine what impact, if any, the two
independent variables (separately and collectively) have on students’ academic achievement levels.

Research Questions and Null Hypotheses

The following research questions and null hypotheses guided this quasi-experimental, quantitative study:

Research Question 1—Among AVID students, does AVID promote the perception of membership (communality)? Among AVID students, does AVID promote the perception of academic press (emphasis)?

Null Hypothesis 1a – Among AVID students, AVID does not promote the perception of membership.

Null Hypothesis 1b – Among AVID students, AVID does not promote the perception of academic press.

Research Question 2—Among AVID students, is there a significant difference in how AVID students enrolled in small schools perceive academic press versus AVID students enrolled in large schools? Among AVID students, is there a significant difference in how AVID students enrolled in small schools perceive membership versus AVID students enrolled in large schools?

Null Hypothesis 2a – Among AVID students, there is no significant difference in how AVID students enrolled in small schools perceive academic press versus those enrolled in large schools.

Null Hypothesis 2b – Among AVID students, there is no significant difference in how AVID students enrolled in small schools perceive membership versus those enrolled in large schools.
Research Question 3—Is there a significant difference in Math achievement as measured by benchmark scores in stratified matched samples of AVID versus Non-AVID students? Is there a significant difference in English Language Arts achievement as measured by benchmark scores in stratified matched samples of AVID versus Non-AVID students?

Null Hypothesis 3a – There is no significant difference in Math achievement as measured by benchmark scores in stratified matched samples of AVID versus Non-AVID students.

Null Hypothesis 3b – There is no significant difference in English Language Arts achievement as measured by benchmark scores in stratified matched samples of AVID versus Non-AVID students.

Research Question 4—Among AVID students in large schools versus AVID students in small schools, is there a significant difference in achievement as measured by benchmark scores in English Language Arts?

Among AVID students in large schools versus AVID students in small schools, is there a significant difference in achievement as measured by benchmark scores in Math?

Null Hypothesis 4a – Among AVID students in large schools versus AVID students in small schools, there is no significant difference in achievement as measured by benchmark scores in English Language Arts.

Null Hypothesis 4b – Among AVID students in large schools versus AVID students in small schools, there is no significant difference in achievement as measured by benchmark scores in Math.
Research Question 5—Is there a significant difference among Math benchmark assessment scores for stratified matched samples of AVID students enrolled in small schools, AVID students enrolled in large schools, Non-AVID students enrolled in small schools and Non-AVID students enrolled in large schools?

Is there a significant difference among English Language Arts benchmark assessment scores for stratified matched samples of AVID students enrolled in small schools, AVID students enrolled in large schools, Non-AVID students enrolled in small schools and Non-AVID students enrolled in large schools?

Null Hypothesis 5a – There is no significant difference among Math benchmark assessment scores for stratified matched samples of AVID students enrolled in small schools, AVID students enrolled in large schools, Non-AVID students enrolled in small schools, and Non-AVID students enrolled in large schools.

Null Hypothesis 5b – There is no significant difference among English Language Arts benchmark assessment scores for stratified matched samples of AVID students enrolled in small schools, AVID students enrolled in large schools, Non-AVID students enrolled in small schools, and Non-AVID students enrolled in large schools.

Definition of Terms

Academic Achievement – Measure of students exhibiting proficiency (Levels 3 or 4) on a series of formative benchmark assessments administered to all 9th graders in this mid-sized school district. This served as the outcome variable in this research design.

Academic Emphasis – The focus on particular behaviors in the school environment: it is the belief held by students and faculty in a school that academic pursuits are of critical significance (Goddard et al., 2000); it is one of the three dimensions of Academic
Optimism, the others being faculty trust and collective efficacy (Hoy et al., 2006). For the purposes of this paper, academic press will be used interchangeably with academic emphasis.

**Academic Emphasis Subscale (OHI-S)** – Subscale of the Organizational Health Inventory for Secondary Schools. This instrument was developed by Dr. Wayne K. Hoy, Ohio State University. Originally designed to be administered to adults, the instrument focuses on the degree to which academic achievement is a clear focal point within a school.

**Academic Press** – Refers to the degree to which schools are driven by a focus on academic achievement that, in turn, influences organizational norms, goals and values (Shouse, 1996). It is also defined as a sustained effort to support student learning in the total school environment (McDill, Natriello, & Pallas, 1986). Blumenfeld (1992) describes a process that includes focusing student attention, gauging understanding, supporting the reasoning process, and making connections. For the purposes of this paper, academic emphasis will be used interchangeably with academic press.

**Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID)** – An in-school academic support program for students in grades 4 through 12. The program focuses on preparing students in the academic middle for college eligibility and success. It aspires to place academically average students in advanced classes with the aim of leveling the playing field for minority, rural, low-income, and other students without a college-going tradition.

**Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) Elective (advisory)** – The core element of the AVID program which helps students negotiate the most challenging
classes. The AVID Elective focuses on academic and social support. The schedule for the AVID Elective (advisory) includes two days of instruction, two days of tutoring, and one day of motivational lessons, speakers, and expeditionary learning experiences (Hubbard & Mehan, 1999). For the purposes of this research paper, advisory will be used interchangeably with AVID Elective (advisory).

Advisory – An affective educational program designed to focus on the intellectual, social, emotional, physical, and ethical development of students (Cotton, 2001).

Communality – This concept refers to a spirit of unity, cooperation, and solidarity among members of a community. For purposes of this research paper, communality will be used interchangeably with engagement and membership.

Community – This concept has two dimensions. One dimension refers to a specific space or geographic terrain; the second dimension refers to relations. The latter speaks to the essence or quality of human relationships (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Comprehensive High School – A secondary school designed to attend to the varied interests and needs of all students under one roof by providing a general core curriculum enriched with a broad range of academic and non-academic activities.

Engaged Teacher Behavior Subscale – This subscale is part of the Organizational Climate Description for Secondary Schools (OCDQ-RS). Developed by Dr. Wayne K. Hoy, Ohio State University, the instrument assesses teacher perceptions about a school relative to morale, inherent pride, trust, hope, friendship, and the comfort and care among individuals while working with each other. Originally the instrument was designed for administration to teachers; for the purpose of this study, this instrument was adapted for student use in this research design.
**Engagement** – This refers to a psychological process that refers to the “attention, interest, investment, and effort students expend in the work of learning” (Marks, 2000, p. 155). For purposes of this research paper, *engagement* will be used interchangeably with *communality* and *membership*.

**[Ethical] Caring** – This is a higher level of care that is characterized by “encounters that result in the cared-for recognizing the caring and responding in some detectable manner” (Noddings, 2005, p. 2). Like personalization, long associated as a key attribute of the small school movement, this concept reflects a critical consideration of individual student characteristics and needs in organizing the learning environment (Cotton, 2001).

**Sense of Community** – This is a “feeling of belongingness within a group” (Osterman, 2000). This concept reflects a sense of membership, support, and acceptance among individuals (Goodenow, 1992). For the purpose of this paper, the terms *membership*, *engagement*, *belongingness*, and *communality* will be used interchangeably.

**Small School** – There is no standard definition for the small school concept. Generally, small school advocates suggest no more than 400 students for elementary schools and 800 students for secondary schools, although many recommend smaller sizes of fewer than 300 students in elementary and 500 students in secondary. Their existence is premised on the desire to know, view, and acknowledge each child individually and to charge at least one caring adult with the responsibility for the academic, social, and emotional development of each student.

**Summary of Remaining Chapters**

The remaining chapters introduce a critical review of literature and an explanation of the methodology to be applied in this research study. Chapter 2 introduces the
problem statement, the research questions, and the associated null hypothesis. The literature review will focus on the following themes: school structure, small schools personalization, membership/communality, academic press/emphasis, and the implications for working with diverse, urban students. The review is designed to provide a deeper understanding of the potential implications for establishing school environments where the focus is on students' sense of membership and academic press. Chapter 3 builds upon the literature review by setting forth the methodology for this exploratory, quasi-experimental, quantitative study. The methodology is discussed with a focus on clearly delineating the context, description of participants, the data collection tools, and the research procedures for the collecting and analyzing of data. Chapter 4 presents the results of this research study. This chapter includes the research questions, the data analysis with key findings, and the summary of results. Chapter 5 delineates the critical discussion and conceptual interpretations of the research results. Additional components of Chapter 5 include the introduction, implications of the findings, limitations, recommendations for an "ethic of care" model in an urban context, and final conclusions.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

The current state of affairs in America’s secondary schools is a source of significant concern for educators and policymakers. A sense of urgency also exists to provide an optimal learning environment for urban youngsters who are predominantly low-income students of color. Recent research paints a compelling picture of what might be done to create school environments that optimize student learning and achievement at the secondary level. The journey to create learning environments that support student achievement is inherently tied to discussions of what constitutes the real goal and purpose of schooling. While several research studies emphasize the attributes of smallness and the feasibility of establishing advisory programs, neither of these elements alone are perceived as isolated panaceas. Antrop-Gonzalez (2006) states, “Smaller size is only important when it helps facilitate the establishment of school as sanctuary conditions like the establishment of high quality, interpersonal student-teacher relationships” (p. 298).

Analogous to this mindset is Lee, Smith, and Croninger’s (1997) recognition that a plethora of school practices count for very little in terms of student learning and equity if these practices or organizational structures are not supported by a consideration of the interactions among human beings in the school context or an examination of what is taught and the manner in which curriculum is delivered to students.

Advocates for small schools identify a range of advantages that potentially enhance the life chances of urban youth, such as increased achievement for students of
color and low-income students, a reduction in acts of violence, an increased sense of membership and buy-in within the school environment, increases in attendance and graduation rates, and greater community and parental engagement (Bracey, 2001). Wainer and Zwerling (2006), however, challenge the assumptions that the mere establishment of small school communities increases students' academic achievement. Their examination of elementary students' performance on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment did not substantiate a relationship between school size and levels of student academic achievement. They did not, however, see the same relationship in large high schools where higher levels of academic achievement were noted. They surmised that the limited course offerings associated with small high schools and the presence of fewer specialized educators resulted in lower levels of student academic achievement.

Cynics of the small school movement also highlight the change of heart emerging from one of the earliest and most vociferous advocates for small schools, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. In 2005, the Foundation focused on enhancing the quality of school instruction and leveraging resources within selected school districts. The Foundation recognized that a mere focus on school size was too narrow a perspective in an effort for systemic reform, particularly in large urban school districts (Thompson, 2005). One might surmise that this change in focus underlies a growing awareness that small school size and a focus on personalization alone are not the sole predictors of individual students' capacity to achieve academically in an urban context. Indeed, one must judiciously weigh other critical factors.

The purpose of the research study was to explore the predictive capacity for AVID Elective (advisory) students' sense of membership (engagement/community) and
exposure to academic press (academic emphasis) in influencing some measure of proficiency in student achievement. The study examined students' perceptions around the degree to which they experience a sense of membership (engagement/community) and exposure to academic press (academic emphasis) in the context of a 9th grade AVID Elective (advisory). The results of the study will inform efforts to provide an optimal context in which to better engage, educate, and support the achievement of urban youth at the secondary level.

There is an emerging body of literature that appears to substantiate the need to weigh the degree to which structural and organizational policies and practices mediate individual and collective levels of student achievement. Lee, Smith, and Croninger (1997) determined that, indeed, school structure impacts students' academic achievement. This research seeks to explore whether or not generating a sense of community and attending to academics represent specific structural practices that potentially influence academic achievement and the inclination of educators to take responsibility for the academic achievement of all students.

This chapter incorporates a review of pertinent literature connected to school structure, small schools personalization, membership/community, academic press/emphasis, and implications for working with diverse, urban students. The review will provide a deeper understanding of the potential implications of establishing school environments where the focus is on students' sense of membership and academic press.

**Topic Analysis**

*School structure.* James Coleman (1966) shook the educational establishment with his suggestion that school attributes mattered very little in relationship to student
achievement. Coleman put the onus or responsibility for differences in individual student achievement on variations in students’ family background. Current research, however, appears to substantiate that structural and organizational practices do mediate students’ academic achievement. Lee, Smith, and Croninger (1997) used a sample of 9,631 senior students in 789 high schools in an attempt to connect elements of secondary schools’ academic and social organization to structural practices that had an impact on student learning. This study was the third wave of work generated from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, which delineated the attributes of secondary schools that made them optimal places to support student learning, particularly in the areas of mathematics and science. The authors concluded that school structure influences academic achievement. A sense of community and an attention to academics represent specific structural practices that potentially influence academic achievement and the inclination of teachers to take responsibility for student achievement; smaller high schools are appropriate contexts for nurturing student achievement (Lee, Smith, & Croninger, 1997).

Lambert, Wallach, and Ramsey (2007) further examine the implications of school structure on not only student learning, but also the implications for further adult learning in an environment focused on relationships, relevance, and rigor. As part of their work with the Small Schools Project, the authors reviewed data collected from over a three-year period from seven schools that were recipients of grants from the Gates Foundation. The authors identify clear parallels between the factors that not only support student learning, but potentially nurture adult learning: Instruction must take place within a community of learners, providing participants with opportunities to refine [their]
thinking; instruction must be personalized honoring learners’ interests and strengths; and instruction must include formative assessments to help make learners’ thinking visible (p.37).

The foray into school structure and organization is further extended by Lee and Burkam (2003) as they analyze what high schools do to support students or deter them from remaining enrolled in school. Focusing on academic offerings, school size, and social relations, the researchers used a sample of 3,840 students in 190 urban and suburban school districts. Researchers examined longitudinal data such as achievement test scores, high school transcripts, and survey information. Descriptive data from the respective high schools was generated from surveys administered to principals and from student feedback. Lee and Burkam (2003) concluded that schools with an enrollment of fewer than 1,500 students were more likely to sustain students’ decisions to continue their education, that contexts in which affirming relationships existed between students and teachers also resulted in reduced dropout rates, and that affirming relationships between students and teachers mediated the larger elements of school organization and structure.

Small school personalization. Small schools and the associated theme of personalization were examined as an arena for enhanced student outcomes by Feldman, Tung, and Ouimette (2003). Using data generated by the Pilot Schools and the Boston Public School District, this study examined the efficacy of the Boston Pilot Schools, compared to similar schools in the same school system. Student demographics, achievement, and engagement were the quantitative areas upon which they focused. Feldman, Tung, and Ouimette (2003) conclude:

Across indicators of student engagement, Boston Pilot Schools have among the
highest attendance and longest wait lists and among the lowest suspensions and transfers out in the district. By standardized test scores, Pilot School students score at or above the district average in all subjects. These schools have low grade retention rates, high rates of graduation, and send significantly more of their students on to post-graduate education (p. iii). This study further forces a critical examination of the dominant large school factory model and affect at the secondary level.

Darling-Hammond, Ancess, and Ort (2002) analyzed small school design features and the inherent implications for the academic achievement of urban youth in a seven-year study of the Coalition Campus Schools Project in New York City. Using data generated from the creation, structure, and practices of the small schools carved out of two large comprehensive high schools, researchers investigated the long-term effects of the small school model on student academic achievement. Student attributes, attendance, academic records, program and policy documents, student work samples, observations, and semi-structured interviews of key stakeholders provided rich data for this investigation. Darling-Hammond et al. (2002) concluded that this coalition of schools produced improved levels of attendance, fewer violent occurrences, improved literacy skills, greater high school completion rates, and greater rates of college enrollment. Of particular note was the fact that these schools served a population of students who were more academically disadvantaged. This study further supported a critical consideration and crafting of the contexts in which we seek to educate and engage urban youth.

According to Myatt (2004):

Qualitative studies of smaller schools have observed a genuine sense of belonging
for both students and teachers, higher expectations for student engagement, and fewer distractions within the learning environment. These are precisely the conditions under which teachers can help students take greater responsibility for their own learning and establish both the culture and tools of inquiry-based instruction (p. 771).

The affective dimension of secondary education was further examined in Boorstein's (1997) qualitative research design of classroom and school observations and semi-structured interviews to assess what was or was not happening in school advisories that might influence outcomes such as student dropout rates and grade retention. Boorstein (1997) drew these two conclusions: First, research data substantiated that inherent to the concept of (an effective) advisory is the formation of emotional bonds among participants – indeed, this is a required element. Second, teacher personality traits weighed heavily in determining the effectiveness of advisory.

Membership/belonging. Waves of school violence in North America have resulted in renewed attention to factors that enhance or impede students’ feeling a sense of belonging or connection to school. Students’ failure to connect or identify with their school is associated with stymied school and classroom participation; this lack of identification has negative implications for students’ potential success (Adelabu, 2007). There is a dearth of empirical research on how membership or belonging is developed in the school context and how school personnel enhance such qualities in the students with whom they work. Ma’s (2003) research on 6,883 6th graders and 6,868 8th graders sought to examine student and school characteristics that influenced students feeling a sense of belonging. Using a hierarchical linear model of analysis, it was determined that discreet
student and family characteristics had less to do with engendering a sense of belonging within students than did students’ mental and physical attributes. Two elements that did impact students feeling a sense of membership or belonging were self-esteem and the respective schools’ climate. Ma (2003) reinforces the vital role to be played by teachers in shaping students’ sense of belonging. While the school context falls outside the purview of the classroom educator, the tone and climate established within individual classrooms is influenced by the actions or inactions of educators. Ethnographic research conducted by Schlosser (1992) extends this perspective to the critical role played by educators. Working with a culturally diverse group of adolescents identified as potential dropouts, Schlosser reported students who worked with teachers who emphasized membership had a greater likelihood of accepting their teachers’ values and choosing to remain enrolled in school.

Adelabu (2007) defines school membership as the experience of feeling acceptance and connection within the school. Individuals possessing such a feeling use this as a source of motivation to engage and achieve as members of the school community. This study examined the connection between academic achievement to time perspective (present, future) and students’ membership. Participants included 232 low-income, urban African American adolescents. Reported findings indicated that a significant relationship exists among students’ academic achievement, their possession of a forward looking/future orientation, students’ sense of belonging in the school community, and school acceptance. Research reinforced the perspective that students with a sense of belonging participate in extracurricular activities at higher levels and feel greater levels of acceptance. All of these elements result in the forging of emotional
bonds that support students ascribing value to school and academic achievement (Osterman, 2000).

Using a mixed methods approach, Patterson, Beltyukova, Berman, and Francis (2007) researched the attempts made by an urban secondary school to combat staggering academic failure at the freshman level. Similar to schools across the nation, this school was challenged by large numbers of students experiencing difficulty transitioning from freshman to sophomore status. Fifty freshman were randomly drawn from the ranks of the incoming Algebra 1 students in a large urban high school. During this period of time, they were organized in a small school model in a Freshman Academy comprised of a cohort of fifty students and five core teachers. A comparison group was formed from those students remaining in the original Algebra 1 freshman class. Demographic and survey data were used in a case study analysis. Patterson et al. (2007) concluded that academy students had fewer suspensions, better attendance, and higher achievement in Science/Social Studies than those enrolled in the control group. They also found a positive connection between these factors and students' sense of "group membership."

Research conducted by Goodenow (1991, 1993) substantiates some level of connection or reciprocity between students possessing or experiencing a sense of belonging or membership and their academic success. Applying a multiple regression analysis of 612 students enrolled in grades 5 through 8, Goodenow (1991) concluded that students' sense of membership or belonging was connected to their perceived levels of academic success, their inherent desire to engage in academic work, their grade point averages, and teachers' perceptions of students' academic effort. Goodenow's 1993 research involved a survey instrument designed to assess the correlation between
students’ membership, motivation, and achievement. Participants were comprised of 300 diverse students enrolled in urban junior high school programs. Applying multiple regression analysis and controlling for the impact of peer influence or values, students’ sense of membership exhibited a statistically significant influence on students’ motivation, engagement, and tenacity in negotiating through challenging academic work.

