"I Just Decided to Do My Work:" An Investigation into Factors Leading to Academic Improvement Among Multiple-time Retained Seventh Grade Students

Deasure A. Matthew
St. John Fisher College

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Document Type
Dissertation

Degree Name
Doctor of Education (EdD)

Department
Executive Leadership

First Supervisor
Steven K. Million

Second Supervisor
Katrina Arndt

Subject Categories
Education

This dissertation is available at Fisher Digital Publications: https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_etd/99
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By

Deasure A. Matthew

Submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Ed. D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by

Steven K. Million, Ph. D.

Katrina Arndt, Ph. D.

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education

St. John Fisher College

November 2008
We recommend that the dissertation by

Deasure A. Matthew

Entitled "I Just Decided to Do My Work:" An Investigation into Factors Leading to Academic Improvement Among Multiple-time Retained Seventh Grade Students

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

Dr. Steven K. Million

Dr. Katrina Arndt

August 22, 2008

Date
Dedication

To my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, thank you for graciously giving me wisdom and courage to complete this laborious, yet meaningful work.

This dissertation is dedicated to my amazing husband, Lestro, for his faith in my ability to complete my dream. His encouragement and reminders to get back to work made me smile and kept me focused. I am aware of the sacrifices he made so that I could obtain this degree and I am forever grateful.

To my young children, Ian and Kristen, for understanding my occasional absence at the dinner table and why the guest room was suddenly renamed the “dissertation room” and became off limits.

This is also dedicated to my parents for giving me a strong foundation in life. In dearest memory of my mother, Wilma Vivian Finch, who I know is proud of this accomplishment. I miss her dearly. To my father, Harper B. Finch Sr., who instilled in me the importance of faith, family, and “L and R” (logic and reasoning). I love you Dad!

Without my family’s love, encouragement, and continuous support this would not have been possible.
Biographical Sketch

Deasure A. Matthew is currently the principal of Joseph C. Wilson Foundation Academy in Rochester, N.Y. Mrs. Matthew attended the University of Rochester from 1984 to 1988 and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology. She continued at the University of Rochester completing her Master of Science of Education in 1989. Mrs. Matthew attended the State University of New York College at Brockport from 1996 to 1998 and graduated with a Certificate in Advanced Studies in Education Administration. She came to St. John Fisher College in the summer of 2006 and began her doctoral studies in the Ed. D. Program in Executive Leadership. Mrs. Matthew pursued her research in the area of academic achievement of retained middle school students under the direction of Dr. Steven K. Million and Dr. Katrina Arndt and received the Ed. D. degree in 2008.
Acknowledgements

To Dr. Arthur “Sam” Walton a visionary leader who designed a program that allowed me to complete my dream, I will never be the same.

To my Committee Chair and Advisor, Dr. Steven K. Million and Committee Member, Dr. Katrina Arndt for your time, expertise, and guidance. To Barbara Hasler, thank you for guiding my internship and supporting the “big projects.” To Karen Ross, thank you for editing with kindness and patience. I will be forever grateful.

To my dear friends, Kimberly Garlock, Melanie Mason, and Rhonda Neal for the contribution they gave to this research and being there when I needed them. To Cohort 1 Kenyans for running along side me in this dissertation marathon. Diantha Watts and Anne Wahl for ongoing support, encouragement and Panera study sessions. Thank you!

A special acknowledgement to the leadership team at Wilson Foundation Academy – Armando Ramirez, Babette Phillips, Barbara Dunn, Cameron Clyburn, Julie Roselli, Lo Wan Brown, and Walter Larkin your commitment to children helped to shape the climate of which all participants spoke. Thank you for your support and understanding when I needed time to write their story. To the counseling team at Wilson Foundation Academy, Heidi Jackson, Robin LaVergne, Karen Ross, and Sherrolletta Scissum, and the remarkable faculty and staff, thank you for your support and creating positive experiences for children. Finally and most importantly, I am particularly grateful to the students who participated in my study and provided the voices we needed to hear.
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Chapter I: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

The problem that this study examined was the academic improvement of two- and three-time retained seventh grade students in a low-performing middle school after implementing new school leadership and instructional teams, and modifying the school’s academic program. According to Frey (2005), there is perhaps no single issue in education that has provoked such emotional debates nor generated such a wealth of research and literature as the dilemma of grade-level retention. The question of whether to retain students who do not meet academic standards has been a concern of educators for decades. Currently, retention is at the forefront of educational discussions with the move to develop standards, create benchmarks, establish grade-level promotion criteria, and hold both students and schools accountable for meeting standards (Frey, 2005; Jimerson, 2001).

This study examined a selected population of middle school students in an urban public middle school who demonstrated academic improvement after multiple years of failing and being retained in the seventh grade. Retention for those who fail to achieve has become increasingly popular, consistent with the focus on accountability and standards-based curriculum (Holmes & Matthews, 1984). Despite research suggesting little benefit from retention, it remains a common practice among educators (Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jackson, 1975; Jimerson, 2001). Identifying what may have influenced
the students' academic improvement may add to existing knowledge on the factors that influence student achievement. Furthermore, findings may have important implications for understanding factors that promote academic improvement among retained students.

*Significance of the Study*

Administrators in the Rochester City School District in western New York have been commended for reforming a low-performing school and increasing student achievement. Actions taken by administrators and the staff at Joseph C. Wilson Magnet High School were intended to reform the climate of the school and create an environment focused on teaching and learning where students and teachers addressed academic performance in partnership with school leaders. Instructional team leaders, classroom teachers serving as departmental representatives, were appointed with shared leadership responsibilities. These responsibilities included implementing, monitoring, and assessing curriculum for their departments. They also served as members of the school's Instructional Council and worked with administrators to support the instructional program. The council consisted of administrators and teachers working collaboratively to support classroom instruction and help set policy regarding the school's instructional program. Printy and Marks (2006) synthesized research findings from studies examining how principals and teachers contribute to shared instructional leadership and the relationship of shared instructional leadership to student learning. Their investigation showed that the best teacher and student performance results occur in schools where principals focus on instructional issues and view teachers as full partners in the school organization.
The focus of the study was to examine the academic improvement of the seventh grade students who were repeating the grade for the second or third time. Identifying the effects of school climate, parent involvement, and motivation and teacher-student relationships as factors that support academic achievement among retained students may contribute to existing studies on student achievement.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine the factors supporting academic achievement among students who were retained. The review of the literature presents findings suggesting school climate, teacher behaviors, parent involvement, and effort and self-determination have the greatest influence on academic performance. These variables were selected to investigate the factors influencing the performance of retained students. Their inclusion reflects current best thinking as reflected in the literature, but should not be viewed as exhaustive. Instead the researcher recognized that data collection and analysis may suggest the influence of variables other than those presented in this review of literature. A case study approach was used to examine a population of middle school students enrolled in an urban low-performing school who exhibited academic improvement after modifying the school’s academic program and implementing new school leadership and instructional teams.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions helped identify factors contributing to the improvement of two- and three-time retained seventh grade students after implementing new school leadership and instructional teams, and modifying the school’s academic program:
1. What effect does school climate have on the academic performance of retained students?

2. What effect does personal effort and self-determination have on the academic performance of retained students?

3. What effect does parent and family involvement have on the academic performance of retained students?

4. What effect does teacher-student interaction have on the academic performance of retained students?

Definitions of Terms

The following definitions are used to provide a context for the major concepts explored in this study:

1. **Academic Improvement** — increase in report card grades.

2. **Grade retention** — the practice of non-promotion of students to the next grade level upon completion of the school year (Jimerson, Carlson, Rotert, et al., 1997).

3. **Leadership** — act of guiding and overseeing program and operations of school building.

4. **Low-performing** — overall performance of students that are below New York State Education Department’s minimum Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) (Accountability Status Report, 2005).

5. **Nationally-recognized academic program** — American high school listed on Newsweek magazine yearly ranking of *America’s Best High Schools*. Ranking is based on the challenge index that calculates the proportion of students who
took a higher level exam (Advanced Placement Exam or International Baccalaureate Exam) and the number of graduates of a given year (Newsweek, May 2004)

6. Previously failing students – students enrolled as seventh grade for the 2005-2006 school year who were repeating the seventh grade for the second or more time.

7. Principal leadership behaviors – actions and behaviors of school principal

8. Promotion – advancing a student to the next higher grade (Code of Conduct, 2008).

9. Retention – holding back a student in a particular grade as a result of failure to obtain passing grades (Code of Conduct, 2008).