Smerdon (2002) expands the consideration of the affective dimensions of schooling and the potential implications for student engagement by examining students’ perceptions of membership. As in similar studies, longitudinal data was drawn from the National Educational Study of 1988 and included 11,807 sophomores in 808 public, private, and Catholic high schools. In addition to academic data, school and student questionnaires provided critical information in assessing “students’ perception of membership, linking student and school characteristics” (p. 287). Students enrolled in challenging academic courses, particularly in math and English, possessed enhanced academic expectations and, as a consequence, felt a higher level of school membership than students enrolled in less rigorous course work. Such a scenario may indeed be attributed to students being highly tracked and schooled in cohorts that further support such levels of achievement. A perception of higher levels of school membership was also associated with students feeling more autonomy in their academic work and their participation in homerooms [advisory].

Oldenquist (1991) speaks to the significance of community as part of the human experience. “The formation of a way of thinking in a community is so pervasive that people act, react, and interact in particular ways because they share a ‘collective mentality’ ” (p. 96). As current research shows, many educational reformers, policy
leaders and researchers view student membership as an essential component to school effectiveness. Within school communities, activities, values, and positive interactions among students and teachers potentially contribute to the level of student engagement and academic achievement. Yet, Phillips (1997) alludes to the emerging theory of academic press: “A competing theory – that of academic press – posits a more direct link between school processes and academic outcomes. This theory suggests schools are effective when they offer demanding curricula and employ teachers whose educational expectations for their students are high” (p. 633). While on some level, academic press may be perceived as a competing theory, advocates would advance this worldview as one that promotes community through a laser-like focus on academics and student achievement. Starratt (1997) expresses the idea that a school should rightfully aspire to be a community, more specifically, “a teaching community whose goal is the production of knowledge [not merely a] community as an end in itself” (p. 6). The next section examines current research connected to academic press and its implications for influencing the achievement of students.

*Academic press emphasis.* Goddard, Sweetland, and Hoy (2000) define this academic press as the degree to which academic achievement is an explicit core value and impetus for what is done and experienced in the school environment. According to Shouse (1995), “Without a commitment to the importance of academic endeavors, commonality of beliefs, activities, and traditions, and care for students as individuals are unlikely to positively effect achievement levels, and may even work to impede them” (p.8). Students’ academic achievement is potentially influenced by a range of organizational and structural attributes, distinct teacher attributes and behaviors, and
discreet sociological elements as well. Hallinger and Murphy (1986) assessed the ways in which "effective schools" supported learning among students with varied socioeconomic status (SES). Data from the California Assessment Program (CAP) for elementary schools was used to identify eight effective schools. Interviews, observations, surveys, and the review of documents were the major sources of data collection. A delineation was made between low and high SES schools in seven categories strongly influenced by a school's social context: “Clear school mission, tightly coupled curriculum, opportunity to learn, instructional leadership, home-school cooperation and support, widespread student rewards, and high expectations” (p. 330). The authors concluded that relationships in effective schools potentially impact the range of curricular offerings, the amount and type of time devoted to instruction, the instructional role of the principal, and the inherent expectations situated in a school's day-to-day operations (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986). Perhaps the strength of this research is the inherent challenge it presents to critically weigh school sociological characteristics and individual student attributes that potentially influence school effectiveness and student achievement.

Hoy and a range of colleagues (Hoy et al., 1991; Hoy & Tarter, 1997; Hoy & Sabo, 1998) examine academic emphasis or press as an element of a school climate that is considered “healthy.” Using the Organizational Health Inventory (OHI), academic press is one of six interrelated elements associated with the dimensions of school climate. Hoy and Sabo (1998) administered the survey instrument to almost 3,000 middle school teachers. In addition, student results on state achievement tests in the areas of reading, mathematics, and writing were also examined. Their research concluded that academic emphasis or press represented the largest correlation with academic achievement in
reading, writing, and mathematics. Hoy, Sweetland, and Smith (2002) explain the impetus for such results when they say: “Academic press is a collective characteristic of the school. Teachers’ beliefs about the faculty’s capability to successfully educate students and the importance of academic performance constitute norms that influence the actions and achievement of schools” (p. 79). This collective characteristic is inherently tied to a collective efficacy. According to Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory (1997), this collective efficacy is played out through what is said and done on a daily basis.

Brophy and Good (1986) clearly articulate a responsibility on the part of educators to strategically reinforce academic objectives as a means of positively influencing student achievement. As such, they surmise that any effort to improve student achievement must be inherently tied to the development and implementation of effective instructional behaviors. Research conducted by Alig-Mielcarek and Hoy (2005) attended to the impact of instructional leadership and academic press on student achievement. Controlling for students’ socio-economic status and applying a structural equation model, researchers concluded that academic emphasis or press was the critical variable that nurtured student achievement. It was also determined that instructional leadership worked indirectly through academic emphasis to enhance student academic achievement.

The sociological dimensions of student academic achievement are further articulated in the research of Lee and Smith (1999). Using data elicited from surveys of 30,000 6th and 8th grade students, teachers, and administrators in Chicago public schools, student learning was assessed over a one-year period on standardized tests in math and reading. Researchers sought to examine the social support given to individual students
and how this support, coupled with a sustained focus on student learning within the school community, resulted in higher math and reading achievement (Lee & Smith, 1999). McDill, Natriello, and Pallas (1986) refer to this sustained focus on supporting student learning within a school as *academic press*. Lee and Smith (1999) conclude that social support was positively associated with increases in student learning. Schools where academic press is a priority support student learning to a greater extent. However, high levels of social support in a school were insufficient in supporting student learning if academic press was not an inherently strong attribute in that school context.

The findings suggest that reforms that are directed primarily to improving personal relationships between students and their teachers as a means to improve student learning miss something important. Only in schools with an organizational thrust toward serious academics does social support actually influence learning (p. 937).

*Academic press* refers to “the extent to which school organizations are driven by achievement oriented values, goals, and norms” (Shouse, 1996, p. 49). Shouse (1996) further informs an understanding of academic press, the establishment of a communal context, and the potential implications for student achievement. The author challenges a traditional assumption that an educational context must choose between two tensions, establishing a spirit of community embedded in caring relations at the expense of high academic standards and associated expectations for students. Looking at both attributes independently and in concert, metrics of academic press and community were drawn from the First Follow-Up survey of the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988. Applying a hierarchical regression analysis, Shouse (1996) determines that a positive
relationship exists between student academic achievement and academic press. The author further contends that academic press has tremendous capacity to positively impact academic achievement in schools with lower socio-economic status. Academic achievement was negatively impacted when the establishment of a spirit of community was perceived as a primary focus at the expense of academic press. Shouse (1996) concluded, "for low and middle-SES schools, the greatest achievement effects follow from strong combinations of communality and academic press" (p.47).

The need to attend to the sociological dimensions of student achievement among various ethnic, gender, and age groups is exemplified in research conducted by Wasonga, Christman, and Kilmer (2003). Focusing on the ability to gauge students' propensity to achieve academically and to maintain a resilient spirit, researchers administered a survey to 480 secondary students. Resilient students were characterized as having, "verbal fluency, [a] sense of competence, good problem solving skills, high self-esteem, self-control, malleability, an even temper, an openness to new experiences, and a clear sense of purpose" (p.63). Using a state standardized assessment, a pool of 9th to 12th graders was identified to respond to the Resilience Assessment Module (Constantine, Benard & Diaz, 1999). Wasonga, Christman, and Kilmer (2003) reported:

There were significant differences in academic achievement between Asian American respondents and Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino students. Female respondents had higher standardized non-significant academic achievement scores than males. [Specific factors that predicted resiliency among urban secondary students] were significant and positively associated with resilience (p. 74).
This study further illustrates the inherent need for educators to turn a critical and urgent lens towards those environmental elements that potentially support or impede both the resiliency and academic achievement of diverse urban students.

**Implications for working with diverse, urban students.** Advocates for small schools identify a range of advantages that potentially enhance the life chances of urban youth, such as increased achievement for students of color and low-income students, a reduction in acts of violence, an increased sense of membership and buy-in within the school environment, increases in attendance and graduation rates, and greater community and parental engagement (Bracey, 2001). Current research substantiates the potential for caring teachers to push children of color or low-income students beyond minimal levels of academic and social performance; indeed, such attributes are ascribed to educators who practice “culturally responsive” teaching skills and habits of mind (Gay, 2000).

In many ways, some students pay a particularly high price when they are confronted by individuals and contexts devoid of a spirit of caring. In such contexts, their social and academic status, coupled with perceptions of perceived deficits, further exacerbate their ability to succeed in school and in life. Cassidy and Bates (2005) chronicle the story of a school for at-risk students where an ethos of caring enhances the life chances and futures of its student body. Situated in a suburban area, this independent school serves as home to approximately 60 students from diverse ethnic backgrounds from the surrounding metropolitan area. Most of the students are in, or have concluded, court-mandated participation for a plethora of reasons (e.g., arson, theft, assault.) Using observations, interviews of students and staff, and data analysis of key artifacts, the researchers used a qualitative case study approach to ascertain the degree to which
Noddings' "ethics of care" was realized in this particular setting and now this context differed from previous educational contexts experienced by the students. Cassidy and Bates (2005) conclude:

Students, teachers and administrators perceive caring [through the lens of] building respectful, responsive, and supportive relationships and, through these relationships, meeting the needs of children in flexible and insightful ways. Staff members seek to model and practice care with each other and with students. Students spoke fervently of the care they received from teachers and administrators who were accessible and open, and of the difference caring made in their own development, school-work, and overall well-being. Despite the fact that students had been involved in criminal behavior, the staff held them in high esteem; and the school staff gave students a voice in decision making about curriculum (pp. 95-96).

Their findings further confirm the potential power of care among the neediest and most challenging students in a school population.

One of the most prolific writers on caring as an extension of the schooling associated with the education of Latino students is Angela Valenzuela. Valenzuela's (1999), Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring, created a sense of urgency to attend to issues of caring in the context of educating students from diverse cultures and backgrounds. Valenzuela's three-year ethnographic study of an inner-city high school describes the plight of Mexican-American students who are the victims of "subtractive schooling," a situation in which their education is a process in
which schools “subtract” resources from these young people. This process of subtraction occurs in these two ways:

First, it dismisses their definition of education which is not only thoroughly grounded in Mexican culture, but also approximates the optimal definition of education advanced by Noddings (1984) and other caring theorists. Second, subtractive schooling encompasses subtractively assimilationist policies and practices that are designed to divest Mexican students of their culture and language. A key consequence of these subtractive elements of schooling is the erosion of students’ social capital evident in the presence and absence of academically oriented networks among immigrant and U.S.-born youth, respectively (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 20).

Ideally, Valenzuela advocates for an educational process that is supported by an ethic of care that is far more diverse and inclusive of the holistic development of young people. The term that Valenzuela applies to such an educational process is educacion.

[Educacion refers] to the family’s role of inculcating in children a sense of moral, social, and personal responsibility and serves as the foundation for all learning. Though inclusive of formal academic training, educacion refers to competence in the social world, wherein one respects the dignity and individuality of others. This person, as opposed to object orientation, suggests the futility of academic knowledge and skills when individuals do not know how to live in the world as caring, responsible, well-mannered, and respectful human beings (p. 23). Nora Alder (2002) extends the conceptual framework for “caring” in the school context through her qualitative study of the process in which caring relationships emerge.
between educators and students enrolled in an urban middle school context. An interpretative research design examined the question, “What does care mean to urban middle school students and their teachers” (p. 248)? Participants were primarily African American students enrolled in two urban middle school sites. Of the students in the school district, 92% received free or reduced-priced lunches. At each school site, two African American teachers were identified by their respective principals as having a caring nature. From the 50 students enrolled in the two classes, 12 students participated in the actual research design. Data collection and analysis emanated from focus groups, teacher interviews [member checking], and 100 hours of classroom/school observations. Alder (2002) concludes that students perceived a caring teacher as one showing a “willingness to be strict, [as having] control over disruptive behavior, and [projecting an inclination to] pressure students into getting work done” (p. 250).

Nurturing caring relationships among students and teachers in the school context potentially engenders within students a fundamental human motivation for interactions with others and a sense of connection and belonging that sustains the affective dimensions of moral development.

In Fisher’s 2005 study, an examination was made of the educational experiences of under-achieving and high-achieving students. Participants were African American high school students in a diverse, urban setting. Particular attention was given to assessing issues of “self-concept, academic behavior, and self-reported personal experiences between high-achieving African heritage students and under-achieving African heritage students” (p. 201). Data was drawn from focus groups, demographic information, and quantitative self-concept assessments. Twenty-six students in grades 9
through 12 served in the two focus groups. All student participants (high-achieving or under-achieving) in some form or manner were confronted in some dimension of their efforts to achieve academic success. Yet, the nature of their shared challenges varied among under-achieving and high-achieving students. Fisher (2005) concludes that several elements contributed to the academic success of high achievers: "High self-concepts, time management skills, parental support, high expectations, the desire to prove stereotypes wrong, their own high expectations, and the desire to be responsible for their own lives and control their own destiny" (p.204). These results again underscore the need to examine the social, structural, and contextual factors that potentially impact the academic achievement of students of color in our urban schools. Does such a consideration provide further support in weighing the inherent potential of small school advisories as a tool for supporting the affective and academic achievement of urban youth?

Antrop-Gonzalez (2006) further expands the consideration of the small school context through her research on the concept of School as Sanctuary. Using student voices from the Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos Alternative High School (PACHS) in Chicago, Antrop-Gonzalez examined (a) the communication that occurred between students and teachers, (b) the descriptors used by students to capture their secondary school experience, and (c) the rationale of why students chose to attend that school versus the more traditional or other alternative secondary schools. Interviews and participant observations of students, alumni, and teachers enabled Antrop-Gonzalez (2006) to generate a definition of "School as Sanctuary" from her qualitative study. Antrop-Gonzalez defined school as a sanctuary when relationships between students and
educators are nurtured, when the influence of gangs is dramatically diminished, and when the ethnic and racial backgrounds of students are validated. Antrop-Gonzalez's definition clearly reflects the nuances and challenges seen in this particular setting.

Affirming relationships between students and their teachers not only provides mutual benefits for adults and young people, but it also appears to go far in mediating other factors that might result in student disengagement. The potential also appears to exist for urban educators working with children of color and low-income students to profoundly influence their academic success by practicing an ethic of caring. Tucker, Zayco, Herman, Reinke, Trujillo, Carraway, Wallack, and Ivery (2002) examined the mutual effect that exists among student-communicated teacher actions, students' self-assessment, and student engagement. A causal model was generated from the responses received from 107 low-income African American students in grades 1 to 12 who were enrolled in an after-school program. The researchers concluded that academic engagement was dually influenced by students experiencing a sense of belonging and their perception of their own independence; the participation or engagement of teachers had strong implications across grade levels on the degree to which students reported academic engagement (Tucker et al., 2002).

Acknowledging the current plight of African American young people and the degree to which they lag behind white students, Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings superbly chronicles the skills and habits of mind of teachers who successfully educate African American students. In the second edition of Dreamkeepers, Ladson-Billings (2009) continues the saga of eight exemplary educators who provide education through an additive, culturally relevant lens by affirming students and their cultural backgrounds.
The second edition updates the stories of the original eight teachers and introduces the next generations of educators who are similarly inclined. Ladson-Billings attends to teaching beliefs and behaviors that positively impact the success of African American students. The culturally relevant pedagogy for which Ladson-Billings (2009) advocates incorporates social relations with the following attributes:

1. The teacher/student relationship is fluid, humanely equitable, extending to interactions beyond the classroom and into the community;
2. The teacher demonstrates a connectedness with all students;
3. The teacher encourages a community of learners; and
4. The teacher encourages students to learn collaboratively. Students are expected to learn collaboratively. Students are expected to teach each other and be responsible for each other (p. 60).

Ladson-Billings (2009) envisions classrooms that sustain individual students’ academic and social growth through the context of the larger group. Through a strategic focus on nurturing an academic community, educators engender a sense of membership or communality which young people naturally desire.

Reis, Colbert, and Hebert (2005) explore the concept of resiliency in their 3-year study of thirty-five, low socio-economic status, demographically diverse, and academically gifted high school students who achieved or did not achieve in an urban context. Using an ethnographic, comparative case studies approach, the authors examined the attributes that emerge from students perceived as academically talented and exhibited associated levels of resiliency. Reis et al. (2005) concluded:

Some protective factors helped some academically talented students to achieve at
high levels. The protective factors include supportive adults; friendships with other achieving students; opportunity to take honors and advanced classes; participation in multiple extracurricular activities, both after school and during the summer; the development of a strong belief in self; and ways to cope with the negative aspects of their school and urban environment, and in some cases, their family lives. Other protective factors include students' relationships with supportive adults and their previous participation in a gifted and talented program (p. 110).

The protective factors that emerge in sustaining academic achievement among low socio-economic factors may potentially be nurtured and further explored in the context of the small school advisory or the AVID Elective in which attention is given to establishing a sense of sense of membership (engagement/community) and exposure to academic press (academic emphasis).

Summary of Literature Review

Small schools have emerged as a perceived antidote to the impersonalization and poor achievement associated with large comprehensive high schools. Advisories are affective educational programs focusing on the "emotional, social, physical, intellectual, psychological, and ethical development of students" (Forte & Schurr. 1993, p. 117). Feldman, Tong, and Ouimette (2003) substantiated that a positive connection existed between personalized learning communities and improved student outcomes. Research appears to support that school structure has implications for curriculum, the use of instructional time, the role of administrators, school success metrics (attendance, suspensions, graduation rates), and the academic achievement of students. A foundation
also exists to further examine school structure and the affective dimensions of educating, engaging, and promoting the achievement of diverse student populations.

Caring as a concept and tool within the confines of school structures has a long legacy. Student perceptions of caring reflect a keen understanding of being recipients of such attitudes and actions. Yet, growing research challenges the idea that merely caring for students is a sufficient prerequisite or guarantee for student achievement.

Engendering a sense of membership/belonging within students, particularly those inclined to be at risk or disconnected, may be a starting point to support their tenacity in staying the course academically. Some researchers question to what end and purpose a sense of belonging or membership serves if that sense is detached from a focus on academics. Small size and a focus on personalization may nurture relationships; it alone cannot generate academic focus resulting in student achievement. Sufficient research appears to provide a context for optimizing the innate desire to be in membership or to experience a sense of belonging within the confines of a school. A foundation appears to exist for further examination as to how schools/classrooms become communities of learners, learning and academic achievement. This research seeks to explore if social support played out in a sense of belonging and coupled with a clear academic mission engenders within students the skills and habits of mind to achieve academic success.

The ultimate examination of any school, large or small, lies in its ability to graduate students and prepare them for post-secondary success. According to Lee and Smith (1999), “Reforms that are directed primarily to improving personal relationships between students and their teachers as a means to improve student learning miss something important” (p. 937). Recent research focuses on examining the social support
given to students and how this support, coupled with a sustained focus on student learning within the school community, results in higher achievement. McDill, Natriello, and Pallas (1986) refer to this sustained focus on supporting student learning within a school as *academic press*. Lee and Smith (1999) conclude social support is positively associated with increases in student learning. Schools where academic press is a priority support student learning to a greater extent. However, high levels of social support in a school were insufficient in supporting student learning if academic press was not an inherently strong attribute in that school context. The findings suggest that “only in schools with an organizational thrust toward serious academics does social support actually influence learning” (p. 937).

The purpose of this study was to explore the predictive capacity for AVID Elective (advisory) students’ *sense of membership (engagement/communality)* coupled with *academic press (academic emphasis)* to influence some measure of proficiency in student academic achievement. The study examined students’ perceptions around the degree to which they experienced a *sense of membership (engagement/communality)* and *academic press (academic emphasis)* in the context of a 9th grade AVID Elective (advisory) class.

The next section outlines the research methodology design. Specific details are shared regarding the general perspective, the research context, description of participants, instruments used in data collection, and research procedures used for data collection and analysis data.
Introduction: The General Perspective

The ultimate examination of any school, large or small, lies in its ability to graduate students and prepare them for post-secondary success. Lee and Smith (1999) state, "Reforms that are directed primarily to improving personal relationships between students and their teachers as a means to improve student learning miss something important" (p.937). Recent research has focused on examining the social support given to students and how this support, coupled with a sustained focus on student learning within the school community, results in higher achievement. This sustained focus on supporting student learning within a school is known as academic press (McDill, Natriello, & Pallas, 1986). Lee and Smith (1999) concluded that social support was positively associated with increases in student learning. Schools where academic press is a priority supported learning to a greater extent. High levels of social support in a school are insufficient in supporting student learning if academic press was not an inherently strong attribute in that school context. The findings suggested: "Only in schools with an organization thrust toward serious academics does social support actually influence learning" (p. 937).

Urban communities are particularly challenged by increasing numbers of young people dropping out of high school. Ideas have emerged around the degree to which large schools breed student isolation, alienation, poor achievement, violence, and increased dropout rates. The small school movement's focus on personalization represented a
response to social, economic, and political forces that require new approaches to educating young people. Small size may nurture relationships; however, it cannot create or guarantee academic focus. Limited research has focused on examining how the social support given to students, coupled with a sustained focus on student learning, might result in greater student engagement and improved levels of student achievement.

The following research questions and null hypotheses guided this research study:

Research Question 1—Among AVID students, does AVID promote the perception of membership (communality)? Among AVID students, does AVID promote the perception of academic press (emphasis)?

**Null Hypothesis 1a** – Among AVID students, AVID does not promote the perception of membership.

**Null Hypothesis 1b** – Among AVID students, AVID does not promote the perception of academic press.

Research Question 2—Among AVID students, is there a significant difference in how AVID students enrolled in small schools perceive academic press versus AVID students enrolled in large schools?

Among AVID students, is there a significant difference in how AVID students enrolled in small schools perceive membership versus AVID students enrolled in large schools?

**Null Hypothesis 2a** – Among AVID students, there is no significant difference in how AVID students enrolled in small schools perceive academic press versus those enrolled in large schools.
Null Hypothesis 2b – Among AVID students, there is no significant difference in how AVID students enrolled in small schools perceive membership versus those enrolled in large schools.

Research Question 3–Is there a significant difference in Math achievement as measured by benchmark scores in stratified matched samples of AVID versus Non-AVID students?

Is there a significant difference in English Language Arts achievement as measured by benchmark scores in stratified matched samples of AVID versus Non-AVID students?

Null Hypothesis 3a – There is no significant difference in Math achievement as measured by benchmark scores in stratified matched samples of AVID versus Non-AVID students.

Null Hypothesis 3b – There is no significant difference in English Language Arts achievement as measured by benchmark scores in stratified matched samples of AVID versus Non-AVID students.

Research Question 4–Among AVID students in large schools versus AVID students in small schools, is there a significant difference in achievement as measured by benchmark scores in English Language Arts?

Among AVID students in large schools versus AVID students in small schools, is there a significant difference in achievement as measured by benchmark scores in Math?

Null Hypothesis 4a – Among AVID students in large schools versus AVID students in small schools, there is no significant difference in achievement as measured by benchmark scores in English Language Arts.
Null Hypothesis 4b – Among AVID students in large schools versus AVID students in small schools, there is no significant difference in achievement as measured by benchmark scores in Math.

Research Question 5 – Is there a significant difference among Math benchmark assessment scores for stratified matched samples of AVID students enrolled in small schools, AVID students enrolled in large schools, Non-AVID students enrolled in small schools, and Non-AVID students enrolled in large schools?

Is there a significant difference among English Language Arts benchmark assessment scores for stratified matched samples of AVID students enrolled in small schools, AVID students enrolled in large schools, Non-AVID students enrolled in small schools and Non-AVID students enrolled in large schools?

Null Hypothesis 5a – There is no significant difference among Math benchmark assessment scores for stratified matched samples of AVID students enrolled in small schools, AVID students enrolled in large schools, Non-AVID students enrolled in small schools, and Non-AVID students enrolled in large schools.

Null Hypothesis 5b – There is no significant difference among English Language Arts benchmark assessment scores for stratified matched samples of AVID students enrolled in small schools, AVID students enrolled in large schools, Non-AVID students enrolled in small schools, and Non-AVID students enrolled in large schools.

A quantitative approach was used as it provided an inquiry framework to test the hypotheses through the use of surveys, and data collection was used to generate statistical data (Cresswell, 2003). This research design involved consideration of a proposed hypothesis, implementation of a study to assess the validity of the stated hypothesis, a
review of the data, and the presentation of clearly articulated findings (Cottrell & McKenzie, 2005). The study began with the administration of the survey instrument to obtain quantitative data around student perspectives on the two independent variables. Analysis of frequency of response was used in assessing student responses on the survey in order to gauge their perceptions relative to a sense of membership and academic press in the AVID Elective (advisory). Requests were made to the Research Division of the school district for two separate rosters of all AVID and Non-AVID students with Math and English benchmark assessment scores for the 4th administration. The rosters of AVID and Non-AVID students were drawn from the 14 schools where AVID students originally responded to the student survey. Stratified matched samples of 282 AVID students and 282 Non-AVID students were developed.

Variability among AVID Elective (advisory) students and Non-AVID students’ perceptions of membership and academic press was analyzed through the application of a One-way ANOVA. This application was used as a means of determining the impact, if any, of the two independent variables on the proposed dependent variable of student academic achievement (as measured by benchmark assessment scores). The exploratory nature of the results of the research study might be used to inform efforts to provide optimal contexts to better engage, educate, and support the achievement of youth at the secondary level.

Research Context

According to Glatthorn and Joyner (2005), “Context is used to identify the place and time of the study that enables other researchers and readers to better understand the findings” (p. 190). The researcher of this analysis held a senior management position in a
mid-sized urban public school system. This mid-sized urban school district located in Upstate New York served as the research context. During the 2008-2009 school year, this district served approximately 32,586 students in grades Pre-K through 12. There were 39 elementary schools and 19 secondary schools. Over 71% of the students received free and reduced-price lunch. According to the 2007 Basic Education Data System (BEDS) Report, approximately 65% of students were African American, 21% were Latino, 12% were Caucasian, and 9% were classified as multiracial. Students in special education classes comprised 16% of the population, and English Language Learner students represented 7% of the student population.

For purposes of confidentiality, the district and the specific schools from which the sample was drawn were not identified. The researcher had direct supervisory responsibility for the AVID program that included an elective known as the AVID Elective (advisory). Approximately 400 first-time 9th graders across the district were enrolled in the AVID program. This was a district-wide initiative during the 2008-2009 academic year. The district implemented AVID as a district-wide initiative for grades 7 and 9. A total of 19 schools hosted the AVID program. The AVID Elective (advisory) is a core element of the AVID program and was designed to help students negotiate the most challenging academic classes. The AVID Elective (advisory) focused on academic and social support. The schedule for the AVID Elective (advisory) included two days of instruction, two days of tutoring, and one day of motivational lessons, speakers and expeditionary learning experiences (Hubbard and Mehan, 1999). The AVID Elective (advisory), similar to the advisories found in small schools, incorporated an attention to
personalization as embodied in the establishment of a sense of membership and academic press among student participants.

The researcher incorporated school, district, and college protocols when accessing documents, reviewing data, and warehousing materials. Due to the role of the researcher in this district and the research context, direct contact with participants was made by a third party. The research design involved a cross-sectional administration of a survey instrument in June of 2009. The data collection process was completed by mid-June of 2009. Data analysis followed during the months of July and August. The purpose of the quantitative data collected was to provide greater insights into what type of classroom environment, particularly an advisory context, best supported student achievement.

Research Participants

All first-time 9th grade students enrolled in an AVID Elective (advisory) were invited to participate in this research project. Due to the researcher’s role, and to further protect the anonymity of AVID schools, teachers, and students, the district’s Director of AVID established initial contact with Principals and the AVID Elective Teachers. The Director of AVID also disseminated and collected materials to all participants. AVID students, parents, and guardians received a letter asking permission for students’ participation. Students took the letter home with a request that they return it the next day, signed by their parent or guardian. The signed and returned consent forms were placed in an envelope and then placed in a separate envelope that was stored with the surveys. Completed surveys were placed in this second envelope with the school’s name and an AVID Elective (advisory) ID on it. No other information linked to the identity of specific
students or AVID teachers was incorporated in this process. The sealed envelope containing the surveys and letters was picked up by the AVID Director.

This purposive sample represented approximately 235 out of 400 first-time 9th grade students enrolled in AVID across the selected school district. The 235 AVID students represented 14 school sites from which student responses were received. Such a process was aligned to the researcher's desire to acquire specific information from a sample that would best inform this line of research inquiry (Merriam, 1998). Students enrolled in AVID Elective classes (advisories) were surveyed regarding their perceptions of membership (engagement/communality) and exposure to academic press (academic emphasis). Their perceptions were analyzed against measures of proficiency in their academic achievement as exemplified by scores on the benchmark assessments.

Students’ anonymity was maintained. Efforts were made to control for demographics in the identification of the sample population.

The 235 AVID Elective (advisory) students who participated in the survey process comprised the primary study group of this research design. A request for data was made to the Office of Accountability for the benchmark assessment scores associated with all first-time students enrolled in the 9th grade AVID Elective (advisory) courses. No information identifying specific students was provided. A unique number identifying each student was used to protect anonymity. Data included in the file (besides the unique identifier) were the test scores on the 4th administration of the English Language Arts and Mathematics benchmark assessments, the school, gender, ethnicity, disability status, language proficiency, and the course number of the AVID Elective (advisory).
For the purpose of drawing comparisons, a non-study group was used as part of this research design. A similar request for data was made with the Research Division of the school district for the benchmark assessment scores associated with students not enrolled in the 9th grade AVID Elective (advisory) courses (again, first-time 9th graders). No information identifying specific students was provided. A unique number identifying each student was used to protect anonymity. Data included in the file (besides the unique identifier) were the test scores on the 4th administration of the English Language Arts and Mathematics benchmark assessments, the school, gender, ethnicity, disability status, language proficiency, and the course number of the AVID Elective (advisory). These data sets resulted in a stratified matched sample of 282 AVID and 282 Non-AVID students.

For the purpose of additional data analysis, AVID and Non-AVID students were sub-divided into small school and large school designations. This designation was based solely on student enrollment in each of the 14 schools from which responses were received for the student survey. Small schools were those comprised of student enrollments of 500 or fewer students. Large schools were those comprised of more than 500 students. Of the AVID students, 78 were enrolled in small schools, and 204 were enrolled in large schools. Of the Non-AVID students, 77 were enrolled in small schools, and 205 were enrolled in large school settings.

*Instruments Used in Data Collection-Cross-sectional Survey Instrument*

One method of data collection used in this analysis was a cross-sectional survey instrument adapted from the Organizational Health Inventory for Secondary Schools (OHI-S) and the Organizational Climate Description for Secondary Schools (OCDQ-RS).
The original instruments were developed by Dr. Wayne K. Hoy, Professor in Educational Administration at Ohio State University. Permission was granted for the use of these instruments. The adapted instrument was composed of 18 questions designed to elicit student perspectives regarding the degree to which they experienced a sense of membership, coupled with academic press. This instrument incorporated a scale varying along a four-point scale. The identified categories for responses were: (1) “Almost Never,” (2) “Sometimes,” (3) “Often,” and (4) “Almost Always.”

The Organizational Health Inventory for Secondary Schools (OHI-S) was designed to assess the perceived health of a secondary school as indicative across seven dimensions. According to Hoy (1991), a healthy school is one in which the school, the leadership, and classroom teachers are connected in a harmonious manner; they successfully function in a collective manner to achieve an organizational mission. The seven dimensions or sub-test areas are: Institutional Integrity, Initiating Structure, Consideration, Principal Influence, Resource Support, Morale, and Academic Emphasis.

The Academic Emphasis sub-test was adapted for this research study. Academic Emphasis focused on the degree to which academic achievement is a clear focal point within a school context. It incorporated the establishment of clear and authentic academic goals for students, the creation of an environment that supported learning, teachers conveying a consistent message that students were capable of achieving, and the inclination of students to achieve academically in an environment in which such efforts are recognized and affirmed.

The Organizational Climate Description for Secondary Schools (OCDQ-RS) was designed to assess secondary schools' climate across five dimensions. The five
dimensions or sub-test areas were: Supportive Principal Behavior, Directive Principal Behavior, Frustrated Teacher Behavior, Intimate Teacher Behavior, and Engaged Teacher Behavior. As a means of assessing students' sense of membership, engagement, and communality within the AVID Elective (advisory) context, the Engaged Teacher Behavior sub-test was adapted for student responses. This sub-test assessed perceptions relative to morale, inherent pride, and the comfort/care among individuals in working with each other, friendship, trust, and hope.

For the purpose of establishing content reliability, two focus groups (comprised of 6 to 10 9th graders) were conducted with individuals designated as non-participants. The researcher was present, but the groups were facilitated by an individual familiar with the researcher's work. This facilitation was done to ensure objectivity. During this process, students were asked to read the letter seeking consent and to identify anything that required further clarification. The facilitator read the letter aloud and solicited feedback from students. The meaning behind each paragraph was discussed to ensure that there was consensus on the meaning. A similar process was implemented in reviewing the actual survey instrument. All materials were collected by the researcher. As a result of their critical feedback, an inter-rater reliability of .77 was achieved.

The adapted instrument assessed membership/communality in several categories. These categories included: shared values; positive student-teacher relations characterized by students' perception of care emanating from teachers, group pride, and a positive inclination among members of the group to work with and support each other; feelings of connection; and a collective commitment to the success of others in the group. Academic press attributes assessed by the instrument included: a recognition of
high/achievable goals, the establishment of an orderly environment, optimism around the ability of others to succeed, teachers' belief that students could achieve, students' inclination to work hard, respect, significant time devoted to academics as exemplified in what is said and done, consistent instructional leadership on the part of the teacher, and social support for achievement.

Instruments Used in Data Collection-Benchmark Assessment Data Sets

As part of a system-wide initiative, the school district implemented a series of four benchmark assessments during the 2008-2009 academic year. The school district's benchmark assessment implementation provided four timely assessments designed to prepare students for New York State tests and to determine the extent of delivery of the district-mandated curriculum for grades 5 to 9 in English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics. The benchmarks were designed to provide students with familiarity with the format and content of New York State tests. The ELA benchmark included three types of items: multiple-choice, constructive response, and extended-response performance tasks. The Math assessment included three types of items: multiple-choice, short-response performance tasks, and extended-response performance tasks. Assessment scores reflected the degree of student learning for specific New York State standards and performance indicators (PI) highlighted in the district curriculum for the designated period of administration.

The fourth administration of the ELA and Mathematics benchmark assessments in the 2008-2009 school year were administered after New York State testing concluded for ELA and Mathematics for grades 5 to 8 in 2009. ELA assessments were designed around a focus on post-January challenges (after New York State ELA assessments were
administered) and performance challenges for the upcoming school year. Math benchmarks were designed based on New York State post-March performance indicators (after New York State Math assessments were administered).

Students scoring Levels 3 or 4 on a four-level assessment were deemed to be academically proficient for purposes of this research study. In ELA, Levels 3 and 4 were characterized by: adeptness in going beyond the written texts; explaining, generalizing and connecting ideas; taking information from one passage of text and applying this information to a different task; developing hypotheses; complex analyses of the connections among several texts; and developing compositions with an awareness of the audience, purpose, organization, voice, and evidence. Students scoring Levels 3 or 4 in Math exemplified skills and habits of mind that incorporated an ability to reason, plan, draw logical conclusions, explain concepts, decide which concepts should be applied towards the resolution of a complex problem, make multiple connections within and across several content areas, develop and prove conjectures, and synthesize ideas into new concepts.

Data Analysis

Several factors were weighed in reviewing responses in the survey instrument. The researcher looked for any central tendencies. An attempt was made to identify any outliers in regard to students' responses around perceptions of membership and academic press. Attention was also given to the shape, spread, and distribution of responses for each item. The degree to which homogeneity existed was also considered. Time was spent in assessing the response of sub-groups, such as students in particular types of schools. Overall, these considerations were examined by analyzing the means, standard
deviation, and the range of scores for the identified variables. A similar process of analysis was applied in reviewing the student scores on the benchmark assessments.

Again, the analysis incorporated an assessment of the shape, spread, and distribution of responses. Sub-groups were also a focal point of the analysis. To accomplish these points of analysis in a succinct manner, the statistical tests used in this research study were Frequency of Response and One-way ANOVA.

Frequency of Response analysis reflects a representation of responses due to inputs at various frequencies. Some researchers perceive this analysis to be less intuitive or instructive in nature. However, for purposes of this research, it served as an immediate tool for the researcher to acquire a handle on the dynamic nature of the survey data. Frequency of Response analysis also provided some insight into the impact of certain attributes or conditions on students’ perception of communality and academic press. If the researcher is able to assess the frequency of certain responses, then the potential exists to predict the impact of certain inputs. Secondly, if there is a desire to design educational contexts to better meet the needs of students, we need to know which characteristics or qualities might elicit the desired results, yielding improvements in academic achievement.

The researcher used One-way ANOVA as a tool for the analysis of variance. According to Cronk (2006):

One-way ANOVA compares the means of two or more groups of subjects that vary on a single independent variable (AVID versus Non-AVID). ANOVA gives a single answer that tells us if any of the groups is different from any of the other groups (p. 64).
One-way ANOVA is considered one of the most useful and simple among an array of statistical procedures. The selection of this form of statistical analysis was based on several assumptions:

1. The populations from which the samples were obtained must be normally or approximately normally distributed.
2. The samples must be independent.
3. The variances of the population must be equal.
4. It is not necessary to have equal sample sizes.

(One-way ANOVA, n.d.)

The One-way ANOVA supports research that allows for the examination of variance when compared between and within groups. This statistical approach is used to test for differences among a minimum of two or more groups or treatments. A limitation of the One-way ANOVA is its inability to explicitly indicate where the difference exists.

Statistical analysis was incorporated through the use of SPSS 16.0 software. Variations were examined between first-time 9th grade students who were or were not participants in the AVID Elective (advisory). The predictive capacity of AVID Elective (advisory) students' sense of membership (engagement/communality) and academic press (academic emphasis) to impact some measure of proficiency in their academic achievement was initially assessed through an examination of 235 surveys completed by AVID students in 14 schools. Surveys were analyzed to determine the degree to which AVID Elective (advisory) students believed that AVID promoted the perception of membership (engagement/communality) and the perception of academic press (academic emphasis). Additional analysis was done to determine if there were inherent differences in how AVID students enrolled in small schools perceived membership and academic press,
compared to AVID students enrolled in large schools. Analysis of frequency of
responses was done for survey questions focused on membership, and those questions
focused on academic press. Survey responses were further analyzed through the
application of a One-way ANOVA. The One-way ANOVA was used to gauge the
variability that existed among AVID students and their perceptions of academic press and
membership. Analysis was designed to determine any variability in how AVID students
enrolled in small schools perceived academic press and communality versus AVID
students enrolled in large schools.