Summary

The problem that this study examined was the academic improvement of two- or three-time retained seventh grade students in a low-performing middle school after implementing new school leadership and instructional teams, and modifying the school’s academic program. This study considered a selected population of middle school students in an urban public middle school who demonstrated academic improvement after
multiple years of failing and retention in the seventh grade. Identifying factors that influenced the students' academic improvement may add to existing knowledge on the student achievement. Furthermore, findings may carry important implications for understanding key factors that promote academic improvement among retained students. Chapter 2 presents the literature findings on the effects of grade retention, school climate, self-determination and effort, parent influence and teacher-student relationship on academic improvement and success. Chapter 3 explains the methodology used for the study and chapter 4 describes the results and emerging themes. Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the general findings, implications, and recommendations.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

There is an ongoing debate in the education community on the practice of grade retention as a means to produce academic growth and achievement exists. Less frequently considered, however, is the possibility of leadership behaviors, school climate, and teacher-student relationships as factors supporting academic achievement among students who have been retained (Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jackson, 1975; Jimerson, 2001). Researchers have analyzed the effects of grade retention and find that it fails to demonstrate long-term effectiveness in academic achievement (Holmes, 1989; Jimerson, 2001). In fact, Holmes and Matthews’ 1984 study revealed that retained students have lower academic achievement, poorer personal adjustment, lower self-esteem and held school in less favor than promoted students.

Theoretical Rationale

The benefit and detriment of grade retention has been analyzed by researchers and educators alike. Studies show there is no reliable evidence to suggest grade retention is more beneficial than grade promotion for students with academic difficulties (Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jackson, 1975; Jimerson, 2001). Nonetheless, the use of grade retention has not diminished despite evidence suggesting that retention yields no benefit (Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jackson, 1975; Jimerson, 2001). Furthermore, Jackson (1975) suggested educational professionals who retain students do
so without valid research evidence to indicate this intervention strategy will benefit students with academic difficulties more than promotion to the next grade. Jimerson (2001) encouraged educators to consider alternatives to retention and consider addressing factors that inhibit student motivation and engagement.

A well-known theory used in association with student learning and achievement is Achievement Goal Theory. According to Pintrich (2000), Achievement Goal Theory describes the reasons or purposes why individuals pursue and achieve a specific task. Achievement Goal Theory has emerged as one of the most compelling theories of motivation for analyzing the influence of different classroom structures and school environments on student motivation and learning (Pintrich, 2000).

**Topic Analysis**

The review of the literature on the effects of grade retention shows that it fails to demonstrate long-term effectiveness in academic achievement (Holmes, 1989; Jimerson, 2001). Alternatively, creating a positive school climate where classroom instruction is valued and supported optimizes student performance and achievement (Cotton, 2003). Darling-Hammond (1998) identified teacher preparedness and expertise as the most important factors influencing students' school performance. She determined that teachers who are knowledgeable of and sensitive to students' cultural differences and who apply a variety of appropriate teaching strategies are most likely to promote academic success.

Both Cotton (2003) and Darling-Hammond (1998) indicated students need to feel a sense of belonging within the school setting and establish a positive relationship with classroom teachers in order to maximize motivation, engagement, and learning. Darling-Hammond further indicates that highly skilled teachers who know how to use a wide-
range of successful teaching strategies are the most important alternative to grade retention. Other researchers assert that despite studies suggesting little benefit to retention it remains a common practice among educators in the United States (Frey, 2005; Jimerson, 2001).

*Effects of Grade Retention on Student Academic Performance*

Jimerson (2001) and Frey (2005) identified former President Clinton’s 1998 State of the Union address as a denouncement of social promotion in favor of demonstration of mastery. Jimerson claimed this attention to social promotion initiated standards-based instruction and accountability criteria for promotion and a consequent rise in grade-retention as an alternative to social promotion. Grade retention for those who fail to achieve has been practiced in the United States since the mid-19th-century with retention rates nearly 50% during that same time period (Holmes & Matthews, 1984). Frey (2005) claimed that the evidence gathered in the past 30 years on the practice of retention suggests that it is academically ineffective and is potentially detrimental to children’s social and emotional health. Although researchers have shown that grade retention has a long history in the United States, they also presented evidence that does not support using grade retention as an academic intervention (Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jackson, 1975; Jimerson, 2001).

Jackson (1975) provided a comprehensive overview of 44 research studies on the effects of grade retention between 1911 and 1973 examining benefits of grade retention for low-achieving students. The published studies were classified into one of the following categories: (a) reports directly related to the topic (b) reports that discussed the topic without research evidence or ones that drew from related research, but did not
report original research, and (c) reports that were not directly related to the topic being reviewed. Each study was categorized by the type of basic analytical design used and divided into three groups: naturalistic, pre-post, and experimental.

Naturalistic studies compared students who were retained under normal school policies with those who were promoted. Of the 17 studies categorized as naturalistic, ten studies reported academic benefits in promoting students rather than retaining them; three studies reported benefits within both the promoted and retained groups; and four studies reported no difference between the promoted and retained groups. The pre-post design compared performance and social adjustment of retained students before and after promotion. Nine studies reported gains in academic performance and social adjustments following promotion of the retained students, one study reported both losses and gains in academic performance and social adjustment, and two reported no change.

Studies using an experimental design compared students with academic difficulties who were randomly assigned to either grade promotion or grade retention. Of the three studies included, one reported results favoring only promoted and three reported no difference between groups. Results were coded with statistical significance at $p < .05$ level. Using chi-square tests, in no case was the null hypothesis rejected. Thus, Jackson's (1975) findings revealed no reliable evidence to suggest grade retention is more beneficial than grade promotion for students with academic difficulties. Furthermore, Jackson (1975) suggested educational professionals who retain students do so without valid evidence to indicate this intervention strategy will benefit students with academic difficulties more than promotion to the next grade. Similar findings came almost ten years after Jackson (1975) with Holmes and Matthews' (1984) meta-analysis.
Holmes and Matthews' (1984) meta-analysis explored the effects of retention on elementary and middle school pupils. The analysis included 44 studies where the effect size (ES) was defined as the difference between the mean of the retained group and the mean of the promoted group, divided by the standard deviation of the promoted group. The effect sizes were calculated with data measuring the following major dependent variables: (a) academic achievement, (b) personal adjustment, (c) self-concept, and (d) attitude toward school. A total of 11,132 students were included in 44 investigations. There were 4,208 non-promoted students, with 6,924 regularly promoted students serving as controls. In all, 575 individual effect sizes were calculated and a grand mean effect size of -.37 was obtained indicating that on average, groups of non-promoted students scored .37 standard deviations lower on the outcome measures than did promoted groups.

That is, each outcome measure produced negative mean effect size values, indicating that non-promotion has a negative effect on students. An effect size of -.44 was obtained in academic achievement outcomes indicated non-promotion had a negative effect on the study population. Similarly, the -.27 effect size for personal adjustment outcome indicated that non-promotion yielded negative social, emotional, and behavioral adjustments for students. Likewise, self-concept (-.19 ES) and attitude toward school (-.16 ES) showed a negative effect size indicating non-promotion has a negative effect on students. Holmes and Matthews (1984) used effect sizes from only those studies in which promoted and non-promoted students had been matched and obtained a -.38 grand mean. Holmes and Matthews' study revealed that retained students have lower academic achievement, poorer personal adjustment, lower self-esteem, and held school in less favor than promoted students.
Despite research findings suggesting grade retention is not an effective academic intervention, retention remains a highly used strategy and often the first and only consideration for those who do not achieve (Frey, 2005). Recent studies on retention throughout the United States included a population of students from grades K-12 from various socioeconomic backgrounds and ethnic orientations. One study conducted by Jimerson, Carlson, Rotert, Egeland (1997), between 1975 and 1996 in Minnesota used a sample population of children from low-income homes comprising 32 retained and 50 low-achieving, but promoted grade K-3 students.

Jimerson et al. used interviews, surveys, attendance records, and standardized and IQ test scores to collect data. Findings indicated that short-term gains in math achievement disappeared by sixth grade for retained students and poor social adjustment persisted through age sixteen (1997). A multiyear study by Karweit (1999) reported similar findings.

Karweit (1999) used a national representative sample of 9,240 students tracked from their entry to first grade by the Center for Research on Students Placed At-Risk at Johns Hopkins University. Results over a span of 3.5 years showed 18.4% of these students had been retained at least once. Findings from same-grade comparison showed a positive effect during the retention year, but the positive effects were not sustained beyond the retained year. Initially, retained students seemed to benefit in mathematics achievement, but this effect had disappeared by middle school (Karweit, 1999). There was no difference found for reading comprehension, although retained students continued to compare negatively to the cohort group (Karweit, 1999). Likewise, Resnick, Bearman, Blum, Bauman, Harris, Jones, et al. (1997) found similar outcomes for retained students.
Resnick et al. (1997) reported that since 1994, 120,000 seventh- to twelfth-grade students from 132 high schools in 80 communities have been participating in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. This ongoing comprehensive study examines influences on adolescent health behavior. A stratified sample population of 12,118 students participated in a survey of school life. Findings showed the 21.3% who were retained at least once in their school career demonstrated an association with emotional stress and tobacco use ($p < .001$) among middle school students (Resnick et al., 1997).