The second aspect of this research involved the creation of stratified matched
samples of 282 AVID and 282 Non-AVID students drawn from the same 14 schools from
which the original AVID survey responses were received. Students were matched on the
basis of enrollment or non-enrollment in AVID, school type (large school/small school),
gender, ethnicity, disability status, and language proficiency. These participants were
selected and used as a source for retrieving student scores on the fourth administration of
the English Language Arts benchmark assessment and the Math benchmark assessments.
Again, the One-way ANOVA analysis of both assessments included a consideration of
the variance in: Math/English Language Arts benchmark assessment scores, when
compared between the stratified matched samples of AVID versus Non-AVID students;
Math/English Language Arts benchmark assessment scores, when compared between
AVID students enrolled in small schools versus AVID students enrolled in large schools;
and Math/English Language Arts benchmark assessment scores, when compared among
AVID student enrolled in small schools. AVID students enrolled in large schools, Non-
AVID student enrolled in small schools, and Non-AVID student enrolled in large schools.

Summary of the Methodology

The ultimate examination of any school lies in its ability to graduate students and prepare them for post-secondary success. Recent research has focused on examining the social support given to students and how this support, coupled with a sustained focus on student learning within the school community, results in higher achievement. This sustained focus on supporting student learning is known as academic press (McDill, Natriello, & Pallas, 1986). Lee and Smith (1999) concluded that social support was positively associated with increases in student learning. Schools where academic press is a priority support learning to a greater extent.

The following research questions and null hypothesis guided this research study:

Research Question 1—Among AVID students, does AVID promote the perception of membership (communality)? Among AVID students, does AVID promote the perception of academic press (emphasis)?

Null Hypothesis 1a – Among AVID students, AVID does not promote the perception of membership.

Null Hypothesis 1b – Among AVID students, AVID does not promote the perception of academic press.

Research Question 2—Among AVID students, is there a significant difference in how AVID students enrolled in small schools perceive academic press versus AVID students enrolled in large schools?
Among AVID students, is there a significant difference in how AVID students enrolled in small schools perceive membership versus AVID students enrolled in large schools?

**Null Hypothesis 2a** – Among AVID students, there is no significant difference in how AVID students enrolled in small schools perceive academic press versus those enrolled in large schools.

**Null Hypothesis 2b** – Among AVID students, there is no significant difference in how AVID students enrolled in small schools perceive membership versus those enrolled in large schools.

Research Question 3 – Is there a significant difference in Math achievement as measured by benchmark scores in stratified matched samples of AVID versus Non-AVID students?

Is there a significant difference in English Language Arts achievement as measured by benchmark scores in stratified matched samples of AVID versus Non-AVID students?

**Null Hypothesis 3a** – There is no significant difference in Math achievement as measured by benchmark scores in stratified matched samples of AVID versus Non-AVID students.

**Null Hypothesis 3b** – There is no significant difference in English Language Arts achievement as measured by benchmark scores in stratified matched samples of AVID versus Non-AVID students.

Research Question 4 – Among AVID students in large schools versus AVID students in small schools, is there a significant difference in achievement as measured by benchmark scores in English Language Arts?

Among AVID students in large schools versus AVID students in small schools, is there a significant difference in achievement as measured by benchmark scores in Math?
Null Hypothesis 4a – Among AVID students in large schools versus AVID students in small schools, there is no significant difference in achievement as measured by benchmark scores in English Language Arts.

Null Hypothesis 4b – Among AVID students in large schools versus AVID students in small schools, there is no significant difference in achievement as measured by benchmark scores in Math.

Research Question 5– Is there a significant difference among Math benchmark assessment scores for stratified matched samples of AVID students enrolled in small schools, AVID students enrolled in large schools, Non-AVID students enrolled in small schools and Non-AVID students enrolled in large schools?

Is there a significant difference among English Language Arts benchmark assessment scores for stratified matched samples of AVID students enrolled in small schools, AVID students enrolled in large schools, Non-AVID students enrolled in small schools and Non-AVID students enrolled in large schools?

Null Hypothesis 5a – There is no significant difference among Math benchmark assessment scores for stratified matched samples of AVID students enrolled in small schools, AVID students enrolled in large schools, Non-AVID students enrolled in small schools, and Non-AVID students enrolled in large schools.

Null Hypothesis 5b – There is no significant difference among English Language Arts benchmark assessment scores for stratified matched samples of AVID students enrolled in small schools, AVID students enrolled in large schools, Non-AVID students enrolled in small schools, and Non-AVID students enrolled in large schools.
A quantitative approach was used as it provided an inquiry framework to test hypothesis through the use of surveys, and data collection was used to generate statistical data (Cresswell, 2003). The study began with the administration of the survey instrument to obtain quantitative data around student perspectives on the two independent variables. Analysis of Frequency of Response was used in assessing student responses on the survey in order to gauge their perceptions relative to a sense of membership and academic press in the AVID Elective (advisory).

Variability among AVID Elective (advisory) students and Non-AVID students' perceptions of membership and academic press was analyzed through the application of a One-way ANOVA. This application was used as a means of determining the impact, if any, of the two independent variables on the proposed dependent variable of student academic achievement (as measured by benchmark assessment scores.)

The researcher held a senior management position in a mid-sized urban public school system. This mid-sized urban school district located in Upstate New York served as the research context. During the 2008-2009 school year, this district served approximately 32,586 students in grades Pre-K through 12. The researcher had direct supervisory responsibility for the AVID program that included an elective known as AVID Elective (advisory). Approximately 400 first-time 9th graders across the district were enrolled in the AVID program. The AVID Elective (advisory) focused on academic and social support.

The research design involved a cross-sectional administration of a survey instrument in June of 2009. The data collection process was completed by mid-June of 2009. Data analysis followed during the months of July and August. The quantitative
data collected was used to provide greater insights into what type of classroom environment, particularly advisory, supported student achievement.

All first-time 9th grade students enrolled in an AVID Elective (advisory) were invited to participate in this research project. Out of the 400 first-time 9th grade students enrolled in AVID, 235 participated in the survey; those 235 AVID students represented 14 school sites from which student responses were received. Students enrolled in AVID were surveyed regarding their perceptions of membership (engagement/community) and exposure to academic press (academic emphasis). Their perceptions were analyzed against measures of proficiency in their academic achievement, as exemplified by proficiency scores on benchmark assessments. The 235 AVID Elective students served as the primary study group for this research design. A request for additional data generated a file that included students' school assignment, gender, ethnicity, disability status, language proficiency, and the AVID course number.

For the purpose of drawing comparisons, a non-study group was used as part of this research design. A similar request for data was made for students not enrolled in the 9th grade AVID Elective (advisory). Additional data analysis involved the sub-division of AVID and Non-AVID groups into small school and large school designations. Of the AVID students, 78 were enrolled in small schools, and 204 were enrolled in large schools. Of the Non-AVID students, 77 were enrolled in small schools, and 205 were enrolled in large school settings.

One method of data collection was a cross-sectional survey instrument adapted from the Organizational Health Inventory for Secondary Schools (OHI-S) and the Organizational Climate Description for Secondary Schools (OCDQ-RS). The adapted
instrument was composed of 18 questions designed to elicit student perspectives regarding the degree to which they experienced a sense of membership, coupled with academic press. This instrument incorporated a scale varying along a four-point scale. The Organizational Climate Description for Secondary Schools (OCDQ-RS) was designed to assess secondary schools' climate across five dimensions. The five dimensions or sub-test areas were: Supportive Principal Behavior, Directive Principal Behavior, Frustrated Teacher Behavior, Intimate Teacher Behavior, and Engaged Teacher Behavior.

Two focus groups were conducted for the purpose of establishing content reliability. As a result of their critical feedback, an inter-rater reliability of .77 was achieved. The adapted instrument assessed membership/communality in several categories: shared values; positive student-teacher relations characterized by students' perception of care emanating from teachers, group pride and a positive inclination among members of the group to work with and support each other; feelings of connection; and a collective commitment to the success of others in the group. Academic press attributes assessed by the instrument included a recognition of high/achievable goals, the establishment of an orderly environment, optimism around the ability of others to succeed, teachers’ belief that students could achieve, students’ inclination to work hard, respect, significant time devoted to academics as exemplified in what is said and done, consistent instructional leadership on the part of the teacher, and social support for achievement.

The second method of data collection incorporated the district-implemented series of four benchmark assessments during the 2008-2009 academic year. The fourth
administration of the English Language Arts and Math benchmark assessments occurred after New York State testing concluded for English Language Arts and math for grades 5 to 8. Students scoring Levels 3 or 4 on a four-level assessment were deemed to be academically proficient for purposes of this research study.

After collecting survey data, several factors were weighed in reviewing responses. The researcher looked for any central tendencies and measures of dispersion. An attempt was made to identify any outliers in regard to students’ responses around perceptions of membership and academic press. Attention was also given to the shape, spread, and distribution of responses for each item. The major tools of analysis for this research study were Frequency of Response and One-way ANOVA. Statistical analysis was incorporated through the use of SPSS 16.0 software.

The purpose of this analysis was to obtain direct data from students about the learning environment that optimized their academic achievement. It was hoped that this research would particularly inform the design of policies, procedures, and organizational structures that will engage students, particularly those in an urban context. According to Ancess (1997), “Launching a school is a statement of belief in the possibilities of education – the belief that education can make a difference in the lives of individuals and in the life of our democracy” (p. 2).

The next chapter presents the results of this research study. The discussion and explanation of the research findings will be supported through the presentation of the research questions, articulation of the findings and associated analysis, and a summary of research results.
Chapter 4: Results

Introduction and Research Questions

As stated in Chapter 1, this research explores the predictive capacity for AVID Elective (advisory) students’ sense of membership, coupled with academic press, to influence some measure of proficiency in student achievement. An 18-question survey and an analysis of scores on English Language Arts and Mathematics benchmark assessments were used to determine what impact, if any, the two variables (separately and collectively) have on students’ academic achievement. The following research questions and null hypothesis guided this quasi-experimental study:

Research Question 1—Among AVID students, does AVID promote the perception of membership (communality)? Among AVID students, does AVID promote the perception of academic press (emphasis)?

Null Hypothesis 1a – Among AVID students, AVID does not promote the perception of membership.

Null Hypothesis 1b – Among AVID students, AVID does not promote the perception of academic press.

Research Question 2—Among AVID students, is there a significant difference in how AVID students enrolled in small schools perceive academic press versus AVID students enrolled in large schools?

Among AVID students, is there a significant difference in how AVID students enrolled in small schools perceive membership versus AVID students enrolled in large schools?
Null Hypothesis 2a – Among AVID students, there is no significant difference in how AVID students enrolled in small schools perceive academic press versus those enrolled in large schools.

Null Hypothesis 2b – Among AVID students, there is no significant difference in how AVID students enrolled in small schools perceive membership versus those enrolled in large schools.

Research Question 3–Is there a significant difference in Math achievement as measured by benchmark scores in stratified matched samples of AVID versus Non-AVID students? Is there a significant difference in English Language Arts achievement as measured by benchmark scores in stratified matched samples of AVID versus Non-AVID students?

Null Hypothesis 3a – There is no significant difference in Math achievement as measured by benchmark scores in stratified matched samples of AVID versus Non-AVID students.

Null Hypothesis 3b – There is no significant difference in English Language Arts achievement as measured by benchmark scores in stratified matched samples of AVID versus Non-AVID students.

Research Question 4–Among AVID students in large schools versus AVID students in small schools, is there a significant difference in achievement as measured by benchmark scores in English Language Arts? Among AVID students in large schools versus AVID students in small schools, is there a significant difference in achievement as measured by benchmark scores in math?
Null Hypothesis 4a – Among AVID students in large schools versus AVID students in small schools, there is no significant difference in achievement as measured by benchmark scores in English Language Arts.

Null Hypothesis 4b – Among AVID students in large schools versus AVID students in small schools, there is no significant difference in achievement as measured by benchmark scores in Math.

Research Question 5 – Is there a significant difference among Math benchmark assessment scores for stratified matched samples of AVID students enrolled in small schools, AVID students enrolled in large schools, Non-AVID students enrolled in small schools, and Non-AVID students enrolled in large schools?

Is there a significant difference among English Language Arts benchmark assessment scores for stratified matched samples of AVID students enrolled in small schools, AVID students enrolled in large schools, Non-AVID students enrolled in small schools, and Non-AVID students enrolled in large schools?

Null Hypothesis 5a – There is no significant difference among Math benchmark assessment scores for stratified matched samples of AVID students enrolled in small schools, AVID students enrolled in large schools, Non-AVID students enrolled in small schools, and Non-AVID students enrolled in large schools.

Null Hypothesis 5b – There is no significant difference among English Language Arts benchmark assessment scores for stratified matched samples of AVID students enrolled in small schools, AVID students enrolled in large schools, Non-AVID students enrolled in small schools, and Non-AVID students enrolled in large schools.
All first-time 9th grade students (approximately 400) currently enrolled in an AVID Elective (advisory) in a mid-sized urban school district were invited to participate in this research project. An 18-question survey instrument designed to elicit perspectives regarding the degree to which students experienced a sense of membership, coupled with academic press, in the context of the AVID Elective (advisory) was completed by 235 AVID students. The instrument incorporated a continuous four-point scale. The identified categories for responses were (1) “Almost Never,” (2) “Sometimes,” (3) “Often,” and (4) “Almost Always.” Survey responses were analyzed for the purpose of assessing the degree to which AVID Elective (advisory) students perceived themselves to be the recipients of a sense of membership and academic press in the context of the AVID Elective (advisory).

The second element of this research involved the creation of a stratified matched sample of 282 AVID and 282 Non-AVID students drawn from the same 14 schools from which the AVID survey responses were received. Cases were matched on the basis of enrollment or non-enrollment in AVID, school type (large school/small school), gender, ethnicity, disability status, and language proficiency. This sample was used as a source for accessing student scores on the fourth administration of the English Language Arts benchmark assessment and the Mathematics benchmark assessment.

Analysis of both the survey results and scores on the benchmark assessments allowed for determining the degree to which students' sense of membership and academic press in AVID Elective (advisory) influenced some measure of proficiency in student achievement. This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section shares the results and analysis of the survey administered to the AVID Elective (advisory)
students. The second section reflects the analysis of the benchmark assessment scores
drawn from the 282 stratified samples of AVID and Non-AVID students.

Data Analysis and Findings: Survey

Research Question 1 gauged AVID students’ perception of membership
(communality) and academic press (emphasis). For purposes of analysis, Frequency of
Response was applied. The predictive capacity of AVID Elective (advisory) students’
sense of membership (engagement/communality) and academic press (academic
emphasis) to impact some measure of proficiency in their academic achievement was
initially assessed through an examination of 235 surveys completed by AVID students in
14 schools. Surveys were analyzed to determine the degree to which AVID Elective
(advisory) students believed that AVID promoted the perception of membership
(engagement/communality) and the perception of academic press (academic emphasis).
Additional analysis was done to determine if there were inherent differences in how
AVID students enrolled in small schools perceived membership and academic press,
compared to AVID students enrolled in large schools.

Analysis of Frequency of Responses on the four-point scale among the 235 AVID
student surveys indicated a response of “Often” or “Almost Always” on eight of ten
questions pertaining to perceptions of membership (engagement/communality) in the
context of the AVID Elective (advisory). The total point value attributed to each
respondent for questions pertaining to membership was compared to a baseline value of
30. This baseline was established as an acceptable level for perceptions of membership
because it represented at least 75% of the total point value associated with membership
on this survey. Of the survey respondents, 56.5% (or 133) fell at the baseline or above
for perceptions of membership; 43.40% (or 102) fell below the baseline for acceptable levels of perceptions of membership. The mean for membership was 29.52, and the median was 30, with a standard deviation of 6.37658. This data reflected minimal evidence that, among AVID students, AVID promoted perceptions of membership (communality).

The analysis of Frequency of Responses for the 235 AVID student surveys revealed a far more compelling picture of the significance and potential influence of academic press (academic emphasis.) The total point value attributed to each respondent for questions pertaining to academic press was compared to a baseline value of 24. This baseline was established as an acceptable level for perceptions of academic press because it represented at least 75% of the total point value associated with academic press on this survey. Of the survey respondents, 71.90% fell at the baseline or above for perceptions of academic press; 28.10% (or 66 survey respondents) fell below the baseline for acceptable levels of academic press. The mean for academic press was 25.51, and the median was 26, with a standard deviation of 4.50863. This data reflected evidence that among AVID students, AVID promoted perceptions of academic press. Table 4.1 summarizes the frequency of responses for academic press and membership among AVID students.
Table 4.1

*Students At or Above Baseline for Academic Press and Membership*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Baseline</th>
<th># At or Above Baseline</th>
<th>% At or Above Baseline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic Press</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>71.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>56.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Question 2 determined whether or not there was a significant difference in AVID student perceptions of academic press and membership among those enrolled in small schools versus those enrolled in large schools. The extent to which meaningful differences might exist among AVID students with regard to their perceptions of academic press and membership was analyzed using a One-way ANOVA.

Results indicated that, among AVID students enrolled in small schools versus those enrolled in large schools, there were minimal differences in how they perceived academic press. The mean of the 106 AVID students enrolled in small schools was 24.79, with a standard deviation of .15 for perceptions of academic press. The mean for the 129 AVID students enrolled in large schools was 24.80, with a standard deviation of .14. The differences were not statistically significant (F(1, 233)=.469, p=.494) (See Table 4.2).

Among AVID students enrolled in small schools versus those enrolled in large schools, there was slight variability in how students in both settings perceived a sense of membership. The mean of the 106 AVID students enrolled in small schools was 30.74, with a standard deviation of .1613. An identical mean of 129 AVID students enrolled in
large schools was 30.74, with a standard deviation of .1585. Among AVID students, there was no significant difference in how AVID students enrolled in small schools perceived membership (communality) versus AVID students enrolled in large schools (F(1, 233)=.001, p=.976). As a result, the null hypothesis was not rejected. Table 4.2 delineates the results of the One-way ANOVA.

Table 4.2

One-Way ANOVA Perception of Academic Press and Membership by School Size

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>AVID Lg.</th>
<th>AVID Sm.</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean – Academic Press</td>
<td>24.80</td>
<td>24.79</td>
<td>1, 233</td>
<td>.469</td>
<td>.494</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stand. Dev. – Acad. Press</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean – Membership</td>
<td>30.74</td>
<td>30.74</td>
<td>1, 233</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.976</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stand. Dev. – Membership</td>
<td>.1585</td>
<td>.1613</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This initial analysis of AVID students' perceptions (as conveyed through the survey instrument) corroborates that two elements often associated with effective advisories – social support (membership) and academic press – are perceived to be present in the context of the AVID Elective (advisory). Although survey responses suggest minimal perceptions of membership, of particular note, however, is the evidence suggesting that AVID participants are the recipients of academic press in the context of the AVID Elective. This indication is aligned with the primacy given to academic preparation and achievement within the AVID program. While social support and collaboration are important elements of the AVID Elective experience, the social support
and collaboration are focused on enhancing individual and collective students' academic achievement.

While students perceived themselves to be minimally impacted by a sense of membership in the AVID Elective and strongly impacted by academic press, the question remained as to how perceptions of membership and academic press served as predictors of some measure of proficiency in students' academic achievement. The matched sample of AVID and Non-AVID students and their benchmark assessment scores provided some insight.