Frey (2005) claimed when longitudinal studies focus on low-income, minority children, retention rates are even higher. This finding is substantiated from the Chicago Longitudinal Project study reported by McCoy and Reynolds (1999).

The Chicago Longitudinal Project study began in 1986 and followed 1,164 kindergarten children in the Chicago Public Schools. The sample population was selected based on socioeconomic status and ethnicity: 95% of the sample population was African-American and 5% Hispanic. By spring 1994, when their age cohort reached eighth grade, 28% of the sample had been retained at least once (McCoy & Reynolds, 1999). In 2001, Jimerson conducted a meta-analysis that investigated the effects of grade retention.

Jimerson’s (2001) meta-analysis focused on grade retention research published between 1990 and 1999 that examined academic and socioemotional outcomes associated with grade retention. Jimerson reviewed 20 published studies by answering the following questions for each:

1. What variables are used to match the comparison group to the retained students?

2. In what grade are the students retained and at what age and grade are the
outcomes examined?

3. What are the results of analyses exploring academic achievement outcomes of retained students relative to a comparison group of promoted students?

4. What are the results of analyses exploring socioemotional and behavioral outcomes of retained students in contrast to a comparison group of promoted students? and

5. What do the authors of each study conclude regarding the efficacy of grade retention?

Jimerson (2001) created two categories for grouping analyses presented in the 20 studies: academic achievement and socioemotional adjustments. Outcomes from each relevant analysis were coded with respect to statistically significant results favoring retained students, no significant differences between groups, or statistically significant results favoring the comparison group of promoted students. An alpha level of $p \leq .05$ was established as the criterion for statistical significance. Jimerson found 80 percent of the studies suggested grade retention is not an effective academic intervention. Despite the findings, Jimerson reported 5 to 10 percent of students are retained annually in the United States, representing more than 2.4 million children every year. Jimerson's findings were consistent with earlier results of Holmes and Matthews (1984).

Another recent study by Jimerson and Kaufman (2003) reported results of a meta-analysis of nearly 700 research analyses of achievement using over 80 studies during the past 75 years. Findings failed to support the use of grade retention as a means to improve academic achievement; rather, they suggest grade retention increases the likelihood of students dropping out of school and is associated with other long-term negative
outcomes, such as lower levels of academic and social adjustments. Findings of Jimerson and Kaufman (2003) indicated no benefit from retention as also was suggested by the study of Jackson (1975), Holmes and Matthews (1984), Jimerson et al. (1997), Karweit (1999), Resnick et al. (1997), and McCoy and Reynolds (1999) and supported by Frymer (1997) who similarly found retaining students contributes to greater academic failure, higher drop out levels, and greater behavioral difficulties. Simply having a student repeat a grade is unlikely to address factors influencing poor achievement that resulted in the decision to retain (Jimerson, 2001). It is not surprising then that retaining a child at grade level fails to demonstrate long-term effectiveness in achievement outcomes.

**Alternatives to Grade Retention**

It is only through addressing causes for poor academic performance that educators can effectively change performance outcomes (Jimerson, 2001). According to Bowman (2005), next to dropping out of school, failing a grade is one of the most troubling problems for students. Bowman contends that in an era of standards-based education, standards alone cannot help students succeed academically in the absence of quality instruction and suggests that alternatives to grade retention should be considered in order to improve student achievement.

Frequently, educators and researchers suggest the debate over retention versus promotion be abandoned for discussion in favor of early intervention strategies and instructional designs that support higher student achievement. Ruebling, Stow, Kayona, and Clarke (2004) assert that curriculum development and student and teacher accountability are essential to raising achievement. Providing opportunities for teachers to work in teams, focusing resources effectively on implementing curriculum, and
establishing accountability for results are ways of ensuring that the daily instructional lives of children improve (Ruehling et al., 2004). Despite a school’s best efforts, there is usually anticipation that some students will experience difficulty during the school year. Holmes and Saturday (2000) suggest that much of what can be done for students who would otherwise be retained consists of early identification of potential failures and provisions for the kind of remediation that is usually given to children after they have been retained. These alternatives to retention are effective means for supporting students experiencing academic difficulties (Holmes & Saturday, 2000).

Early intervention strategies and teacher preparation suggested by Ruehling et al. (2004) and Holmes and Saturday (2000) support Jimerson’s (2001) and Frymer’s (1997) studies in which they contend education professionals should consider a variety of alternatives to retention. Jimerson (2001) and Frymer (1997) suggest that simply having a student repeat a grade is unlikely to address the multiple factors influencing the students’ poor achievement that resulted in the decision to retain the student.

In contrast, schools focusing on teaching and learning are apt to address the needs of struggling learners and are equally important as alternative programs. Researchers have found a positive relationship between healthy school climates and increased student achievement and motivation, which suggests that creating a positive school climate where classroom instruction is valued and supported optimizes student performance and achievement (Hoostein 1996; McCaslin, 2006; Wentzel, 1998).

Effects of Leadership on School Climate and Academic Performance

Ruehling et al. (2004) proclaimed that the key to student achievement lies in the responsibility of school leaders to create a climate reflecting an academic focus.
Changing the curriculum and academic program in isolation will not lead to school improvement or improved learning outcomes. Learning communities involving collaboration among school leaders and classroom teachers should be created (Ruebling et al., 2004). Spillane (2005) and Whitaker, Whitaker, and Lumpa (2000) found that involving and inspiring others and creating a climate of trust and collaboration are essential to improving schools and student achievement.

Researchers also suggested that instructional leadership influences student motivation and serves as a predictor of student achievement (O’Donnell & White, 2005; Quinn, 2002). Studies done on shared leadership report that principals alone cannot provide sufficient leadership influence to systematically improve the quality of instruction or level of student achievement nor can teachers on their own supply required leadership to improve teaching and learning (Cotton, 2003; Hallinger, Bickman, & Davis, 1996; Printy & Marks, 2006).

Hallinger et al. (1996) used questionnaires and student test scores to examine the relationship among school context variables (parental involvement, principal gender, and teacher experience), principal instructional leadership, instructional climate, and student reading achievement. Results showed no direct effects of principal instructional leadership on student achievement. The results supported, however, the belief that a principal can have an indirect effect on school effectiveness through actions that shape the school’s learning climate (Hallinger et al., 1996).

Printy and Marks (2006) agree and found synthesized research findings from studies examining how principals and teachers contribute to shared instructional leadership and the relationship of shared leadership to teacher and student learning. Their
findings indicated that the best teacher and student performance results occur in schools where principals focus on instructional issues and who consider teachers as professionals and full partners in the school organization.

Similar findings emerged from research by Cotton (2003) and Quinn (2002) who found that administrative leadership is a key component of schools with high student achievement. Cotton further found principals of high-achieving schools are effective in the following areas: (a) creating a safe and orderly school environment, (b) focusing on student learning, (c) maintaining high expectations of students, (d) shared leadership and staff empowerment, and (e) visibility and accessibility.

Quinn studied the relationship between principal leadership behaviors and teacher instructional practice descriptors. This relationship was observed among schools participating in a school improvement process. The study included eight elementary, middle and high schools in the United States. Teachers in these 24 schools were surveyed regarding the instructional leadership abilities of the principals. Data on student and teacher engagement were collected through observations using instructional practices inventory (IPI) (Painter & Valentine, 1996). Instructional leadership dimensions were found to correlate highly with instructional practice descriptors. The population of Quinn’s study was limited to schools participating in Project ASSIST (achieving success through school improvement site teams), a systemic school improvement project involving 24 schools in Missouri. The two other instruments used in this study were the staff assessment questionnaire (SAQ) (Andrews & Soder, 1987) and the IPI. The SAQ was completed by one-third of randomly chosen faculty at each of the schools. Data were scored and an aggregate school score was determined. Instructional practices data were
collected using the IPI. After classroom observations were conducted, data were analyzed, yielding observation percentages. Pearson-product moment correlation analysis was used to determine if any of the four instructional leadership subscales (resource provider, instructional resource, communicator, and visible presence) from the SAQ correlated with the instructional practices subscales (active learning, active teaching, teacher-led conversation, teacher-led instructional student seatwork/teacher engaged, student seatwork/teacher disengaged, and total disengagement) as measured by the IPI. A $p = < .05$ level of significance was established. All but one subscale correlated significantly with the IPI raw score. The fourth subscale of strong instructional leadership visible presence did not correlate with any of the IPI subscales.

These findings indicate that being a visible presence in the school does not in and of itself significantly impact instruction. The results of this study support the notion that leadership impacts instruction and shows that higher levels of active learning and active teaching occur in schools where the principal serves as a strong instructional leader.