Data Analysis and Findings: Benchmark Assessments

Research Question 3 gauged if there was a significant difference in Math benchmark assessment scores when comparisons were made between AVID and Non-AVID students. This portion of the research involved the creation of stratified matched samples of 282 AVID and 282 Non-AVID students drawn from the same 14 schools from which the AVID survey responses were received. Students were matched on the basis of enrollment or non-enrollment in AVID, school type (large school/small school), gender, ethnicity, disability status, and language proficiency. These participants were used as a source for retrieving student scores on the fourth administration of the English Language Arts benchmark assessment and the Mathematics benchmark assessment.

Comparisons were made between matched samples of AVID versus Non-AVID students on math and English Language Arts benchmark assessment scores; between AVID students enrolled in large schools versus AVID students enrolled in small schools on math and English Language Arts benchmark assessment scores; and between Non-
AVID students enrolled in large schools versus Non-AVID students enrolled in small schools on math and English Language Arts benchmark assessment scores.

The One-way ANOVA used to analyze Math assessment scores for AVID and Non-AVID students yielded a significant result (F (1, 562) = 13.478, p = .001) (See Table 4.3). The mean for AVID students on the Math benchmark was .66, with a standard deviation of .652. The mean for Non-AVID students on the Math benchmark was .47, with a standard deviation of .534. There was a significant difference in Math achievement as measured by benchmark assessment scores in stratified matched samples of AVID versus Non-AVID students. AVID students scored higher on the Math benchmark assessment than did Non-AVID students. It should be noted that there were more missing scores among both the AVID and Non-AVID students and that Math scores were generally lower across the board than were English Language Arts scores. Table 4.3 represents the math performance findings based on enrollment in AVID.

Table 4.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>AVID</th>
<th>Non-AVID</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>282</td>
<td>282</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Score</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>1,562</td>
<td>13.478</td>
<td>&lt;.001*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stand. Dev.</td>
<td>.652</td>
<td>.534</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significant
Research Question 3 also gauged if there was a significant difference in English Language Arts benchmark assessment scores when comparisons were made between AVID and Non-AVID students. The mean for AVID students on the English Language Arts benchmark was 1.70, with a standard deviation of 1.221. The mean for Non-AVID students on the English Language Arts benchmark assessment was 1.56, with a standard deviation of 1.234. The significance between the groups was .160. There was not a significant difference between English Language Arts benchmark assessment scores, when compared among matched samples of score for AVID and Non-AVID students (F(1, 562)=1.979, p=.160). The null hypothesis was not rejected. Table 4.4 represents the English Language Arts performance findings based on enrollment in AVID.

Table 4.4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>AVID</th>
<th>Non-AVID</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>282</td>
<td>282</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>1,562</td>
<td>1.979</td>
<td>.160**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stand. Dev.</td>
<td>1.221</td>
<td>1.234</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** Not significant

Research Question 4 assessed if there was a significant difference in English Language Arts and Math benchmark scores among AVID students enrolled in large schools versus AVID students enrolled in small schools. A One-way ANOVA was also applied to analyzing comparisons using English Language Arts and Mathematics benchmark assessment scores among AVID students enrolled in small schools versus
AVID students enrolled in large schools. On the Math assessment, the mean for AVID students enrolled in small schools was .65, with a standard deviation of .53. AVID students enrolled in large schools registered a mean of .66, with a standard deviation of .70. These findings were not found to be significant (F (1, 280) = .001, p = .972) (See Table 4.5). When comparing Math benchmark assessment scores for AVID students enrolled in large schools versus AVID students enrolled in small schools, there were no significant differences in Math achievement. The null hypothesis was not rejected. A similar analysis was conducted for the English Language Arts benchmark assessment scores among AVID students in small schools versus those enrolled in larger schools. On the English Language Arts assessment, the mean for AVID students enrolled in small schools was 2.08, with a standard deviation of 1.03. AVID students enrolled in large schools had a mean of 1.56, with a standard deviation of 1.26. This comparison of English Language Arts benchmark assessment scores for AVID students enrolled in small schools versus AVID students enrolled in large schools indicated that differences in ELA achievement were significant. The level of significance between groups was found to be (F(1, 280) = 10.502, p = .001) (See Table 4.5). Students enrolled in AVID in small schools achieved at a significantly higher level. Table 4.5 represents AVID student performance in English Language Arts and Math based on small or large school designation.
Table 4.5

*AVID Performance on Math & ELA Benchmarks by Large or Small School Designation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>AVID</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean--Math</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>1,280</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stand. Dev. Math</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean--ELA</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>1,280</td>
<td>10.502</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stand. Dev.-ELA</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significant

In Research Question 5 a one-way ANOVA was applied to determine if there were significant differences among Math and English Language Arts benchmark assessment scores among stratified matched samples of students. AVID and Non-AVID students were further divided to support an analysis among four distinct groups: Non-AVID students enrolled in small schools (77), Non-AVID students enrolled large schools (205), AVID students enrolled in small schools (78), and AVID students enrolled in large schools (204).

Math benchmark assessment data revealed a mean of .58 with a standard deviation of .55 for Non-AVID students in small schools; a mean of .43 with a standard deviation of .53 for Non-AVID students in large schools; a mean of .65 for AVID students enrolled in small schools with a standard deviation of .53; and a mean of .66 for AVID students enrolled in large schools with a standard deviation of .70. There was a significant difference between the groups (F (3, 560)=5.774, p=.001) (See Table 4.6).
AVID students enrolled in large schools tended to score the highest on Math benchmark assessments, closely followed by AVID students enrolled in small schools. Non-AVID students enrolled in large schools scored the lowest on Math benchmark assessments.

A similar analysis for English Language Arts results was conducted comparing AVID and Non-AVID students in large and small schools. The English Language Arts results revealed a mean of 1.65 with a standard deviation of 1.25 for Non-AVID students in small schools; a mean of 1.52 with a standard deviation of 1.23 for Non-AVID students in large schools; a mean of 2.08 for AVID students enrolled in small schools with a standard deviation of 1.03; and a mean of 1.56 for AVID students enrolled in large schools with a standard deviation of 1.26. There was a significant difference between the groups (F (3, 560)=4.278, p=.005) (See Table 4.6). AVID students in small schools scored the highest on English Language Arts benchmark assessments. Non-AVID students enrolled in small schools scored at the next highest level. Non-AVID students enrolled in large schools scored the lowest on ELA benchmark assessments. Table 4.6 represents AVID and Non-AVID student performance in English Language Arts and Math benchmarks based on small or large school designation.
Table 4.6

**AVID and Non-AVID Performance on Math & ELA by Small or Large School**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>AVID Lg.</th>
<th>AVID Sm.</th>
<th>Non-AVID Lg.</th>
<th>Non-AVID Sm.</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean-Math</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>3,560</td>
<td>5.774</td>
<td>.001*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stand. Dev. Math</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean-ELA</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>3,560</td>
<td>4.278</td>
<td>.005*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stand. Dev.-ELA</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significant

**Summary of Results**

In summary, AVID students' purport a perception of academic press in the context of the AVID Elective. While social support is an essential element of the AVID Elective experience, survey respondents indicated minimal perceptions of membership. An examination of the contextual implications of AVID students enrolled in large schools versus AVID students enrolled in small schools yielded minimal variability for academic press among students in either setting. There was slight variability in how students perceived a sense of membership in the large schools setting or in small schools.

AVID students scored at higher levels on the Math benchmark assessment than did their Non-AVID peers. There was no significant difference between AVID and Non-AVID students' scores on the English Language Arts benchmark assessment. AVID and Non-AVID students were divided to support an analysis among four distinct groups: Non-AVID students enrolled in small schools (77), Non-AVID students enrolled large schools (205), AVID students enrolled in small schools (78), and AVID students enrolled...
in large schools (204). The implications for school structural and programmatic implications were magnified through findings that revealed that AVID students enrolled in large schools scored the highest in Math, closely followed by AVID students in small schools; in addition, AVID students enrolled in small schools scored highest on English Language Arts, followed by Non-AVID students in small schools who scored at the next highest level. Analysis of benchmark assessments among AVID students in large schools versus AVID students in small schools revealed that AVID students in small schools scored higher on English Language Arts than did their peers in large schools, and that there was no significant difference in Math achievement between AVID students enrolled in small schools and AVID students enrolled in large schools.

A consideration of the research findings and the research questions results in the following conclusions:

Research Question 1--Among AVID students, does AVID promote the perception of membership (communality)? Among AVID students, does AVID promote the perception of academic press (emphasis)?

Null Hypothesis 1a – Among AVID students, AVID does not promote the perception of membership.

Null Hypothesis 1b – Among AVID students, AVID does not promote the perception of academic press.

Conclusion – A review of AVID student survey responses for membership (engagement/communality) indicated there was minimal evidence that, among AVID students, the AVID Elective (advisory) promoted students’ perception of membership (engagement/communality).
Conclusion – A review of AVID student survey responses for academic press (academic emphasis) indicated there was evidence that, among AVID students, the AVID Elective (advisory) promoted students' perceptions of academic press (academic emphasis).

Research Question 2– Among AVID students, is there a significant difference in how AVID students enrolled in small schools perceive academic press versus AVID students enrolled in large schools?

Among AVID students, is there a significant difference in how AVID students enrolled in small schools perceive membership versus AVID students enrolled in large schools?

Null Hypothesis 2a – Among AVID students, there is no significant difference in how AVID students enrolled in small schools perceive academic press versus those enrolled in large schools.

Null Hypothesis 2b – Among AVID students, there is no significant difference in how AVID students enrolled in small schools perceive membership versus those enrolled in large schools.

Conclusion – Among AVID students enrolled in small schools versus those enrolled in large schools, there are minimal difference in how students in both settings perceived academic press.

Conclusion – Among AVID students enrolled in small schools versus those enrolled in large schools, there is slight variability in regard to how students in both settings perceive membership. The mean score (30.74) was the same for membership perceptions among AVID students enrolled in small schools and AVID students enrolled in large schools.
Research Question 3—Is there a significant difference in Math achievement as measured by benchmark score in stratified matched samples of AVID versus Non-AVID students?
Is there a significant difference in English Language Arts achievement as measured by benchmark scores in stratified matched samples of AVID versus Non-AVID students?

Null Hypothesis 3a – There is no significant difference in Math achievement as measured by benchmark scores in stratified matched samples of AVID versus Non-AVID students.

Null Hypothesis 3b – There is no significant difference in English Language Arts achievement as measured by benchmark scores in stratified matched samples of AVID versus Non-AVID students.

Conclusion – There was a significant difference between Math benchmark scores for stratified matched samples of AVID students versus Non-AVID. AVID students scored higher in Math benchmark assessments than did Non-AVID students.

Conclusion – There was not a significant difference between English Language Arts benchmark assessments scores for stratified matched samples of AVID students versus Non-AVID students.

Research Question 4—Among AVID students in large schools versus AVID students in small schools, is there a significant difference in achievement as measured by benchmark scores in English Language Arts?

Among AVID students in large schools versus AVID students in small schools, is there a significant difference in achievement as measured by benchmark scores in Math?
Null Hypothesis 4a – Among AVID students in large schools versus AVID students in small schools, there is no significant difference in achievement as measured by benchmark scores in English Language Arts.

Null Hypothesis 4b – Among AVID students in large schools versus AVID students in small schools, there is no significant difference in achievement as measured by benchmark scores in Math.

Conclusion – When comparing benchmark English Language Arts scores for AVID students in large schools versus AVID students in small schools, there was a significant difference in ELA achievement. Students enrolled in AVID small schools achieved at a higher level.

Conclusion – When comparing benchmark Math scores for AVID students in large schools versus AVID students in small schools, there was no significant difference in math achievement. The null hypothesis could not be rejected.

Research Question 5-Is there a significant difference among Math benchmark assessment scores for stratified matched samples of AVID students enrolled in small schools, AVID students enrolled in large schools, Non-AVID students enrolled in small schools, and Non-AVID students enrolled in large schools?

Is there a significant difference among English Language Arts benchmark assessment scores for stratified matched samples of AVID students enrolled in small schools, AVID students enrolled in large schools, Non-AVID students enrolled in small schools, and Non-AVID students enrolled in large schools?

Null Hypothesis 5a – There is no significant difference among Math benchmark assessment scores for stratified matched samples of AVID students enrolled in small
schools, AVID students enrolled in large schools, Non-AVID students enrolled in small schools, and Non-AVID students enrolled in large schools.

**Null Hypothesis 5b** – There is no significant difference among English Language Arts benchmark assessment scores for stratified matched samples of AVID students enrolled in small schools, AVID students enrolled in large schools, Non-AVID students enrolled in small schools, and Non-AVID students enrolled in large schools?

**Conclusion** – There was a significant difference among Math benchmark assessment scores for stratified matched samples of AVID students enrolled in small schools, AVID students enrolled in large schools, Non-AVID students enrolled in small schools, and Non-AVID students enrolled in large schools. AVID students enrolled in large schools scored the highest on Math benchmarks, closely followed by AVID students enrolled in small schools. Non-AVID students enrolled in large schools scored the lowest on Math benchmark assessments.

**Conclusion** – There was a significant difference among English Language Arts assessment scores for stratified matched samples of AVID students enrolled in small schools, AVID students enrolled in large schools, Non-AVID students enrolled in small schools, and Non-AVID students enrolled in large schools. AVID students in small schools scored the highest on the English Language Arts benchmark. Non-AVID students enrolled in small schools scored at the next highest level. Non-AVID students enrolled in large schools scored the lowest on English Language Arts benchmarks.
The next chapter will discuss the implications of the findings. research limitations, specific recommendations, and conclusion.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

The current state of affairs in America's secondary schools is a source of significant concern for educators and policymakers. A sense of urgency also exists to provide an optimal learning environment for urban youngsters who are predominantly low-income students of color. Recent research paints a compelling picture of what might be done to create school environments that optimize student learning and achievement at the secondary level. The journey to create learning environments that support student achievement is inherently tied to discussions of what constitutes the real goal and purpose of schooling. According to Lee, Smith, and Croninger (1997), a plethora of school practices count for very little in terms of student learning and equity, if these practices or organizational structures are not supported by a consideration of the interactions among human beings in the school context or an examination of what is taught and the manner in which curriculum is delivered to students. The ultimate examination of any school, large or small, lies in its ability to graduate students and prepare them for post-secondary success.

The purpose of this quasi-experimental, quantitative study was to generate an exploratory examination of the predictive capacity for AVID Elective (advisory) students' sense of membership, coupled with academic press, to influence some measure of proficiency in student academic achievement. An 18-question survey and an analysis of scores on English Language Arts and Math benchmark assessments were used to
determine what impact, if any, the two variables (separately and collectively) had on students' academic achievement. This chapter presents the implications of the research findings, the limitations of this research study, recommendations for future action, and a summary of the research study, as based on the analysis and findings.

Implications of Findings

Research findings presented in Chapter 4 support theory, scholarly understandings, decision-making, and professional practice as it relates to the predictive capacity for AVID Elective (advisory) students' sense of membership (engagement/communality) and exposure to academic press (academic emphasis) and some measure of proficiency in student achievement.

Theoretical implications. This research study reinforces the need to strategically attend to the social and structural dimensions of the teaching and learning process. In particular, this study substantiates Gewertz's (2007) contention that the social and structural dimensions of a school are "integral parts of a relationship-driven, collaborative way of running a high school" (p. 23). The study provides some credence to consider how students relate to each other and their teachers in the context of schools and classroom.

It also invites a critique of how these interactions have relevance beyond communal considerations, and how they potentially impede or enhance students' perception of themselves as learners and their academic achievement. The AVID Elective (advisory) is designed to incorporate social support in order to augment individual learning. "Whether working in study groups, sharing their writing in reader-writer workshops or read-alouds, students know they can trust other students to support
their learning and to provide another source of feedback and new ideas” (Swanson, Contreras, Coto, Furgeson, & Gira, 2006, p.3). When such social support is missing in any learning environment, one might infer that such a void has detrimental implications for individuals and groups of students.

The concept of caring is inherently tied to concepts of community and belonging. A sense of belonging is one of Maslow’s (1962) Hierarchy of Needs. Indeed, he proposed this need for belonging must be met prior to any learning. The findings suggest that teacher caring might serve as an antecedent to generating a sense of membership, which ideally serves as a foundation or incubator for advancing academic press. This is analogous to Capp’s (2003) assertion that “Until a school [teacher] is able to establish in its students a sense of belonging, community, and a sense of place, a struggle to maximize the learning potential of the students within the school will occur” (p. 2).

The research findings reflecting mild student perceptions of membership or social support within the AVID Elective are aligned to Lee and Smith’s (1999) admonishment: “Reforms that are directed primarily to improving personal relationships between students and teachers as a means to improve student learning miss something important (p. 937). The findings invite further consideration of the nuances of the care offered by educators and how they are or are not perceived by students. However, there is a clear need to further examine or challenge reforms solely based on improved personal relationships. The findings reiterate a need for a theoretical frame of reference as to what end or for what purpose improved personal relationships in an educational setting can serve. Starratt (1997) expresses the idea that a school should rightfully aspire to be a
community, or more specifically, “a teaching community whose goal is the production of knowledge [not merely a] community as an end in itself” (p. 6).

The AVID students’ strong perceptions of academic press are also aligned to the idea that social support is positively associated with increases in student learning; indeed, schools where academic press is a priority support student learning to a greater extent (Lee & Smith, 1999). AVID Elective students’ strong perception of academic press reinforces Murray’s (1938) recognition that this “press” is indeed a normative dimension of a school. This study invites further consideration as to how the strength of academic press may indeed serve as a self-perpetuating entity, dependent upon the degree to which it frames the actions of students and teachers within the classroom or school (Goddard, Sweetland, & Hoy, 2000). Hoy, Sweetland, and Smith (2002) capture this perspective: “Academic press in a school enhances organizational performance, and reciprocal causality suggests that resulting performance improvements in turn strengthen academic press in the school” (p. 79). Such a context produces a collective efficacy that is reflective of Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory.

The findings are less conclusive to the perceived advantages (variability) between small schools over larger school settings and the implications for membership, academic press and student achievement. Wainer and Zwerling (2006) challenged the assumption that the mere establishment of small school communities increased students’ academic achievement. The variability between the two settings may suggests that there should be less of a focus on school size and more of a focus on the nature of relationships, activities, and messages conveyed on a consistent basis that potentially influence levels of student achievement. This study further challenges Coleman’s (1966) earliest
assertions that school attributes mattered very little and that the onus or responsibility for differences in individual student achievement was tied to variations in students' family background. While Lee and Burkam (2003) concluded that schools with an enrollment of fewer than 1,500 students were more likely to sustain students' decisions to continue their education, they acknowledged that affirming relationships between students and teachers could mediate the larger elements of school organization and structure.

Students' involvement in the AVID Elective (advisory) appears to set students on a path for academic achievement, and certainly perception data drawn from the survey attests to students' clear belief that academic press is a component of their school experience. The impact of the AVID Elective (advisory) experience may be aligned to Smerdon's (2002) research that concluded that students enrolled in challenging academic courses, particularly Math and English, possessed enhanced academic expectations and, as a consequence, felt a higher level of school membership than did students enrolled in less rigorous course work. The academic achievement edge for AVID Elective (advisory) students may also be explained through the findings that emerged from previous research by Reis, Colbert, and Herbert (2005). Their examination of factors that supported the academic achievement and resiliency of low-SES and demographically diverse students revealed a range of qualities, including "supportive adults, friendships with other achieving students, development of a strong belief in self and ways to cope with negative aspects of their school and urban environments" (Reis, Colbert, & Herbert, 2005, p. 110).