Much like the findings of Cotton (2003) and Printy and Marks (2006), Quinn claimed that the principal as instructional leader conveys the responsibility of motivating and inspiring teachers with a goal of impacting instructional practice and through it student achievement (Quinn, 2002). Researchers also found that principals in schools with higher student achievement were visionary, transformational leaders, steering their faculty toward continuous instructional improvement (Bolman & Deal, 2003; Covert, 2004; Printy & Marks, 2006). The factors likely to increase student performance relate to the leader’s ability to create the learning environment and teachers’ ability to engage students in the classroom.
Witziers et al. (2003) revisited the debate concerning the impact of principal leadership on student achievement. Quantitative meta-analysis was used to examine the extent to which principals directly affect student outcomes in studies conducted between 1986 and 1996. To indicate the effect of educational leadership, Fisher's Z transformation of the correlation coefficient was used. Witziers et al.'s results suggest that the following leadership behaviors have a significant and positive relationship with student outcomes (p<.10): (a) supervision and evaluation (Zr = .02), (b) monitoring (Zr = .07), (c) visibility (Zr = .07), and (d) defining and communicating mission (Zr = .19).

Defining and communicating mission appeared to be the most relevant leadership behavior in terms of improving student outcomes and appears to confirm Hallinger and Bohman and Deal's assertions that this is one of the most important aspects of school leadership. Despite research claims confirming a relationship between educational leadership and student achievement, results suggest only an indirect association. In fact, Witziers et al. admitted classroom instruction as having the most direct influence on student achievement. Similar to Witziers et al.'s (2003) findings, other researchers suggest a strong correlation between student achievement and healthy and positive school cultures; yet, they do not ignore the fact that classroom instruction has the most direct influence on student achievement (Grolnick & Ryan, 1987; Hootstein 1996; McCaslin, 2006; Ryan, Stiller, Lynch, 1994; Wentzel, 1998).

*Effects of Effort, Motivation and Self-determination on Academic Performance*

Engagement and motivation are critical elements in student success and learning (Akey, 2006). Astin (1985) reported that two major factors likely to reduce student motivation to perform well in school are boredom with the course and being behind in
grade-level, Oliver (1995) stated that a child who has failed tends to have low expectations of success, does not persist on tasks, and develops low self-esteem.

Motivation is central to students' involvement in learning and improving their level of academic performance (Oliver, 1995). Research in recent years has focused on identifying factors that promote academic success among students whose demographic characteristics and circumstances place them at risk for school failure (Akey, 2006).

Studies have shown that motivational theories can help educators understand student attitudes toward academic performance (Newsom, 1990). Two theories provide a foundation for evaluating student motivation and its impact on academic improvement.

One widely cited theory of motivation is the Expectancy Theory (Vroom, 1964). This theory states that motivated individuals put forth the greatest effort, believe that those efforts will lead to good performance, and that good performance will lead to preferred outcomes. Vroom's Expectancy Theory assumes that behavior results from conscious choices and performance is based on individual factors such as personality, skills, knowledge, experience, and abilities (Vroom, 1964). The Expectancy Theory states that individuals have a variety of goals and that they can be motivated if they believe that:

(a) there is a positive correlation between efforts and performance, (b) favorable performance will result in an outcome, (c) the outcome's value to the person can be determined, and (d) the desire to satisfy the need is strong enough to make the effort worthwhile. Vroom claimed that this theory of motivation is not about self-interests, but rather about the associations people make toward expected outcomes and the contribution they feel they can make toward those outcomes (Dreer, 2003).

The second theory is Self-determination Theory which focuses on the degree to
which people endorse their actions at the highest level of reflection and engage in the
actions with a full sense of choice (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci,
2006). Deci and Ryan (2000) examined the factors that enhanced rather than undermined
instructional motivation, self-regulation, and well-being. Their findings suggested three
innate psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness, which when
satisfied yield enhanced self-determination. Deci and Ryan (2000) asserted that basic
psychological needs are a natural aspect of human beings that apply to all people,
regardless of gender, group, or culture. To the extent that the needs are continuously
satisfied, people will function effectively and develop in healthy ways. That is, the social
context can either support or thwart the natural tendencies toward active engagement and
healthy psychological growth (Deci & Ryan, 2000).
Effects of Parental Involvement on Academic Performance

A growing body of research has shown that students perform better academically when parents are involved with their child’s schooling (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Feuerstein, 1990; Jeynes, 2003; Ryan et al., 1989; Sui-Chu, 1996). Ryan et al.’s study found supporting evidence that parents are instrumental in their children’s academic success and that parental involvement has a positive impact on student achievement. Astone and McLanahan (1991) found that parental involvement and behavior are related to school achievement indicators including: grades, attendance, attitudes, expectation, school retention, and degree completion. According to Astone and McLanahan (1991) parental involvement may range from discussing school activities at home and attending teacher conferences to full involvement in school activities such as volunteer participation at sporting events and social activities. Findings of studies examining the effects of parent’s school-based involvement (e.g. open houses, parent-teacher conferences) are consistent with the notion that such involvement is beneficial for children (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Jeynes, 2003). The effects of parents’ home-based involvement in activities that are directly related to school are less clear and less researched.

Home-based involvement typically represents parents’ practices related to school that take place outside of school, usually, though not always, in the home. These practices can be directly related to school such as assistance with homework or course selection, responding to children’s academic endeavors, reading books with children, and talking with them about grades, teachers, or the value of doing well in school (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994). In national surveys in the United States, parents’ involvement on the
home front as manifested in assisting with homework is relatively frequent, with about 70% of parents helping children at least once a week, regardless of parents’ socioeconomic status, educational attainment, or ethnicity (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). On the basis of national surveys, home-based involvement is most frequently demonstrated in the United States in terms of visiting the library (50% in 2003) but also occurs fairly frequently in terms of taking children to plays, (36% in 2003) museums, or historical sites (22% in 2003), with such involvement more common among wealthier, educated, non-Hispanic parents (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

Research on parents’ involvement on the school front is fairly consistent in suggesting that such involvement benefits children in terms of their achievement (Gronick & Ryan, 1989). The research on parent involvement on the home front yields less consistent results. According to Riblatt, Beatty, Cronan, and Ochoa (2002), home front involvement geared toward children’s intellectual enrichment (e.g. visiting a museum) has shown to enhanced achievement; whereas home front involvement directly linked to school (e.g. help with homework) does not always appear to have such benefits. This discrepancy may be a result of the parent’s skill level. The ambiguity regarding parents’ home-based involvement raises particular concern, because this is the most frequent form of involvement for most parents (Riblatt, et al. 2002). Yet the research which has been conducted is consistent with the notion that parents’ involvement on the home front has positive effects on children’s academic performance (Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996; Gronick & Slowiaczek, 1994). According to Sui-Chu and Willms (1996), discussing school activities at home seems to have the greatest influence on student achievement. Intermittent contact with teachers and direct involvement with their
children outside of the school setting provide parents with feedback about their child's academic performance and support a positive relationship between the child and teacher (Jeynes, 2003).

**Effect of Instruction and Teacher-Student Interaction on Academic Performance**

Ryan, Stiller, and Lynch (1994) examined 606 early adolescents' relationships with teachers, parents, and friends in relation to each other and to various measures of school adjustments and motivation. They hypothesized that more positive relationships with parents and teachers would predict school performance and correlate with self-esteem. Participants in the study were from a public middle school (grades seven and eight). Self-reports of the participants' motivation, school performance, and self-esteem as measured by the Inventory of Adolescent Attachments (IAA) (Greenberg, 1982), the Academic Coping Inventory (Tero & Connell, 1984), the Self-Regulation Questionnaire-Academic (SRQ-A) (Ryan & Connell, 1989) and the Multidimensional Self-Esteem Inventory (MSEI) (O'Brien & Epstein, 1988) were used in association with relationships with parents, teachers and friends. These findings support Ryan et al.'s hypothesis and suggest the quality of teacher and parent relationships contributes positively to school performance. Their findings also propose there may be transference between teacher and parent relationships, such that students who feel secure with and supported by parents may be more inclined to better relationships with their teachers.

The growing belief that positive relationships between student and teacher are related to student achievement is supported by Kaplan and Owings (2001) who suggest that improved student achievement depends on improved classroom teaching and teaching quality. They recommend that principals: (a) consider teacher hiring practices,
(b) frequently visit classrooms to look for instructional best practices; (c) make student achievement and failure prevention valid criteria for teaching effectiveness; and (d) consider equity, achievement, and accountability when making teaching assignments while actively supporting new teachers' professional induction. Creating small learning environments, providing opportunity for professional teamwork, and establishing clear and high standards for personalizing a child's school environment to enhance academic performance also are suggested by Kaplan and Owings (2001).