Finally, research findings suggest that caring as exemplified in a sense of membership (communality) and academic press are elements of the AVID Elective
(advisory) students’ perceived experience. Shouse (1996) has challenged the traditional assumption that an educational context must choose between two tensions, establishing a spirit of community embedded in caring relations at the expense of high academic standards and associated expectations for students. Shouse (1996) concluded: “For low and middle-SES schools, the greatest achievement effects follow from strong combinations of communality and academic press” (p. 47).

Scholarly understandings. Based on a review of literature and data results, the researcher has developed a more thoughtful level of discernment of the impact of membership and the potential impact on the individual and collective achievement of students. Many small school advocates have articulated a range of advantages for urban youth by virtue of their exposure to the small school context and the associated focus on personalization. According to Bracey (2001), such exposure results in increased achievement for students of color and low-income students, a reduction in violence, an increased sense of membership and buy-in within the school environment, increases in attendance and graduation rates, and greater community and parental engagement. While Gay (2000) has not focused on the large school versus small school debate, she has articulated the need for culturally responsive pedagogy, undergirded by a spirit of caring emanating from the teacher. Ladson-Billings (2009) alludes to the critical role played by educators in attending to relationships, while promoting a community of learners. Valenzuela (1999) further informs a consideration of care as a foundational tool for community, and ultimately academics, when she states: “This person, as opposed to object orientation, suggests the futility of academic knowledge and skills when individuals do not know how to live in the world as caring, responsible, well-mannered.
and respectful human beings” (p. 23). Again, the researcher is inclined to see such an orientation as one not necessarily held hostage to the small school context, but one indicative of a sound approach to educating all children and driven by a moral imperative. The most critical dimensions of the researcher's scholarly understanding is substantiated by the student perception data and assessment results that merely caring for students is not an independent or sufficient guarantor of individual or collective student achievement.

**Decision-making.** Significant district resources have been invested in the implementation of the AVID program in all secondary schools with an initial focus on grades 7 and 9. Research findings provide some level of support for current implementation efforts and provide a basis to further examine trend data for the long-range implications on student achievement. Such decisions take on critical implications, given the current financial constraints that confront many schools districts, particularly those in an urban context. Findings also suggest opportunities for teachers and administrators to critically examine an ethic of care, membership, and strong doses of academic press to discern how such a formula implemented outside the AVID program structure might positively impact student and cohort achievement.

As previously mentioned, the findings are less conclusive in regard to an inordinate academic or membership advantage ascribed to students enrolled in AVID Elective small school contexts. The findings do invite further consideration as to how students’ exposure to AVID might mitigate the deleterious attributes often associated with the large comprehensive high schools and low levels of student achievement, particularly in our urban centers.
Professional practice. This research and the associated findings offer a wealth of incentives, as well as an impetus to move from scholarship to theory, from theory to decision-making, and from decision-making to authentic changes within professional educational practices and policies. Research substantiates a positive connection between a personalized learning environment and improved student outcomes (Gladden, 1998; Raywid, 1999; Stigler & Hiebart, 1999, Cotton, 2001; Feldman, Tung. & Ouimette, 2003; Gewerta, 2007). Advisory has been perceived as a means by which learning is intimately tied to the development of relationships between adolescents, educators, and the subject areas taught (Strike, 1998). The research findings substantiate the power of AVID Elective (advisory) as a tool for enhancing student academic achievement. This research opens the door to further inquiries as to how advisory experiences should be crafted beyond the programmatic confines of the AVID program. How might personalization, a focus on relationships, membership, and academic press be crafted in the laboratory of the school to yield similar results as are evidenced in the AVID Elective? How might further examination of students’ perceptions of membership and academic press be used to create more personalized learning environments that result in higher levels of academic achievement? If such contexts are worthy of duplication as tools for educational reform, there are inherent challenges for schools of education in preparing the next generation of leaders equipped with the skills and habits of mind required for a more person-focus versus a more object-focus associated with traditional approaches to education.

Boorstein (1997) captured the inherent challenge by concluding that research data substantiates that inherent to the concept of (an effective) advisory, is the formation of emotional bonds among participants – indeed this is a required element – and teacher
personality traits weigh heavily in determining the effectiveness of advisory. While AVID Elective students perceived minimal levels of membership in their classroom experience, its mere presence still serves as an impetus for current educators to critically examine their capacity to create classrooms where a sense of membership is supported and academic press is nurtured.

According to French, Atkinson, and Rugen (2007), advisory time includes a focus on students engaged in academic activities, communal activities, dialogue centered around the holistic development of students, and a keen focus on shared concerns or interests. The decided academic edge that appears to be associated with AVID involvement suggests that such a context exists within the confines of the AVID Elective (advisory). Research findings may suggest a need to further examine the shared interests and concerns in an academic setting. Perhaps to a large extent the mission of preparing students for college entrance serves as an impetus for engendering within AVID Elective students a “forward looking” perspective. Adelabu (2007) examined the connection between academic achievement to time perspective (present, future) and students’ membership. Reported findings indicated that a significant relationship existed among students’ academic achievement, their possession of a forward looking/future orientation, students’ sense of belonging in the school community, and school acceptance. Engendering a forward looking perspective within students may indeed support greater resiliency in the pursuit of academic endeavors.

Two findings from this research were of particular interest. The first research question assessed AVID Elective students’ perceptions of the promotion of membership and academic press. While a review of AVID student survey responses for academic
press indicated there was evidence that AVID promoted perceptions of academic press, there was minimal evidence among AVID students that the AVID Elective promoted membership. This is particularly noteworthy, given the strong emphasis on social support within the AVID Elective structure and guidelines. Future research design might incorporate the use of more qualitative data drawn from focus groups or individual student surveys. The development of a qualitative instrument might support a more thorough examination of communality as a discreet element within the AVID Elective and students’ perceptions.

A second finding was related to the third research question. This question assessed whether or not there was a significant difference in Math and English Language Arts benchmark assessment scores when comparisons were made between AVID and Non-AVID students. While there was no significant difference (p=.160) revealed on English Language Arts benchmark assessments, there was a significant difference (p=.00) between AVID and Non-AVID students on the Math benchmarks. Subsequent interviews with the District Coordinator of AVID for this school district revealed English Language Learners with stronger skills in math were given heightened consideration during the recruitment process, even if their English Language Arts scores reflected lower levels of proficiency. This trend was noted nationally in other AVID programs as well. Given the growing number of English Language Learners in this district, this might explain this particular finding.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this research study. This research study represents an exploratory investigation into the predictive capacity for AVID Elective (advisory)
students' sense of membership, coupled with academic press or emphasis, to influence some measure of proficiency in students' academic achievement. Factors that potentially affect academic achievement, such as communality and academic press, are multidimensional and complex psychological constructs. Further analysis and interpretation are required to identify implications for further practice. New studies may conceptualize these constructs using more comprehensive, multiple measures. These findings may be further qualified by grade level, type of student, and other contextual factors. All relationships involving quantity measures of communality, academic press and their impact on achievement will have boundary conditions.

The fact that the study is based on information and materials drawn from the review of literature and a student administered survey instrument may reflect just one worldview or perspective in a particular context. An additional consideration is that the original survey instrument from which the researcher adapted the instrument used in this research study was originally designed to gauge adults' (i.e., teachers') perceptions of academic press or emphasis and a sense of membership (engagement/communality).

This research study addresses the perspective of students who are currently first-time 9th graders enrolled in the AVID Elective (advisory) for the first time in this mid-sized urban school district. This research study did not include a nationally representative sample. An additional sampling limitation was the collection of data from matched samples rather than samples obtained through random assignment. The researcher attempted to address this issue by strategically matching students with comparable demographic characteristics (i.e., gender, school-type, ethnicity, disability, language proficiency) in order to create groups as equivalent as possible. These research design
elements must be weighed in assessing the degree to which generalizations might be
made to a broader student population.

Another limitation of the research study was that the study did not consider
students' school experiences or achievement prior to their enrollment in the AVID
program. Such information might provide additional insight around students' perceptions
and experiences regarding communality and academic press. On a related note, no other
academic achievement data was used beyond the benchmark assessment scores.
Analyzing additional academic indicators, such as report card grades, might also inform a
more thorough assessment of the degree to which students' perceptions of communality
and academic press potentially impact their academic achievement.

Finally, this research did not address the experiences (or perceptions) of students
not enrolled in AVID who are potentially at significantly greater risk of becoming
disengaged and not achieving academically.

The next section recommends a new ethic of care for potentially impacting the
academic achievement of urban youth. This ethic of care blends a consideration of
communality and academic press, with a particular focus on generating a group ethos
with individual and collective implications for academic achievement.

Recommendations

An ethic of care for promoting the academic achievement of urban youth.
Students' academic achievement is potentially influenced by a range of organizational
and structural attributes, distinct teacher/school attributes and behaviors, and discreet
sociological elements, as well. Review of the literature and research findings suggest a
need for further research and new models for supporting the academic achievement of all children and particularly those in our urban centers.

A compelling challenge of the 21st century is how to best meet the needs of children for whom learning and academic achievements are persistent sources of frustration and potential disengagement. All too frequently, these same students are admonished to make sense and meaning from their schooling; yet little effort is exerted on the part of schools and educators to make sense of these students. Valenzuela (1999) contends:

There is little reason to bother aspiring to higher education if the price of admission must be prepaid in yearly installments of humiliation and alienation. Making schools and schooling affirmative, truly educational experiences for all students requires implementing changes that reach deep into the structures of the educational system (p. 99).

There is a general consensus among urban educators that the current achievement gap disproportionately impacts children of color and poor children. Low levels of academic achievement, particularly among urban youth, further exacerbates social problems and relegates too many young people to cycles of poverty and futures devoid of options. The economic implications for American society are played out in our inability to advance a workforce equipped with the skills, habits of mind, and diversity to compete in a highly technological and globally competitive marketplace. The findings associated with this research study reinforce a consideration of the degree and manner in which school factors or attributes serve as predictors of achievement and test performance, particularly as they have relevance for the academic achievement of urban youth. While attending to the
affective dimensions of educating youngsters for 21st century living is important and not inherently anti-intellectual, these research findings suggest that an ethic of care as exemplified in a sense of membership and belonging must be supported by an academic press focused on student achievement and success.

The findings of this exploratory research study and the associated literature review invite further consideration of the optimal context in which to educate urban youth. This section describes a model in which an ethic of care nurtures a context in which the social interactions between teachers and students and among groups of students results in academic achievement becoming a by-product of these social interactions and “ways of being” among all participants. Such a model includes a dynamic and strategically developed context in which relationships unfold for the purpose of advancing an ethos for academic achievement.

The larger context. This ethic of care reflects a concerted effort to reduce the inherent cultural and social gaps that may exist between adults and students. Caring becomes a medium for advancing educational achievement and reform. Such efforts are guided by educators’ awareness of the individual strengths, foibles, and emotions of members of the community in which learning must be nurtured. As such, there is an authentic quest to understand and appreciate “the other”. Educators in such a context are keenly attuned to the perspective that no attempt to educate children, to support their academic achievement and development excludes a vital consideration of the student-teacher relationship. This ethic of care reflects a heightened sensitivity to optimizing communication. Listening serves as a means of supporting community and as a tool for acquiring information and understanding. There is a desire to extend the knowledge of
each member of the learning community beyond the confines of the classroom and school. Knowledge of students' lives beyond the school or classroom serves as a critical tool in the hands of educators, as it provides meaning and relevancy to the learning process. Such knowledge becomes a bridge between students and the content or ideas to be examined and learned.

In this ethic of care, the cultural, social, and ethnic nuances of each individual are perceived as value-added dimensions upon which a community of learners is established and the foundation for individual and collective achievement is laid. This ethic of care is further characterized by connections between students and teachers, and connections among students. Working and learning in a collaborative manner is expected and encouraged. This ethic of care embodies a consistent message that counters any idea that the education of young people is devoid of relevance, life, and a deep acknowledgement of the personhood and capacity of each individual. In such an arena, learning is perceived as an extension of living and of individual and collective growth. Attending to the holistic development of students is indicative of a deep desire to equip each student with the skills and habits of mind to fulfill their academic potential. The social and structural context becomes a staging ground for academic endeavors. A sense of belonging emerges in such a context due to the nature of the consistent interaction between adults and children, and the ethos of academic press. A concerted effort is made to strategically construct the information and essential character of members within the community. This ethic of care is further characterized by efforts to draw out of each student innate cognitive skills and talents. Students are the beneficiaries of extensive encouragement and support. Trust becomes the glue between social support and
students' potential to achieve academically. As such, students are supported in challenging themselves beyond their perceived limits or boundaries. Stretching goals and risk-taking become a part of the social norms and learning environment. Believing in one's capacity to achieve, devoting quality time to academic endeavors, and exposure to accelerated learning opportunities all evolve from relationships informed by an ethic of care attuned to academic achievement. In the confines of the classroom and school, a collective efficacy emerges that potentially has a profound implication for advancing academic achievement.

This proposed ethic of care is one in which academics are nurtured and is one tied to concepts of communality. An authentic effort is made to craft an environment in which all individuals feel a sense of comfort and engagement. At the individual classroom level, students perceive the environment as a sanctuary and as one in which they and their peers are supported. A sense of unity is nurtured, but not in a manner that negates individual perspective or diminishes critical thinking. The rapport between and among students and teachers is one characterized by humanity. Such relationships mediate circumstances that potentially contribute to a lack of connection or engagement. This focus on communality is associated with a belief that knowledge of academic or subject content is important, but insufficient, when it does not include knowledge of the individuals with whom the content must become connected. This ethic of care is characterized by a belief that knowing academic or subject content gains greater relevancy when connections have been established among teachers and students. Traditional notions of teacher management give sway to a focus on establishing trusting relationships and engaging students in meaningful [academic] endeavors. While
significant time and attention are given to establishing authentic relationships within the
school or classroom environment. Academic achievement or learning remain the primary
impetus and end goal for all that is said and done. The spirit that emanates from
educators immersed in such efforts is the clear message to students that there is nothing
they can or cannot do that will excuse them from this journey towards knowledge, self-
fulfillment, and purpose.

This model for an ethic of care plays out in a climate where the individual is not
the sole starting point for all dialogues or activities. The larger context in which teaching
and learning takes place includes a collectivist perspective or worldview. This is
embodied in the manner in which students interact with each other and the manner in
which students and teachers interact with each other. All of these interactions contribute
to a collective efficacy among members of the community of learners. Such a climate is
characterized by a shared sense of mutual care, collaborative activities, and the
fundamental emergence of a group ethos reflective of particular ideas, habits of minds.
and worldviews. This model for an ethic of care where academic achievement is
nurtured is derived from the pedagogically strategic and deliberate actions of educators
who are consciously aware of their efforts and the specific ends or purposes to which
they work with and for students (academic achievement).

This ethic of care requires a consideration of group norms and a minimization of
the usual inclination to focus on individual competition and one-upmanship in the
academic arena. While students attend to their individual academic growth and
achievement, they are also encouraged to situate this attention in the larger context of the
group's academic achievement and growth. Individual achievement is not advanced to
the exclusion of others or the class as a whole. Academic achievement is embedded in a collective and socially supportive process. This context engenders within students a sense of mutuality and responsibility regarding their academic success and that of their peers. The degree and manner in which such a context is crafted by an educator impacts the degree to which a collective efficacy emerges that potentially serves as a foundation or staging ground for individual and collective academic achievement. Indeed, this becomes an authentic obsession for educators as they see this focus on collective efficacy as a tool for generating greater student effort which in turn can result in greater success. This collectivist, community of learner’s orientation is perceived as not only a tool for instruction but a lifelong skill beyond the confines of the school. It also reflects socialization to students’ roles as citizens.

This ethic of care incorporates an acknowledgement that too much is at stake in the current lives and futures of students. There is also recognition that educators cannot control all of the outside influences that exert a pull or control over the lives of students. Educators in such a context view what they do authentically as a source of both stress and reward. However, this reality does not limit their capacity to see beyond students’ current circumstances and challenges; nor does such an authentic worldview reduce their resiliency or that of their students. This resiliency is characterized by greater self-control, a willingness to explore new ideas or constructs, an enhanced sense of purpose, and an innate predilection to support students in controlling their futures. A constant effort to coach, encourage, and support becomes a badge of honor for educators working in such an environment. For students and educators functioning within this ethic of care, the foundation for all learning is embedded in a social, moral, personal, and collective
imperative. For urban youth in particular, this ethic of care in the school or classroom context becomes an extension of an educational agenda designed to support justice and equity. Students exposed to such an ethic of care are the recipients of a form of social capital that potentially translates into improved self-concepts, better grades, higher achievement, and enhanced opportunities and experiences. The more students become the beneficiaries of such social capital and the associated benefits, the more they are potential players in a self-fulfilling prophecy or cycle of academic success.

The role of teachers in an ethic of care. Classroom educators take on a vital role in this model prescribed for enhancing students’ academic achievement. These individuals potentially become the crème de la crème in an urban setting due to their innate propensity to connect with, and support, students’ academic achievement. After facilitating bonds of connection or relatedness with their students, these educators endeavor to lay the foundation for enhanced levels of student learning.

These same educators do not situate themselves in pedagogical boxes that are defined by an unyielding allegiance to particular skills or processes. Their instructional bag is expansive and inclusive enough to embrace an array of approaches to support student engagement, learning, and achievement. Their efforts are also designed to empower students in defining themselves as academic beings, in finding their voices and generating a worldview that will equip them for real-world living and success.

This ethic of care supports the delicate balancing of expressive discourse with the technical elements of teaching. While goals, standards, and strategies are fodder for what educators do with and for students, these are not elevated to the point that the affective dimensions of human development are minimized. These hardy educators perceive their
role as one in which there is a delicate balance of teaching as art with teaching as science. Educators in such a setting take pride in not only being knowledgeable about their subject content, but they also pride themselves in knowing how students respond to the content. Every effort is made to make sense of students and to equip students as they make sense of the school and the subject content. Reducing the dissonance between students and the subject content is an on-going focal point. Educators aspire to teach subject content and to teach human beings whose personhood (even within a community) is acknowledged and celebrated.

At the end of the instructional day or experience, these educators seek to support the growth of more humane individuals who are also people of achievement and purpose. As students of pedagogy, these educators are uniquely attuned to what enables students to become engaged with and producers of knowledge. The pages of textbooks do not represent the full extent of the curriculum or what knowledge is worth knowing. They apply a critical scalpel to lesson plans and seek to engender within students a critical lens that seeks truth in the midst of unsubstantiated claims or assertions passing themselves off as conventional wisdom or truth. These educators become consistent students of metacognition and what impediments exist that potentially block student learning. Fueled with knowledge derived from such a process, these educators assume the mantle of coaches for individual and collective efficacy focused on students’ academic achievement.

These educators exhibit a belief that they bear responsibility for their students’ capacity to learn and achieve academically. They enthusiastically embrace their personal accountability for student learning, even in the midst of a plethora of bureaucratic
challenges and societal impediments. While keenly aware of real or potential impediments to student engagement and academic achievement, these hearty souls do not live or march by such a worldview. They assess their locus of control and extend every effort to influence the immediate context of the classroom environment. They are persistent educators and endeavor to meet the needs of those within their charge. Again, what they do, and the spirit in which they execute all tasks, is designed to build students' capacity. Their instructional armor is soldered by the attributes of persistence, patience, and vision. They hold on to the belief that their students are capable, that their academic growth is an attainable result, and the concept that as educators, it is their moral and ethical duty to work to this end and purpose.