The recommendations presented by Kaplan and Owings (2001) strengthen the findings presented by Oliver (2006) who states that a child failing academically tends to have low expectations of success, does not persist on tasks, develops low self-esteem, and finds motivation in getting students involved in their learning. The impact increases their level of academic performance. Kaplan and Owings further claim that increasing motivation to learn can be achieved with positive and productive student-teacher relationships. Teachers can increase at-risk students' investment in learning by designing lessons that:

(a) clearly articulate expectations about learning objectives; (b) provide a safe and non-threatening learning environment in which students learn from mistakes without penalty; (c) present meaningful or relevant curriculum; (d) affirm performance frequently and sincerely; (e) offer choices in what students study, with whom they study, and how they demonstrate learning; (f) provide a variety in learning activities; (g) have opportunities for students to make learning immediately useful and relevant; (h) give direct instruction for specific skills and knowledge; (i) give ongoing and varied formative and summative assessments of
student learning: (j) suggest sensitivity to different cultures, language needs, gender equity, and other experiences that shape students' background knowledge; and (k) provide awareness of alternative curriculum resources and technology (Kaplan & Owings, 2001).

Collaboration between principals and teachers is needed for performance results described by Kaplan and Owings (2001). Classroom environments where instruction is the focus and teachers successfully build relationships with students strongly influences student achievement. Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk-Hoy (2006) state that academic emphasis, collaboration, and teacher trust reinforce one another as each impacts student achievement. In a school where the faculty stress high achievement, students work hard, are cooperative, and respect others there is a greater the chance for students to excel. (Hoy, et al., 2006). Hoy et al. (2006) studied school academic optimism by examining 96 high schools and tested the hypotheses that the collective properties of academic emphasis, efficacy, and faculty trust are the composite elements of academic optimism and that student academic achievement is a function of academic optimism. Data were randomly collected from teachers of each school. Instruments used to collect that data included: Organizational Health Inventory (Hoy & Miskel, 2005); Collective Efficacy Scale (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2000); and the Omnibus Trust Scale (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). Analysis showed the intraclass correlation coefficients were .24 for academic emphasis, .23 for collective efficacy, and .21 for trust in parents and students (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2006).

These findings indicated that of the variance in perceived collective efficacy, 23% existed between schools; of the variance for trust in parents and students, 21% existed
between schools; and of the variance for academic emphasis, 24% existed between schools. Hoy et al. used standards adopted by other researchers (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Borgogni, & Steca, 2003; Hox, 2002; Stevens, 1990), to conclude that the intraclass correlation coefficients in all cases were sufficiently strong to suggest a relatively significant grouping effect. The study's findings suggest that academic optimism can be conceived as an important variable in student achievement (Hoy, Tarter, Woolfolk-Hoy, 2006). Other research supports this claim and suggests that it is the responsibility of the school principal to create a climate that values instruction and academic achievement (Cotton, 2003; Grodnick & Ryan, 1987; McCloud, 2005; and Taylor, 2002).

In 1987, Grodnick and Ryan conducted a study with 91 fifth grade students to assess both individual differences in motivational style and varied environments for learning as they affect performance on relevant learning tasks. The study examined the impact of environmental conditions and childrens motivational orientations on learning outcomes. Two directed-learning conditions, one non-controlling and one controlling, were contrasted with each other and with a third non-directed-learning condition. Data were collected through observation and questionnaires. An ANOVA was performed on all dependent measures to examine main effects or interactions. If ANOVAs were found to be significant (p < .05), then t-tests were performed. All three environments resulted in learning, but of different types. Subjects directed to learn in the more controlling manner evidenced a greater deterioration in rote recall the next session, which suggests material learned under external pressures may be less likely retained.

In contrast, Grodnick and Ryan (1987) reported that conceptual learning occurred with both the non-directed- and the non-controlling-direct learning environment, which
suggests that integrating learning requires active processing and organization that is more likely to occur under conditions conducive to more autonomy. Furthermore, evidence suggested learning is optimized under conditions that facilitate active, autonomous involvement on the part of the learner and that teacher interpersonal behavior is an important feature of the classroom environment and is important in achieving desired learning outcomes (Grolnick & Ryan, 1987; Murdock & Miller, 2003). The perception of a caring, supportive relationship with a teacher and a positive classroom environment are directly related to student academic motivation and overall school satisfaction (Murdock & Miller, 2003).

Murdock and Miller’s (2003) study of 206 seventh and eighth grade middle school students examined the relationship between student achievement motivation and students’ perception of teacher support and care. The study used two data analytic strategies (person-centered and variable-centered) to examine the role that perceptions of teacher caring plays in the development of student motivation. The hypothesis claimed teacher care accounts for variance in student motivation. Murdock and Miller (2003) tested the hypothesis by conducting three hierarchical multiple regression analysis using eighth grade academic self-efficacy, eighth grade valuing of education, and eighth grade teacher-rated efforts as criterion variables.

Findings suggest students’ relationships with teachers affect the development of their motivation and that these relationships were the best predictor of their feelings of belonging in the school environment. The participants’ assessments of the quality of their relationships with teachers showed to be important predictors of their commitment to school. According to Murdock and Miller (2003), seeing one’s teacher as supportive and
caring increases the likelihood that a student will value education and subscribe to values that are consistent with those expected in schools. Murdock and Miller (2003) also contend that teacher-student relationships predict level of motivation to learn and in turn influence the level of student achievement. Researchers studying student motivation also claim interest in learning is enhanced by more student choice and involvement in learning activities (Grolnick & Ryan, 1987; Hootstein, 1996).

In 1998, Darling-Hammond claimed that highly skilled teachers who know how to use a wide range of successful teaching strategies with diverse learners are the most important alternative to grade retention and key to student achievement. Darling-Hammond identified teacher preparedness and expertise as the most important factors regarding students' school performance. She further claimed that teachers who are knowledgeable of and sensitive to students' cultural differences, and who come to the classroom equipped with a variety of teaching strategies are most likely to help students experience academic success.

The research findings of Darling-Hammond (1998), Murdock and Miller (2003) and Grolnick and Ryan (1987) indicated students need to feel a sense of connection and belonging within the school setting and have a positive relationship with their classroom teacher in order to maximize motivation, engagement, and learning. This was also supported by Oliver (2006), Baker (1997) and Booker (2006) whose findings suggest that the teacher-student relationship quality among urban African-American youth were related to school satisfaction. In accordance with Murdock and Miller (2003) and Darling-Hammond (1998), who suggested a relationship between attachment to school
and student achievement. Baker (1997) and Booker (2006) found similar results with their study population of exclusively African American students.

Baker (1997) examined teacher-student interactions and relationship quality among urban, African-American children expressing differential school satisfaction. Sixty-nine third through fifth graders (30 third graders; 64 fourth graders; 32 fifth graders) were selected from among a total population of 126 children from an urban, public school. Data collection included observations, interviews, and self-report questionnaires. All 126 potential participants completed self-report questionnaires; students were selected for inclusion in the study by their scores on a school satisfaction measure. Data were analyzed at the individual child level. A 3 (grade) x 2 (gender) ANOVA was performed on each variable. No significant grade or gender effects were noted. The results of Baker’s (1997) study suggested the social context of the classroom influenced students’ appraisals of school as a likeable and satisfying environment. Students expressing more satisfaction with school experience more caring and supportive relationships with teachers than do their peers expressing least satisfaction with school (Baker, 1997).

Similarly, Booker (2006) recently reviewed major findings on school belonging for African-American adolescents. Booker’s review of existing literature showed scant qualitative research on school belonging, in general, but even less conducted on African-American adolescents. Little qualitative research has examined sense of school belonging and its association with academic performance of adolescents from diverse ethnic backgrounds; therefore, research on how African-American students feel about their own competence and value with regard to others in the school environment can provide
valuable insight into understanding the level of performance in school. Booker (2006) suggested that mixed-method and ethnographic research be used to explore this phenomenon and findings may reveal contextual factors that fully describe the experiences of African-American students. Baker's (1997) and Booker's (2006) review and recommendations were selected as the method for the case study research at Wilson Magnet High School as 100% of study participants are urban, African-American adolescents.

Summary

The use of grade retention has not diminished despite findings that suggest retention yields no benefit (Jimerson, 2001; Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jackson, 1975). Review of related research by Jimerson (2001), Frey (2005), McCaslin (2006), Wentzel, (1998), and Hootstein (1996) showed a positive relationship between healthy school cultures and increased student achievement. In addition, creating a positive school culture where classroom instruction is valued and supported can optimize student performance and achievement. Qualitative case study research served as the primary technique in this investigation of previously failing students in a low-performing school following the school's academic and administrative restructuring. The methodology used for the study is discussed in Chapter 3.
Chapter 3: Design Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this research study was to investigate a selected population of students in an urban public middle school who demonstrated academic improvement after multiple years of failing and being retained in the seventh grade. The study examined the major factors that may have contributed to the academic improvement of two- and three-time retained seventh grade students in a low-performing middle school after implementing new school leadership and instructional teams, and modifying the school's academic program.

A qualitative research design was used to document analysis and interviews to investigate factors that may have contributed to the academic improvement of these previously failing seventh grade students. According to Cottrell and McKenzie (2005), one of the main characteristics of qualitative research is its focus on the intensive study of specific instances of a phenomenon in its natural setting that are of interest to the researcher. The analysis of data was largely interpretational and presented through narrative summaries and emerging themes.

Research Context

The Rochester City School District

The study took place in an urban public school located in Rochester, New York. Rochester is the third largest urban setting in New York State with a population of
approximately 220,000 residents. The Rochester City School District serves approximately 35,000 students from grades pre-K through twelve. The student population of the school is 64% African American, 20% Hispanic, 14% Caucasian, 2% Native American, Asian, and other ethnic groups. Eighty-eight percent of the student population are eligible for free or reduced lunch, determined by family income and 17% are students with disabilities.

The Rochester City School District has 40 elementary schools (grades K-6), 19 secondary schools (grades 7-12), and 64 pre-kindergarten sites. According to the New York State Accountability System, 42 of the K-12 city schools are considered in good standing, indicating that they are making sufficient annual progress in both English language arts and math. School reform efforts in the Rochester City School District have focused on the district’s lowest performing schools. This case study centered on a sample population of students who once attended one of the district’s low-performing schools, James Madison School of Excellence. These students were retained in the seventh grade two or three times and improved their academic performance as was reflected in their report card grades for three consecutive marking periods. They showed academic improvement following reorganization of the school’s leadership, instructional team, and academic program.

James Madison School of Excellence

James Madison School of Excellence opened in 1998 with an enrollment of approximately 800 students in grades six through eight. Six years later, James Madison had a student enrollment of 1,038 comprising of 92% African American, four percent Hispanic, three percent Caucasian, and less than one percent Native American, Asian.
and other ethnic groups. James Madison had a 25% retention rate, but grade retention was not the only concern James Madison school leaders faced. Low standardized assessment results were common and in 2004, discipline incidents mounted to 1,586 suspension cases. In 2005, the Board of Education of the Rochester City School District closed James Madison after the New York State Education Department visited, assessed, and labeled the school low-performing for the fifth year in a row.

*Joseph C. Wilson Magnet High School*

Located three blocks from James Madison is Joseph C. Wilson Magnet High School. In 2004, Wilson Magnet enrolled 1,128 students and had the lowest retention rate (6%) of all secondary schools in the district. That same year, 93% of its graduates received a Regents Diploma (the highest high school diploma awarded by the state). Wilson Magnet is highly regarded for its academic course offerings and the International Baccalaureate, Advanced Placement, and honors programs. In May 2004, *Newsweek Magazine* published its annual list of America’s Best High Schools and Wilson Magnet was 57th on the list.

*The Problem*

In May 2005, the Board of Education was convinced that Wilson Magnet High School’s academic program could successfully be implemented within the low-performing school two blocks away to support higher student performance and achievement. Specific to the needs of the troubled school, the Rochester City School’s Board of Education took the unprecedented step of closing James Madison and reopened it under a different name, new leadership team, and modified academic program. This reform effort entailed expanding Wilson Magnet High School by doubling Wilson’s
physical plant, student enrollment, and faculty membership while implementing Wilson’s academic program within the low-performing school.

As a result of the expansion, Wilson Magnet increased to a student population of over 2000 students in grades seven through twelve comprising of 81% African American, eight percent Hispanic, nine percent Caucasian, and two percent Native American, Asian, and other ethnic groups. Seventy percent of the students were eligible for free or reduced-priced lunches and 17 percent were students with a disability. Along with the growth in student enrollment was an increase in the number of students who were failing to meet minimum performance standards; over 100 students were repeating the seventh grade and 73 were repeating seventh grade for the second or third time.

Despite multiple years of grade retention, 26 of the retained students demonstrated academic improvement within the first semester of Wilson Magnet’s expansion and 16 of the 26 were able to sustain their improvement until the end of the school year. After one year of the reorganization, the New York State School Report Card data showed an overall improvement in the academic performance of the students in the school.

Research Participants

The students in the case study were intentionally selected because of notable academic improvement after multiple years of retention. The sample size consisted of nine participants who repeated seventh grade multiple times and improved their academic performance resulting in a mid-year promotion to the eighth grade. The improved academic performance of the retained students created the desire to study the phenomenon and therefore, purposefully became the sample population.
The nine participants in this study were all residents of Rochester, NY who were enrolled in the Rochester City School District. The study population consisted of three male and six female African-American students who were either 16 or 17 years old. All nine students voluntarily agreed to participate in the study after securing parental permission. Each participant repeated seventh grade twice and after repeated failure and retention, demonstrated academic improvement within the first semester of Wilson Magnet's expansion and reorganization of James Madison School. At the time of the study, eight of the participants were enrolled at Wilson Magnet High School while one participant was enrolled in another public school in the same city. Participants were interviewed individually and all interviews took place at the participants' respective schools.

*Procedures and Data Collection*

The methodology used for this study was appropriate for the purposes of a qualitative case study. According to Cottrell and McKenzie (2005), one of the main characteristics of qualitative research is its focus on the intensive study of specific instances of a phenomenon in its natural setting that are of interest to the researcher. The case was a single, within-site that focused on the specific issue of the probable influences on academic improvement rather than a case itself. The study was evaluative in nature and involved description, explanation, and judgment. The qualitative case study allowed for storytelling and used in-depth and thick description of the setting, background, and factors contributing to the academic improvement of the previously failing and retained seventh grade students.
This research study required the approval of the Rochester City School District Department of Research, Evaluation and Testing. An overview of the process and how the study addressed the issue of grade retention was shared with the director of the department through the submission of a formal permission letter. The researcher was notified in writing of the approval to conduct research (see Appendix A). The researcher then submitted an application to St John Fisher College’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). The researcher received written approval to conduct the study (see Appendix B) under the name of the college and began preparation for data collection and analysis.

Instrumentation

The study used document analysis and interviews as data collection instruments: each was used to gather a specific piece of evidence related to the research problem. The instruments also were used to make an assessment as to the factors contributing to the academic improvement of previously failing and retained seventh grade students. The following sections describe how each instrument provided background information and answers to the research problem.

Document analysis. Analyzing documents related to the research case study helped develop an in-depth picture of the school environment prior to reform efforts and identified other elements of investigation central to the research. The researcher reviewed the New York State School Report Cards from 2002 through 2005 for James Madison School of Excellence and Wilson Magnet High School and cumulative records of each participant.

The researcher also reviewed the academic records of each study participant. The documents provided thorough descriptions of the students’ academic histories and were
useful to the researcher as a basis for understanding each participant. Analyzing the New York State School Report Card provided insight into James Madison’s school climate prior to the reform efforts.

**Interviews.** The researcher provided each participant with an introduction letter (see Appendix C) and parent consent form (see Appendix D). Once the parent consent form was signed and returned to the researcher, an individual interview was scheduled. Each participant was asked a series of interview questions (see Appendix E) that were developed by the researcher. The interviews for the study were conducted in the spring of 2008 at the school where the subjects were enrolled. All interviews were conducted and transcribed verbatim by the researcher using an audio listening device and transcribed into a written document with the assistance of a computerized transcription tool. Interviews were conducted in a private office or conference room located in the school building where participants were enrolled. Interviews occurred during participants’ morning homeroom time, lunch period, or after school and did not interfere with their academic class time. Informal analyses, including the notation of prevalent themes, began during interviews and transcription. Detailed notes, identification of themes, and data coding continued after interviews were transcribed.

In order to conceal their identity, each subject selected a pseudo name by which to be referred. All nine subjects responded to ten primary interview questions in varying degrees of detail. Most subjects provided extensive accounts of their experiences, while a few subjects were brief. This difference is likely due primarily to individual personalities of the subjects and the degree to which they each remembered events and experiences. Each participant’s response, however, was included in the data collection and analysis.
Interviewing the participants in this study provided information describing their insights, as well as the underlying expectations and unwritten rules that existed in the James Madison school culture. The use of interviews also helped uncover feelings, attitudes, and perceived reasons for improved academic performance of case study participants.

**Validation**

Creswell (2007) considers *validation* in qualitative research to be an attempt to assess the *accuracy* of the findings, as best described by the researcher and the participants. Rather than using the term *validation*, qualitative researchers discuss the *credibility* of the qualitative study (Creswell, 2007). Clarifying bias, member checking, and thick descriptions are techniques that were used to bring credibility to research findings.