The care exuded by these educators is more than a perfunctory “Let’s all feel good” ethos. This ethic of care is indicative of an authentic respect for and appreciation for the children they teach and the respective contexts or communities in which they live. These educators often view themselves as authentic members of the community or context in which instruction is delivered and not interlopers just doing their time or passing through for some finite period of time. Their efforts are always strategic and purposeful. This extends to their attempts to generate authentic communities for learning and learners. Learning communities result not only from their interaction with students, but also from their interaction and modeling of collaboration with fellow teachers and peers. When educators work to craft such an environment, they situate themselves as superb role models for students who are more inclined to follow their example. Their concerted efforts to build relationships and community in the midst of learning and
learners. particularly in the most challenging of contexts, potentially reflects a self-defense mechanism of sorts to combat the crippling encroachment of burnout.

This ethic of care plays out as educators assume the mantle of coaches, facilitators, and mentors. Through coaching, extending learning options and activities, and the provision of resources, students are pushed, prodded and encouraged to do, to read, to write, to think, and to inquire. Student learning is a by-product of their honest effort and builds upon their individual and collective interests and capacities. Educators exuding a commitment to such an ethic of care do so in the spirit of a moral authority and as an extension of the institutional values and structure. These educators operate with a heightened moral compass and sense of their role as political agents. As an extension of this worldview, they feel a responsibility to craft a learning environment that nurtures students' connection and awareness between themselves and the local, national and global contexts in which they must function and hopefully contribute. For these educators, knowledge is flexible and open for honest and thorough examination. As political agents, these educators have no other choice or inclination but to advance such a perspective.

Students exposed to an ethic of care. Students are at the center and are the object of all efforts and purposes to which this model for an ethic of care exists and persists. This model nurtures the idea that individual students are worthy of recognition and the opportunity to develop to their fullest academic and social potential. This ethic of care is nurtured in a desire to deal with students in a holistic manner. In such contexts, students confer authenticity to this ethic of care by confirming a sense of being accepted and cared for; indeed, it is this receptivity on the part of students that serves as a critical element of
this model. Students' receptivity to being the recipients of care is played out in their perceptions and behaviors. This receptivity is a critical dimension and foundation for student learning and achievement. The depth or extent to which students feel cared for and about as social beings, and particularly as academic beings, has potential implications for the depth or extent to which they care for and about academics. When students demonstrate or sense this care, a reciprocal relationship of sorts is nurtured where they open or present themselves in many ways, including academic beings. Students become keenly aware that their needs, strengths and potential inform the teaching and learning relationship. Students feel that the community within the classroom is their arena for individual and collective growth. In such an arena, knowledge is continuously constructed, negotiated, and shared among constituents (i.e., teachers and students).

This spirit is expressed not only by what is executed by the educator(s), but more importantly it is expressed by what is experienced and produced by individual and collective bodies of students. This model for an ethic of care results in students engaging in democratic activities that involve them planning, making decisions, accessing resources, discerning what is true and credible, and presenting the academic fruits of their labor. Freedoms such as this stem from an inherent belief on the part of educators that students are worthy of such opportunities, eager to be challenged, and inclined towards deep conceptual learning and understanding. As a result of such efforts, students begin to perceive themselves as worthy and capable. They feel as though they are part of some great effort to continuously draw out still hidden talents, skills, and habits of mind. Student learning is under the tutelage of coaching educators. Students enter into an apprenticeship of learning with significant modeling from educators and their peers.
Students' individual backgrounds are value-added dimensions of this apprenticeship, as are their cultural, racial, and ethnic identities. As appropriate and authentic, students' lives are dimensions of the curriculum. As such, classroom activities and the dialogues in which students are engaged adeptly tackle issues of race, power, and equity, and have immediate and long-range implications for students. Particularly in an urban context, every effort is undertaken to ensure that students do not feel alienated from their culture in an effort to acculturate them to the majority culture or worldview. In this ethic of care, students feel and model membership in a community aligned to academic and cultural excellence. When strategically applied in the arena of urban education, this ethic of care engenders, within urban youth, the belief that academic excellence is not an exclusive realm in which solely white, middle class, suburban students function.

*Academics in an ethic of care.* If students are to achieve academically at optimal levels, merely nurturing caring relationships is an insufficient end to a means. In this model, relationships are framed around a strong commitment to students achieving academically and becoming fully engaged as learners and contributors to the world and future they will inherit. In this proposed ethic of care, students are the consistent recipients of academic press or emphasis. This attention to academics is a core value and a clear ethos for all participants in the school or classroom environment. Students and educators in such a context are keenly focused on the production and application of knowledge. Time is judiciously used and applied toward academic endeavors, and distractions are minimized to the greatest extent possible. A rigorous curriculum supported by high expectations and social support for all participants is a dimension of this ethic of care. An examination of such an environment reveals well-planned and
executed classrooms and schools where opportunities are available to extend student learning, and where application, performance, and production of what is learned is de rigueur. Students come to associate their time in such classrooms as time well spent, as a value-added dimension of their lives, and as a tool for their academic achievement and overall development. Continued exposure to such contexts potentially engenders within students a greater inclination to accept themselves as capable, academic beings.

Academic pursuits are not only embedded in a consideration of their immediate implications, but students are also nurtured toward a forward-looking world view that what they do, academically, today does indeed have long-range and positive implications for their future. This ethic of care sustains the academic growth and achievement of students by creating a safe environment where instructional approaches are scaffolded to support student learning and engagement. Academic content becomes a connection with students and not a tool to dehumanize or intimidate them as learners. As such, learning becomes an extension of being, growing, and developing.

This section suggests an ethic of care designed to potentially nurture the academic achievement of urban youth. This model involves the strategic crafting of a context where the social interactions between students and teachers and among groups of students are designed to engender an ethos where academic achievement is a dimension of the group ethos. A consistent effort is made to reduce the inherent cultural and social gaps that may exist between students and educators. The distinct characteristics of individual students are acknowledged and perceived as value-added dimensions of classroom experiences and the pursuit of academic endeavors. This ethic of care is one in which communality and academics are intimately tied together in an environment that is
perceived as safe and supportive of the individual and the collective growth of students. In this model of care, educators and students are nurtured into a growing sense of their own efficacy and agency within and beyond the confines of the classroom.

Educators committed to this model of care are highly skilled in building bonds or connections that serve as a foundation for student engagement and achievement. These educators pride themselves in not only knowing subject content, but also pride themselves in building bridges of meaning and relevancy between the subject content and the students in their charge. They enthusiastically embrace what they see as both a challenge and a moral imperative to push, prod, challenge, and encourage their students towards academic excellence. These educators are strategic in every effort and interaction, and students' holistic development is at the core of all they do. Student receptivity to such a context potentially yields a fertile foundation for knowledge to be constructed, negotiated, and shared among members of an ever-evolving community of learners. Students begin to perceive they are worthy and capable academic beings. This context is further enhanced when time is used judiciously, high expectations are consistently articulated, and students are exposed to a rigorous and relevant curriculum.

All of these elements must also be supported by an extensive network of social support that serves as a safety net. Academic pursuits within this model of care have immediate implications for students and sustain within them a forward looking resiliency that potentially nurtures further academic efforts and achievement. Table 5.1 visually captures the contextual elements that potentially promote the academic achievement of urban students. Table 5.2 outlines discreet teacher attributes that potentially support academic achievement. Table 5.3 incorporates specific student attributes and experiences
associated with this proposed model for an ethic of care to promote academic achievement in an urban context.

Table 5.1

*Context in an Ethic of Care Model to Support Urban Students' Academic Achievement*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Context is One in Which…</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• A quest to understand “the other” is nurtured</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Efforts are made to reduce the cultural and social gaps between and among students and educators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Cultural, social, ethnic nuances of each individual are perceived as value-added dimensions of an additive educational process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• A heightened sensitivity exist around optimizing communication among members of the community (listening has increased relevancy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Mutual trust and respect serve as the social glue among all members of the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Collaboration is articulated, supported, and expected among all members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Learning is perceived as a natural extension of living and growing (individually and collectively)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Both individual and collective efficacy serve as important group norms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• A keen focus exists on the holistic development of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The classroom is perceived as a staging ground for academic endeavors (the number one priority)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Clarity exists among all participants that learning and academic achievement serve as the impetus and end goal for all that is done</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Quality time is judiciously and purposefully devoted to academic endeavors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• There is a reduction or minimization of any dissonance between students and subject content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• An effort is made to nurture students’ awareness and connection to the local, national, and global context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• A rigorous curriculum is coupled with high expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The application, performance and production of knowledge are <em>de rigueur</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Academic achievement as a core value evolves from a collective and socially supported process</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5.2

_The Teacher in an Ethic of Care Model to Support Academic Achievement_

The Teacher is One Who...

- Views teaching through a moral, ethical and political lens (heightened moral compass)
- Is pedagogically strategic in crafting the social and academic context
- Acknowledges and affirms the personhood of every student
- Endeavors to draw out students’ innate cognitive skills and talents
- Focuses on making sense of students and students making sense of school and the learning process
- Perceives himself or herself as members of the community in which he or she teaches
- Models a commitment to collaboration with students and their peers
- Develops an authentic, credible knowledge of students’ lives beyond the classroom
- Takes pride in having a knowledge of subject content and the students to whom content is taught
- Is very clear on his or her own sense of personal and professional agency
- Takes responsibility for his or her locus of control and student learning
- Has the capacity to see beyond students’ current circumstances and challenges and instead puts the focus on students’ inherent potential
- Is a student of metacognition and uses his or her insights to determine the best course of action in working with students
- Readily acknowledges the affective dimensions of teaching and learning
- Possesses an expansive and inclusive bag of instructional strategies
- Balances expressive discourse with the technical elements of teaching
- Skillfully balances teaching as art with teaching as science
- Skillfully, strategically and purposefully crafts lessons
- Scaffolds instruction to meet the needs of learners
- Seeks to minimize individual competition and one-upmanship and instead nurtures a group ethos around achievement
- Perceives knowledge as flexible and open for candid examination
- Is persistent, patient and visionary
- Constantly coaches, facilitates, mentors and supports
- Accepts his or her responsibility as a role model for students
- Seeks to empower students in their roles as academic beings
- Feels a responsibility to nurture students not only as learners, but in their larger roles as citizens
The Student in an Ethic of Care Model to Support Academic Achievement

The Student is One Who...

- Perceives the classroom or larger context for learning as a safe place or sanctuary
- Is the recipient of extensive encouragement and support
- Senses that he or she [and their classmates] are at the center of what is said, done, taught and learned in that classroom setting
- Believes validation and acceptance exists for their ethnic, cultural, social and racial identities
- Perceives that individual and collective needs, strengths, and inherent potential inform the teaching and learning process
- Believes he or she is part of a community of learners
- Is the consistent recipient of academic press or emphasis
- Is encouraged to establish stretch goals
- Is given opportunities to engage in accelerated learning
- Becomes a producer of knowledge
- Is pushed, prodded and encouraged to critically read, write, speak, listen, think and inquire in order to achieve deep conceptual understanding and learning
- Engages in a process in which knowledge is continuously constructed, negotiated and shared
- Is encouraged to apply a critical lens to discerning what is true or valid
- Engages in an on-going apprenticeship in learning
- Situates his or her academic growth and achievement within a group ethos
- Believes he or she is part of some great effort
- Is increasingly nurtured towards enhanced levels of resiliency with implications for greater self control and a willingness to explore new ideas and constructs
- Begins to perceive himself or herself as an academic being capable of achieving
- Becomes a recipient of a type of social capital with implications far beyond the classroom and learning environment
- Confers an authenticity to the care to which they are recipients by exhibiting positive and productive behaviors and attitudes
- Shows a receptivity to an ethic of care that in turn serves as a foundation for academic engagement, learning and achievement
- Exudes an inclination to engage in academic endeavors in direct proportion to the degree to which they feel a sense of care
- Views time in the classroom as time well spent and value added
- Begins to perceive academic activities and achievement in the classroom as having immediate and long range implications for their future
This exploratory research provides a framework for additional research to inform the development of optimal contexts in which to educate urban youth in particular. Further research at the individual, classroom, and school levels will continue to clarify and refine the benefits of advisory or similar educational approaches that support a sense of communality, while at the same time supporting student engagement and academic achievement. Additional research may further define the relationship between communality and academic press in supporting enhanced levels of student achievement. Additional research may indeed help us understand if a reciprocal relationship potentially exists between students perceiving themselves as members of a community and them also being the recipients of academic press. A factor analysis may provide more in-depth understanding of student perceptions in this regard. A researcher may indeed be able to narrow down specific concepts within each variable to understand if specific areas or concepts lead to enhance student achievement.

Additional research could also be conducted to determine how students' perceptions of communality and academic press change over time. It may be helpful to know at what age and within what contexts students begin to perceive or not to perceive a strong sense of communality or academic press. This type of survey could be conducted as a longitudinal study or a one-time survey of students at different grade levels, both within the AVID program and outside of the AVID program. This type of study could be combined with a factor analysis to determine whether or not specific areas or elements of communality and academic press change as students grow older or in specific contexts.

Conclusion

Schooling in America has been shaped by a range of social, political, and
economic forces (Murphy, Beck, Crawford, Hodges, & McGaughy, 2001). The emergence of the small school movement in the 1970’s represented yet another response to social and political forces that required novel approaches to educating students, particularly in our urban centers. The small school movement’s focus on personalization represents a response to social, economic, and political forces that require new approaches to educating young people. Personalization is an effort to take into account individual student characteristics and needs in organizing the learning environment (Cotton, 2001). Research appears to support a positive connection between a personalized learning environment and improved student outcomes (Feldman, Tung, & Ouimette, 2003). While small size may nurture relationships, it cannot create or guarantee students’ academic focus.

A key dimension of the small school focus on personalization is the concept of advisory. Forte and Schurr (1993) define advisory as “An affective educational program designed to focus on social, emotional, physical, intellectual, psychological, and the ethical development of students” (p. 117). According to Osofsky, Sinner, and Wolk (2003), key elements of an advisory include:

1. Each student has an adult advocate to personalize the student’s learning experience.
2. The high school attends to students’ academic progress in varied ways to support their ability to show what they know and are capable of accomplishing.
3. The decision-making process is inclusive and supports the involvement of students, parents, and staff. Members of the school community experience a sense of ownership, participation and a vested interest in the atmosphere of the
4. Educators generate a sense of caring to their pupils and exhibit a responsibility for student learning. (p.55).

Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) is a national program incorporating dual attention to the affective and cognitive dimensions, as is the case with small school advisories. AVID is a fourth- through twelfth-grade system focused on supporting the development and college readiness of under-achieving students in the academic middle. One critical component of the AVID program is the AVID Elective; in this component of the program, students work in groups where there is a focus on shared goals. The AVID Elective teacher does not engage in the traditional notion of impassive students being the recipients of knowledge. The role of the AVID Elective teacher is one of a "guide, facilitator, and coach in a learning community of teachers, students, and tutors working together for the success of the group" (Swanson, Contreras, Coto, Furgeson, & Gira, 2006, p.116). The AVID Elective class serves as an arena in which students are encouraged and pushed. This social support augments individual learning and creates a powerful synergy within the AVID classroom as students support, challenge, and learn from each other. Several research studies support the efficacy and success of AVID as a tool to support student achievement and college readiness. The AVID Elective (advisory) and similar initiatives may hold the seeds for efforts to better engage students and to promote their social and cognitive development, while nurturing their academic achievement.

The ultimate examination of any school large or small lies in its ability to graduate students and prepare them for post-secondary success. The small, personalized
autonomy associated with the small school movement and advisory is potentially challenged in urban districts where testing mandates, required protocols, and mandated programs and materials reign supreme. According to French (2007), “Educational equity is today’s most crucial civil-rights issue” (p. 4). NCLB presents significant policy implications for small schools and potentially calls into question the legislation’s perceived capacity to support students’ academic growth and greater equity in the urban public school sector. Such a scenario invites a consideration of advisories as a tool to further support students. “The enduring effects of advisory programs are unknown at this time when judged from an empirical research perspective” (Galassi, Gulledge, & Cox, 1998, p. 16).

According to Lee and Smith (1999), “Reforms directed primarily to improving personal relationships between students and teachers as a means to improve student learning miss something important” (p. 937). They concluded that social support was positively associated with increases in student learning. Schools where academic press is a priority support student learning to a greater extent. However, high levels of social support in a school were insufficient in supporting student learning if academic press was not an inherently strong attribute in that school context.

The purpose of this study was to describe the predictive capacity for AVID Elective (advisory) students’ sense of membership (engagement/community) coupled with academic press (academic emphasis,) to influence some measure of proficiency in student academic achievement. The study examined students’ perceptions around the degree to which they experience a sense of membership (engagement communality) and academic press (academic emphasis) in the context of a 9th grade AVID Elective

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An 18-question survey and an analysis of scores on English Language Arts and Math benchmark assessments were used to determine what impact, if any, the two variables had on students’ academic achievement levels. The results of the study will inform efforts to provide an optimal context in which to better engage, educate, and support the achievement of youth at the secondary level.

The small schools movement’s focus on personalization has dual implications for educators as they open themselves personally and professionally to knowing about and caring for their students. Perhaps the most prolific theorist to write on the concept of caring in the education arena is Nel Noddings. Noddings (2005b) stated: “The desire to be cared for is almost certainly a universal human characteristic. In schools, kids want to be cared for. They do not want to be treated ‘like numbers,’ or by recipe” (p. 17). Noddings firmly placed the discussion of caring in the realm of an ethical and moral requirement (Flinders, 2001). Noddings frequently alluded to an authentic caring that emerges from every human being remaining cognizant to having been the recipient of such affective characteristics. Noddings emphasized a higher order of caring, “ethical caring.” This level of caring reflected an acknowledgement on the part of the recipient that they are in a relationship with another that is characterized by “receptivity, relatedness and engrossment.”

The concept of caring is inherently tied to concepts of community and belonging. A sense of belonging is one of Maslow’s (1962) Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow (1962) contends that this need must be met prior to any learning occurring. According to Capps (2003), “Until a school is able to establish in its students a sense of belonging, community, and a sense of place, a struggle to maximize the learning potential of the
students within the school will occur” (p. 2). Recent research supports the idea that an effort to generate a sense of caring, along with other attributes, potentially nurtures student’s academic and social development. Enhanced levels of academic motivation and achievement, in addition to a greater inclination towards completing high school, are aligned to a strong sense of school belonging (Osterman, 2000).

Murray (1938) was one of the pre-eminent voices to promote a consideration of the environmental impact on the actions of individuals. The potency of the environment was referred to as press. The normative dimensions of a school environment include an academic press or emphasis. According to Goddard, Sweetland, and Hoy (2000), academic press or emphasis serves as a frame for the actions of teachers and students within the confines of the school environment. Exerting a significant influence on the capacity of students to achieve and the persistence on such achievement by educators, academic press or emphasis potentially becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy or reinforcing entity. Hoy, Sweetland, and Smith (2002) state: “Academic press in a school enhances organizational performance, and reciprocal causality suggests that resulting performance improvements, in turn, strengthen academic press in the school” (p. 79). Goddard et al. (2000) contend that the collective efficacy that emerges from such circumstances correlates to student achievement in mathematics and reading, and diminishes the impact of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender. Through the socialization process of the school environment, students learn to attend to specific tasks.

The purpose of this exploratory study was to describe the predictive capacity for AVID Elective (advisory) students’ sense of membership (engagement/communality) and exposure to academic press (academic emphasis) in influencing some measure of
proficiency in students' academic achievement. The study examined secondary students' perceptions around the degree to which they experienced a sense of membership (engagement/communality) and exposure to academic press (academic emphasis) in the context of a 9th grade AVID Elective (advisory). A quantitative research design used an 18-question survey instrument to reveal students' perceptions in these areas. Furthermore, an analysis of students' test scores on a series of English Language Arts and Mathematics benchmark assessments was used to determine what impact, if any, the two independent variables had on students' academic achievement levels.