*Clarifying bias.* Clarifying researcher bias from the outset of the study is important so that the reader understands the researcher’s position and any biases or assumptions that impact the inquiry (Creswell, 2007). To reduce bias, the researcher commented on past experience, biases, prejudices, and orientations that shaped the interpretation and approach to the study. This technique was important to the research study since the researcher held an administrative position both before and after the expansion of Wilson Magnet High School where the case study participants were enrolled. An assent statement (see Appendix F) was read to each participant prior to the start of the interview. The statement acknowledged the administrative position of the researcher and asked participants for honest responses despite the position the researcher held in the school.
Member checking. In member checking, the researcher solicited participants' views of credibility of the findings and interpretations. Creswell (2007) considers this technique critical for establishing credibility of the findings. This approach involved taking data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions to each participant at the conclusion of the study so that the findings could be judged for accuracy and credibility. Each participant was asked to review interview transcriptions to clarify meaning and check for accuracy of responses.

Thick description. Rich and thick descriptions were used to describe the participants and setting under study. With such detailed descriptions, the researcher creates a context for readers to transfer information to other settings and to determine whether the findings can be transferred because of similar characteristics. Since the sample population in the proposed study is small, a rich, thick description of the case study site, participants, background, and data analysis should provide credibility to the research findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was largely interpretational and presented through narrative summaries. Data collection was organized in files and stored in computer databases. The researcher read text, created summary notes, categories, and codes. Data were classified into themes by searching for common stories among study participants and findings were summarized with in-depth narratives.

Using rich, in-depth narratives, the researcher became the teller of the story (Creswell, 2007) of the academic improvement of previously failing and retained seventh-grade students in a low-performing middle school. Findings from the study were
reviewed in the context of existing literature and implications for school leaders, teachers, and parents were made. Results may be valuable to those who are concerned with raising student achievement and who seek alternatives to grade retention. The research findings may support and promote application to situations with similar characteristics.

Summary

The study examined the major factors contributing to the academic improvement of two- and three-time retained seventh grade students in a low-performing middle school after implementing new school leadership and instructional teams, and modifying the school’s academic program.

The study used document analysis and individual structured interviews as data collection instruments to make an inference about the factors contributing to the students’ academic improvement. The case was a single, within-site, instrumental study allowing for storytelling and an in-depth, thick description of the setting, background, participants, data collection, and analyses which helped bring credibility to the study and its findings.
Chapter 4: Results

Research Question

This chapter presents the findings of a qualitative case study that examined a selected population of students demonstrating academic improvement in the fall of 2005 after multiple years of failing and retention in the seventh grade. Individual interviews were used to investigate the factors that led to the academic improvement of two- and three-time retained seventh grade students in a low-performing middle school after implementing new school leadership and instructional teams, and modifying the school’s academic program. This chapter presents a description of the findings that include participant information, interview narratives, emerging themes, and summary of the results of the study.

Findings

Participant Information

Sixteen students who significantly improved their academic performance after repeated retentions in the seventh grade were selected as the subjects of this study. At the time of data collection, five of the 16 students were no longer enrolled in the Rochester City Schools. School district attendance officers failed to locate the students and their families. The researcher confirmed the families moved from the last known address leaving no forwarding information. Of the remaining case study subjects, one declined the interview and two students initially agreed to the interview, but later declined.
Attempts to include the two students who subsequently declined the interview ended after repeated unsuccessful efforts to arrange meetings. Nine of the 16 subjects comprised the final study population which represents a 56% participation rate.

*Interview Narratives*

The following interview narratives describe the subjects’ responses to the interview questions as they each shared thoughts on the changes in school climate, teachers, peers, family and themselves following a change in their school’s program. The narratives are presented in order of gender and the placement does not represent any particular preference of importance, time of interview, or significance to the study.

*C-Low.* C-Low is a 17 year old tenth grader who lives with his mother, older brother, older sister, and his sister’s boyfriend. He compared his current academic performance to that of the fall of 2005 and revealed that he is currently performing less successfully now than he did then. He reported that he is “struggling right now” in school, but believes things will get better once he “gets used to the school and gettin’ close with the teachers.” He noted that he struggles “because it’s like [the teachers] are new to me and they really don’t know me that much.” C-Low acknowledged that a few of his teachers changed mid-way through the year due to a schedule change and it has been rather difficult adjusting to his new teachers; however, he admits that he has not made much of an effort to seek and build relationships with them. Reflecting on a time when he performed well in school, C-Low recalled the fall of 2005 when James Madison changed to Wilson Foundation Academy, and spoke of some of his experiences in this way:

Things changed like as in no more students doing bad things and you could learn better. In Madison days, I ain’t really care for school and I ain’t really listen to
nobody. [Wilson] helped me 'cause Madison, like I said they ain't really believe in nobody they just let you do what you want to do. When it became Wilson, the teachers put in more effort with you if you needed it, they give you more help and stayed after [school]; James Madison days they wouldn't even bother.

He recalled that he did not “really care for school,” did not “listen to nobody,” and students were allowed to “do what you want to do,” which will show as a common feeling among all the case study subjects. C-Low also remarked that he was not interested in school work and was often in trouble for skipping class. He recalled being suspended from school for fighting and for defying the directive of the vice principal when told to go to class. He remembered seeing a difference in the school environment on the first day of school when the school changed to Wilson Foundation Academy. C-Low smiled as he spoke of the new teachers in the school who “put in more effort with you if you needed it,” and “give you more help and stayed after [school].” He lowered his voice, shook and lowered his head when expressing his disappointment and noted, “James Madison days, they wouldn’t even bother.” Changes in the school brought a different attitude toward school, according to C-Low, who commented on the change in administration and uniform dress code in this way:

[The administrators] started off hard on people; so at first, I did not like 'em, but after you got to know 'em, you just got to give 'em respect and they show you respect. The uniforms made the school look better, but less stress getting dressed waking up. I didn’t like the uniform, but it was a good thing that ya’ll did that, but for us children we’d prefer wearing what we want to wear.
C-Low believed the new administrators were acting in accordance with what was expected of school leaders, and therefore, deserved “respect.” He further reported that “once you get to know them,” students would realize the changes put in place by the new administrative team “were done to get order in the school.” C-Low had mixed views when asked about the uniform policy and shared that the students would have preferred having a choice in what they wore to school, but also praised the policy. C-Low recalled changes in the hallway with fewer students skipping classes and he believes that the new administrators played a key role in making a difference in the climate of the school. He shared that there were fewer fights, and more of a focus on academics, and an increased interest in school. In general, C-Low thought the changes were beneficial. He even attributed the changes to helping him get a job. “Actually, Wilson got me a job,” he exclaimed, “I had to get them good grades in and I actually got a job because of my good grades through the [Good Grades Pay] program.”

C-Low remembered feeling happy about the changes in his grades and his overall performance in school. When asked what he believed caused the noted improvement in his grades leading to a mid-year promotion to the eighth grade, he responded with the following statement:

The teachers and administrators really helped me out and showed me that I could do it and that I could put the work together and do it. Seeing that I could do it and it wasn’t that difficult. All you had to do is put that effort in and then you could do whatever you want. That changed my motivation. The teachers really gave me a motivation to keep going.
C-Low remembered feeling “great” when he improved his performance in school and was advanced to the next grade. He was glad that he did not have to worry about getting his work done because he felt motivated. “Wilson really gave me the motivation to keep it going by seeing that I could do it,” he said, which he acknowledged helped to increase confidence in his abilities and motivation to continue working toward improved performance. C-Low further shared that friends and family were “surprised, but happy for me that I stepped up my grades and showed that I could do it.” C-Low remembered his mother giving him gifts and rewards for his improvement. Although he did not share what the gifts and rewards were, he did say that his mother’s encouragement was a greater motivator than the tangible gifts. C-Low remembered taking more responsibility for tasks at home and school; he no longer waited for his mother to tell him to complete household or school-related work and performed those routine tasks without persuasion or reminders.

C-Low appeared proud of his improvement and commented on what he believed was the primary reason for his change in attitude toward school and improved academic performance: “The teachers really just gave me that help that I needed.”

Other case study subjects expressed similar views and recounted events similar to those that C-Low shared. TF, for example, had memories of changes at James Madison very much like C-Low and credited his improvement to similar factors.

TF. TF is 16 years old and lives with his mother, father, younger brother and two older sisters. He noted that he is currently doing well in school and when asked how he felt about his current performance. TF shared that he feels “good.” about how he is performing in school, but commented on his past performance in school by saying:
I feel like I let myself down when I came to Madison. I let myself down a lot. I could have been [at the Commencement Academy campus] or another high school - could have been playing varsity sport. I could have been graduating next year and a lot of things.

His recollection of his past performance and feeling of disappointment at his retention was overshadowed by his current performance in school. TF acknowledged that he is doing well in school and anticipates earning additional course credits in summer school to further his progress. TF attributed "spending time with the teachers" as the reason he continues to do well in school. Despite being disappointed at his retention, TF recalled the fall of 2005 when James Madison changed to Wilson Foundation Academy, and spoke of the changes in the school environment in this way:

"It was less mayhem and more learning. A lot of things changed ... a whole new environment from Madison to Wilson. The teachers changed, even the students changed. When it was Madison, everyone came when [students] wanted to and came to class any time and they roamed the halls without passes ... the teachers were never coming ... I remember I had six English teachers in one month."