The following research questions and null hypothesis guided this quasi-experimental, quantitative study:

Research Question 1 – Among AVID students, does AVID promote the perception of membership (communality)? Among AVID students, does AVID promote the perception of academic press (emphasis)?

Null Hypothesis 1a – Among AVID students, AVID does not promote the perception of membership.

Null Hypothesis 1b – Among AVID students, AVID does not promote the perception of academic press.

Research Question 2 – Among AVID students, is there a difference in how AVID students enrolled in small schools perceive academic press versus AVID students enrolled in large schools?

Among AVID students, is there a difference in how AVID students enrolled in small schools perceive membership versus AVID students enrolled in large schools?
Null Hypothesis 2a – Among AVID students, there is no difference in how AVID students enrolled in small schools perceive academic press versus those enrolled in large schools.

Null Hypothesis 2b – Among AVID students, there is no difference in how AVID students enrolled in small schools perceive membership versus those enrolled in large schools.

Research Question 3–Is there a significant difference in Math achievement as measured by benchmark scores in stratified matched samples of AVID versus Non-AVID students? Is there a significant difference in English Language Arts achievement as measured by benchmark scores in stratified matched samples of AVID versus Non-AVID students?

Null Hypothesis 3a – There is no significant difference in Math achievement as measured by benchmark scores in stratified matched samples of AVID versus Non-AVID students.

Null Hypothesis 3b – There is no significant difference in English Language Arts achievement as measured by benchmark scores in stratified matched samples of AVID versus Non-AVID students.

Research Question 4–Among AVID students in large schools versus AVID students in small schools, is there a significant difference in achievement as measured by benchmark scores in English Language Arts?

Among AVID students in large schools versus AVID students in small schools, is there a significant difference in achievement as measured by benchmark scores in Math?
Null Hypothesis 4a – Among AVID students in large schools versus AVID students in small schools, there is no significant difference in achievement as measured by benchmark scores in English Language Arts.

Null Hypothesis 4b – Among AVID students in large schools versus AVID students in small schools, there is no significant difference in achievement as measured by benchmark scores in Math.

Research Question 5–Is there a significant difference among Math benchmark assessment scores for stratified matched samples of AVID students enrolled in small schools, AVID students enrolled in large schools, Non-AVID students enrolled in small schools and Non-AVID students enrolled in large schools?

Is there a significant difference among English Language Arts benchmark assessment scores for stratified matched samples of AVID students enrolled in small schools, AVID students enrolled in large schools, Non-AVID students enrolled in small schools, and Non-AVID students enrolled in large schools?

Null Hypothesis 5a – There is no significant difference among Math benchmark assessment scores for stratified matched samples of AVID students enrolled in small schools, AVID students enrolled in large schools, Non-AVID students enrolled in small schools, and Non-AVID students enrolled in large schools.

Null Hypothesis 5b – There is no significant difference among English Language Arts benchmark assessment scores for stratified matched samples of AVID students enrolled in small schools, AVID students enrolled in large schools, Non-AVID students enrolled in small schools, and Non-AVID students enrolled in large schools.
James Coleman (1966) shook the educational establishment with his suggestion that school attributes mattered very little in relationship to student achievement. Coleman put the onus or responsibility for differences in individual student achievement on variations in students' family background. Current research, however, appears to substantiate that structural and organizational practices do mediate students' academic achievement. Lee and Burkam (2003) concluded that schools with an enrollment of fewer than 1,500 students were more likely to sustain students' decisions to continue their education than contexts in which affirming relationships existed between students and teachers also resulted in reduced dropout rates, and that affirming relationships between students and teachers mediated the larger elements of school organization and structure.

Small schools and the associated theme of personalization were examined as an arena for enhanced student outcomes by Feldman, Tung, and Ouimette (2003), who conclude:

Across indicators of student engagement, Boston Pilot Schools have among the highest attendance and longest wait lists and among the lowest suspensions and transfers out in the district. By standardized test scores, Pilot School students score at or above the district average in all subjects. These schools have low grade retention rates, high rates of graduation, and send significantly more of their students on to post-graduate education (p. iii).

Waves of school violence in North America have resulted in renewed attention to factors that enhance or impede students' feeling a sense of belonging or connection to school. Students' failure to connect or identify with their school is associated with stymied school and classroom participation: this lack of identification has negative
implications for students’ potential success (Adelabu, 2007). Ethnographic research conducted by Schlosser (1992) involved working with a culturally diverse group of adolescents identified as potential dropouts. Schlosser reported students who worked with teachers who emphasized membership had a greater likelihood of accepting their teachers’ values and choosing to remain enrolled in school. Research conducted by Goodenow (1991, 1993) substantiates some level of connection or reciprocity between students possessing or experiencing a sense of belonging or membership and their academic success.

According to Shouse (1995), “Without a commitment to the importance of academic endeavors, commonality of beliefs, activities, and traditions, and care for students as individuals are unlikely to positively effect achievement levels, and may even work to impede them” (p.8). Students’ academic achievement is potentially influenced by a range of organizational and structural attributes, distinct teacher attributes and behaviors, and discreet sociological elements as well. Hoy, Sweetland, and Smith (2002) explain the impetus for such results when they say: “Academic press is a collective characteristic of the school. Teachers’ beliefs about the faculty’s capability to successfully educate students and the importance of academic performance constitute norms that influence the actions and achievement of schools” (p. 79). Brophy and Good (1986) clearly articulate a responsibility on the part of educators to strategically reinforce academic objectives as a means of positively influencing student achievement. As such, they surmise that any effort to improve student achievement must be inherently tied to the development and implementation of effective instructional behaviors.
Advocates for small schools identify a range of advantages that potentially enhance the life chances of urban youth (such as increased achievement for students of color and low-income students), a reduction in acts of violence, an increased sense of membership and buy-in within the school environment, increases in attendance and graduation rates, and greater community and parental engagement (Bracey, 2001). Current research substantiates the potential for caring teachers to push children of color or low-income students beyond minimal levels of academic and social performance; indeed, such attributes are ascribed to educators who practice “culturally responsive” teaching skills and habits of mind (Gay, 2000). In many ways, some students pay a particularly high price when they are confronted by individuals and contexts devoid of a spirit of caring. In such contexts, their social and academic status, coupled with perceptions of perceived deficits, further exacerbate their ability to succeed in school and in life.

A quantitative approach was used, as it provided an inquiry framework to test the hypotheses through the use of surveys, and data collection was used to generate statistical data (Cresswell, 2003). This research design involved a consideration of proposed hypotheses, implementation of a study to assess the validity of the stated hypotheses, a review of the data, and the presentation of clearly articulated findings (Cottrell & McKenzie, 2005). The study began with the administration of the survey instrument to obtain quantitative data around student perspectives on the two independent variables. Analysis of Frequency of Response was used in assessing student responses on the survey in order to gauge their perceptions relative to a “sense of membership” and “academic press” in the AVID Elective (advisory). Requests were made to the Office of
Accountability for two separate rosters of all AVID and Non-AVID students with Math and English benchmark assessment scores for the fourth administration. The rosters of AVID and Non-AVID students were drawn from the 14 schools where AVID students originally responded to the student survey. Stratified matched samples of 282 AVID students and 282 Non-AVID students were developed.

Variability among AVID Elective (advisory) students and Non-AVID students' perceptions of membership and academic press was analyzed through the application of One-way ANOVA. This application was used as a means of determining the impact, if any, of the two independent variables on the proposed dependent variable of student academic achievement (as measured by benchmark assessment scores). The results of the research study might be used to inform efforts to provide optimal contexts to better engage, educate, and support the achievement of youth at the secondary level.

A consideration of the research findings and the research questions results in the following conclusions:

Conclusion 1 – Based on a review of AVID student survey responses for membership (engagement/communality) and associated test scores, there is minimal evidence of the predictive capacity for AVID Elective (advisory) students' sense of membership (engagement/communality) to impact some measure of proficiency in students' academic achievement.

Conclusion – Based on a review of AVID student survey responses for academic press (academic emphasis) and associated test scores, there is evidence of the predictive capacity for AVID Elective (advisory) students' sense of academic press (academic emphasis) to impact some measure of proficiency in students' academic achievement.
Conclusion 2—Among AVID students enrolled in small schools versus those enrolled in large schools, there are minimal differences in how students in both settings perceived academic press.

Conclusion—Among AVID students enrolled in small schools versus those enrolled in large schools, there is slight variability in regards to how students in both settings perceive membership. The mean score (30.74) was the same for membership perceptions among AVID students enrolled in small schools and AVID students enrolled in large schools.

Conclusion 3—There is a significant difference between Math benchmark scores for stratified matched samples of AVID students versus Non-AVID. AVID students scored higher in Math benchmark assessments than did Non-AVID students. It should be noted that there were more missing Math scores among both groups, and that Math scores were generally lower across the board than were English Language Arts scores.

Conclusion—There is not a significant difference between English Language Arts benchmark assessments scores for stratified matched samples of AVID students versus Non-AVID students.

Conclusion 4—When comparing benchmark English Language Arts scores for AVID students in large schools versus AVID students in small schools, there is a significant difference in ELA achievement. Students enrolled in AVID small schools tended to do better.

Conclusion—When comparing benchmark Math scores for AVID students in large schools versus AVID students in small schools, there is no significant difference in Math achievement.
Conclusion 5 – There is a significant difference among Math benchmark assessment scores for stratified matched samples of AVID students enrolled in small schools, AVID students enrolled in large schools, Non-AVID students enrolled in small schools, and Non-AVID students enrolled in large schools. AVID students enrolled in large schools tended to score the highest on Math benchmarks, closely followed by AVID students enrolled in small schools. Non-AVID students enrolled in large schools scored the lowest on Math benchmark assessments.

Conclusion – There is a significant difference among English Language Arts assessment scores for stratified matched samples of AVID students enrolled in small schools, AVID students enrolled in large schools, Non-AVID students enrolled in small schools, and Non-AVID students enrolled in large schools. AVID students in small schools scored the highest on the English Language Arts benchmark. Non-AVID students enrolled in small schools scored at the next highest level. Non-AVID students enrolled in large schools scored the lowest on English Language Arts benchmarks.

This research study reinforces the need to strategically attend to the social and structural dimensions of the teaching and learning process. This study substantiates the idea that the social and structural dimensions of a school are “integral parts of a relationship-driven, collaborative way of running a high school” (Gewertz, 2007, p. 23). When social support is missing in any learning environment, one might infer that such a void has detrimental implications for individuals and groups of students. The findings reflect mild student perceptions of membership or social support within the AVID Elective. These findings are aligned to Lee and Smith’s admonishment (1999): “Reforms that are directed primarily to improving personal relationships between students and
teachers as a means to improve student learning miss something important” (p. 937). The findings are less conclusive to the perceived advantages (variability) between small schools over larger school settings and the implications for membership, academic press, and student achievement. The variability between the two settings may suggest that there should be less of a focus on school size and more of a focus on the nature of relationships, activities, and messages conveyed on a consistent basis that potentially influence levels of student achievement. The research findings provide some support for the power of AVID Elective (advisory) as a tool for enhancing student academic achievement. This exploratory research also opens the door to further inquiries as to how advisory experiences should or could be crafted beyond the programmatic confines of the AVID program.

A new model is offered for an ethic of care that is strategically crafted to potentially nurture the academic achievement of urban youth. This model is one in which the social interactions between students and teachers and among groups of students are designed to engender an ethos where academic achievement is a dimension of a group ethos. In this proposed model, communality and academic press are intimately tied together in an environment that is perceived as safe and supportive for individual and collective growth. This model for an ethic of care potentially nurtures educators and students into a growing sense of their own efficacy and agency within and beyond the classroom.

“High schools are one of America’s most ubiquitous intentional communities” (Sizer & Sizer, 2000, p. 8). It is an institution where, for far too long, particularly in our urban centers, there has been a complicit failure to meet the needs of groups of students.
According to Stephen Peters (2007), there are four sources of motivation for people or institutions to change: Desire, Pressure/Heat, Rewards/Incentives, and the Environment. Peters is of the opinion that, of the four elements, the one with the most profound implications is the Environment. Peters (2007) states:

When you change an environment, you construct the framework for good things to happen for children. In the process, schools begin to serve their intended purpose: to educate our children and prepare them to take their rightful places in the world (p. 95).

One-third of students enrolled in grade 9 leave school by grade 12 (Barton, 2005). Even among those who choose to remain enrolled, the depth of their engagement still should give us a collective societal pause for thought. If we are to promote greater student engagement and higher academic achievement, we may no longer assume that we will accomplish such a goal by pushing students back into the usual structures and “business as usual” mindsets that have failed them, and us, to date. A new model for an ethic of care that ties together communality with a laser-like focus on academics may be the environmental change required in our urban centers.
References


Appendix A

Principal/AVID Elective Teacher Letter

Dear Principal/AVID Elective Teacher:

A Doctoral student in the Executive Leadership Program at St. John Fisher College is conducting a study that examines the academic achievement of students involved in an AVID Elective (advisory) program. The researcher is interested in finding out if AVID Elective (advisory) programs emphasizing students' sense of membership and academic press impact some measure of students' academic proficiency or achievement. St. John Fisher College has reviewed and approved this study.

An 18 question survey and the final administration of the 2008-2009 NER English Language Arts and Math Benchmark Assessments will be used to gather answers to the study's research questions. All information will remain confidential and participants will not be identified. Participants' names will be kept confidential by using a numerical coding.

AVID Elective teachers are being asked to disseminate and collect materials for potential participants in this study who are 9th grade students currently enrolled in an AVID Elective program for the first time. Students will be asked to respond to a series of statements regarding their feelings of membership and academic press or emphasis.

Student participation in this study is voluntary. Students are free not to participate or to withdraw at any time, for whatever reason, without risk. In the event that they do withdraw from this study, the information they have already provided will be kept in a confidential manner.

Thank you very much for considering this request for support of this research project. It is hoped that the information will identify other elements that support student achievement. The major findings of the study and recommendations will be shared with participants and educators.

If you have additional questions, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

Kathie Mykins, RCS AVID Coordinator
Appendix B

Marilynn Patterson-Grant
Phone: 585-262-8326
Fax: 585-262-8112
Email: Marilynn.patterson-grant@rcsdk12.org

Student Letter

Dear Student/Parent:

I am a Doctoral student in the Executive Leadership Program at St. John Fisher College. St. John Fisher College has reviewed and approved this study. I am conducting a study that examines the academic achievement of students involved in an AVID Elective program.

An 18 question survey and the last 2008-2009 English Language Arts and Math Benchmark Assessments will be used to gather answers to the study’s research questions. All information will remain confidential and you will not be identified. Your name will be kept confidential by using a numerical coding.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a 9th grade student currently enrolled in an AVID Elective program for the first time.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free not to participate or to withdraw at any time, for whatever reason, without risk. In the event that you do withdraw from this study, the information you have already provided will be kept in a confidential manner.

Participants and their parents/guardians are asked to read and complete the attached permission slip and return it tomorrow to your AVID Elective teacher (see reverse side).

Thank you very much for considering this request. It is my hope that the information will support us in identifying other elements that support student achievement. The major findings of the study and recommendations will be shared with participants and educators.

Sincerely,

Marilynn Patterson-Grant

Over

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Student Participant Consent

I have read (or have had read to me) the contents of this consent form and have been encouraged to ask questions. I have received answers to any questions. I agree to participate in this survey process.

Survey Participant: ______________________________________
                      (Print)

Survey Participant: ______________________________________
                      (Signature)

Date: ___________________________________________________

Parent Consent for Minor Child

I, the parent or guardian of ____________________________, a minor _______ years of age, consent to his/her participation in the above-named study. I have read (or have had read to me) the contents of this permission form and have been encouraged to ask questions. If I had questions, I received answers to my questions. I agree that my child may participate in this survey study.

Parent/Guardian: ______________________________________
                      (Print)

Parent/Guardian: ______________________________________
                      (Signature)

Relationship: __________________________________________

Date: __________________________________________________

If you have questions regarding this study, contact the researcher. If you experience emotional discomfort due to participation in this study, contact the Wellness Center.
Appendix C

Survey

Name ___________________________ School _______________________
(Names will be removed after data is entered)

AVID Elective Rm. _______________________

Directions: The following statements are about your AVID Elective experience. Please indicate the degree to which each statement represents your experience in your AVID Elective by circling the appropriate response. Completion and return of the survey implies your willingness to participate in this research. Your responses will remain confidential.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Almost Never</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Almost Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Students are encouraged and trusted to work together in AVID Elective.
   1 2 3 4

2. The students in this AVID Elective will achieve their goals.
   1 2 3 4

3. AVID Elective students spend time after school with other students in study groups or extracurricular activities.
   1 2 3 4

4. There are high standards for academic performance in this AVID Elective.
   1 2 3 4

5. I am proud to be a member of AVID Elective.
   1 2 3 4

6. I respect others who get good grades in this AVID Elective.
   1 2 3 4

7. Students influence how our AVID Elective works.
   1 2 3 4

8. In AVID Elective, students are encouraged to seek extra work or help to get good grades.
   1 2 3 4
9. The AVID Elective teacher understands and respects each student as an individual.

1 2 3 4

10. Your AVID Elective teacher believes that you have the ability to achieve academically.

1 2 3 4

11. The AVID Elective period is one in which you receive help and support.

1 2 3 4

12. Your academic achievement is recognized and acknowledged in AVID Elective.

1 2 3 4

13. In AVID Elective, students are encouraged to respond to all types of problems by working through them.

1 2 3 4

14. As an AVID Elective student, you are encouraged to try hard to improve on previous work.

1 2 3 4

15. In AVID Elective, you demonstrate confidence and self-esteem.

1 2 3 4

16. The learning environment is orderly and focused in the AVID Elective.

1 2 3 4

17. Students really enjoy their time in the AVID Elective.

1 2 3 4

18. Students and teachers respect the academic abilities of other students in AVID Elective.

1 2 3 4

Completion and return of the survey implies your consent to participate in this research.
Appendix D

TEACHER DIRECTIONS

Contents:

- Pencils
- Survey Instruments for Students
- Envelope Containing Student/Parent Letters and Consent Forms (for Student/Parent Signature)

Directions: (DAY BEFORE SURVEY distributed to students):

- Give each student the Student/Parent Letter and the Student Participant Consent Form
- Please explain to students that a researcher is very interested in what helps them to achieve academically. You may read the letter aloud to them or use it as a reference.
- Explain that in order for students to participate, their signature and that of their parent/guardian is required before they can complete the survey.
- Students should be requested to return their signed slips for the next day.
- Inquire if they have questions. Any questions should be emailed to Katherine.Mykins@resdk12.org. A response will be generated in consultation with the researcher.

Directions: (DAY OF SURVEY):

- Collect all signed Student Participant Consent Forms (please peruse to ensure the form has been signed by the student and the parent). Place the signed consent forms in the “Letters and Consent Forms” envelope.
- Inform students how much time they will have to complete the survey’s 18 questions. In most instances 15-20 minutes should be sufficient time.
- Give one survey instrument to each student who returned a signed consent form.
- Reinforce that there are no right or wrong answers, just their opinions. They should circle the answer that represents how they feel.
- Remind students that there are two sides to the survey (18 questions).
- Place the “Letters and Consent Forms” envelope (containing the signed consent forms) inside the larger envelope (labeled “Surveys”) along with the completed surveys.
- Please email Kathie Mykins when the envelopes are available for pick-up.

Deadline: All consent forms and completed surveys should be completed no later than Friday, June 12th.

The researcher extends profound appreciation to you and your students. It is hoped that their feedback will provide invaluable insight as to what we must do to support their academic achievement and development.