TF recalled that the changes in teachers, students, and climate were all positive. The teachers were "more helpful" and the students became "more focused on school and their classes instead of just being in the halls all of the time," he said. TF commented that he noticed a difference in the way teachers delivered instruction and said that "at Madison, teachers made their own curriculum." TF shook his head and appeared distressed as his voice cracked and he added, "It would have been helpful if [the teachers] taught the curriculum and because they taught out of the curriculum, a lot of kids weren't learning."
TF seemed proud of himself and shared that he was an honor student enrolled in
the district’s Major Achievement Program (MAP) when he was in elementary school.
The MAP is an accelerated honors program that exposes students in grades three through
six to curriculum that is one level above their grade. When TF arrived at James Madison
in 2003, he was placed in the honors program, but indicated that he lost focus and
assimilated into the school culture, which he described as “mayhem.” “Students were just
suspended as a result of misbehavior.” TF stated, “and they would just repeat the
behavior because a lot of students did not care about being suspended.” TF remarked that
he wished that the changes in the school could have occurred earlier than they did and
expressed his wish in the following way:

[The change in the school] should have been earlier, it should have happened way
earlier ‘cause when I came [to James Madison] from number 19 school, I was in
MAP and I adopted the environment and dropped the ball I guess ‘cause of
what everybody was doing and my mind wasn’t focused. So, it would have been
better earlier ... I’d be in a better [position] right now.

When asked about other changes such as administrators and dress code uniform
policy, TF responded, “All the administrators were cool, I think they was our mentors ... when you went to the office, you just bond.” TF did not have much to say regarding the
uniforms, but believed that many students, including him, were surprised to learn about
the uniform dress code policy. TF did not believe it made a difference, however, in the
way students treated one another. “People still get picked on,” he said, “you come to
school with the same thing on [and people] still going to find things to pick on, so the
uniforms really didn’t matter much.”
TF recalled being “happy about the changes in the school” and noted that the teachers went out of their way to help students which he “appreciated” because it made a difference in the way he performed in school. He also felt that he developed a better perspective about school and alleged that if he had not changed, he “probably would [have dropped out].” As he continued to share his thoughts about some of the other changes in the school environment, he claimed, “I was doing homework for the first time. For the first time since elementary school. I sat down and did my homework and gave it a chance.” When asked what he believed caused the noted improvement in his grades leading to a mid-year promotion to the eighth grade, he explained:

My motivation … I saw my little brother’s friend in one of my classes and I was feeling like, wow! It wasn’t any choice; I couldn’t drop out of school with a sixth grade education so I had to just get out of there. I knew there was a way out so I just had to do it. So I just abided by the rules and started to do everything I had to do.

When asked about his motivation and factors that helped contribute to it, TF commented:

Everything changed: the environment changed. I saw the new environment … everywhere you looked it was somebody doing their work so you had no other choice but to do it. It was a learning environment and you got with it.

TF recalled feeling “excellent” when he improved his performance in school and was advanced to the next grade. When he saw his improvement reflected in his report card, TF said, “It made me feel like I was headed somewhere.” and added:

Friends were a little jealous because they weren’t doing the things that they should have been doing. In the end, I believe I was a leader because when they
saw that I was improving, that's when they started passing. So I say it helped me become a leader.

When TF improved his grades and was promoted to the eighth grade, his family was very proud of him and happy that he had improved. His parents were “happy and raised their expectations.” he said, and then commented:

They made me do more than I supposed to do. They expected more of me and their expectations were higher now because they know what I am capable of and they know I dropped the ball but I grabbed it again, so they want me to take that shot and finish doing what I have to do.

TF recalled “feeling different about things,” and shared, “I did not have the same state of mind and mentality that I had when it was Madison. [After the change] I just saw people working and I got my work done too.” TF gave credit to the teachers, administrators, and his counselor for encouraging him to stay focused and continue working hard in school.

He admitted that he did not need help with his school work because he knew how to do it, but he just made poor choices in behavior that led to being retained. Concluding the interview, TF shared:

The [new program] motivated a lot of kids from when it was Madison. It motivated a lot of us. We never thought we could be so successful with the things we were doing. The kids who were getting F’s when it was Madison, you saw the better of them. You saw the change; you saw the B’s and A’s and you never expected that from them.

TF credited his academic improvement to the change in school environment which no longer was in “mayhem.” He reported that students around him were doing work and
seeing his younger brother’s friend in his class was a shock. “I had no other choice but to do it.” TF claimed when he spoke of getting better grades to pass. TF’s expression of determination and reflection on his improved academic performance carries thoughts very similar to those expressed by Cody.

**Cody**: Cody is now 16 years old and is in the tenth grade. Cody lives with his mother and father and two older sisters. He shared that he is very happy with his life and is trying hard to graduate from high school and plans to go to college. He said his sisters are currently enrolled in college and this motivates him to perform well in school; although he admitted he presently could be doing better and identified math as his most difficult subject. Cody was confident that he was going to improve before the end of the school year because he would much rather attend summer school to attain additional course credit toward graduation than to make up for a failing course. Cody spoke candidly of his experience at James Madison prior to the fall of 2005 and remembered the changes in the school environment. He summarized the changes in this way:

[Wilson staff and faculty were] more strict and you couldn’t get away with some of the stuff that you got away with at Madison. [There were] better teachers and staff came [when the school changed] and they were more [willing] to help you if you needed help. It was a whole different school.

Cody remembered his new teachers at Wilson Foundation were more “willing to help” and commented, “Some teachers at Madison didn’t really help and sometimes they wouldn’t really try their hardest to help, but they would see you struggling.” Cody remembered being one of the students who consistently skipped class. “There wasn’t anyone there to make you go [to class], so we didn’t go,” he said. He recalled that the
change in school environment brought a greater "focus on school work and grades, things changed."

When asked about other changes, such as, administrators and new dress code uniform policy, Cody stated:

At first I did not like the uniforms, but I got used to wearing them and then it was okay. The new administrators were cool. They showed that they wanted to help students. I liked them. I really liked the new teachers because they helped out more.

Like TF, Cody did not say much about the change in the dress code, but seemed to like the new administrators. Cody said he was "happy" about the changes in his grades and his overall performance in school. When asked what he believed caused the improvement in grades, leading to a mid-year promotion to the eighth grade, he explained:

I was just tired of being held back: it was time to move up because I was getting too old sitting in the same grade and uniform. I had to do what I had to do to get [my grades] up.

He described his improvement as a result of the changes in his behavior. Being in class rather than skipping class allowed him to demonstrate his academic skill level. The new administrators and teachers were "strict," he recalled, and "would not let students get away with skipping class." Cody smiled and added, "my confidence grew" as his grades improved. Describing his change in attitude, Cody commented:

When I was doing bad, I didn't really care. When I was doing bad, I was like, "well I can't do it anyway so what's the sense of doing it, what is the sense of trying." But when I started seeing that I could do it, my whole attitude changed. I
started being more confident in myself, knowing that I could do it. My teachers really helped me see that I could really do the work.

Cody’s account of his improvement is much like that of C-Low who also shared that his attitude toward school changed once he began to see he could do the work. Cody again smiled, nodding his head as he spoke of how his mother viewed his change in school performance:

My mom liked my improvement because she said she knew I could do it: I just wasn’t putting myself to it and letting my friends get in the way. She was proud of me and that made me feel good.

Family influence is important to Cody and was recognized as a contributing factor to his academic improvement. Cody credited his academic improvement to wanting to do better for himself and his motivation came from his teachers and family members. Cody remembered feeling “good about myself” when he was promoted to eighth grade. “My family was proud of me that I was doing better and not getting in trouble and some tried to help me stay on track,” he shared. Cody’s feelings about himself and the academic changes he made in the fall of 2005 are similar to those expressed by C-Low and TF. By contrast Tee-M’s recollection of the fall 2005 was less complete and her narrative is a sparse account of the period being researched.

Tee-M. Tee-M is 16 years old and in the tenth grade. She lives with her mother and at the time of the interview, she was seven months pregnant. Tee-M spent a total of three years in the seventh grade prior to demonstrating academic improvement that led to a mid-year promotion to the eighth grade at the time James Madison was reorganized. It
became obvious early in the interview that Tee-M had little memory of the details of her experience at James Madison and the beginning of its reorganization.

Tee-M recalled the fall of 2005 and remembered the uniforms as the only thing that seemed different from prior years. After a long pause, Tee-M recalled that “the rules changed and it ain’t that much people in the halls.” She quickly followed with, “Oh yeah, we had to sit down in the cafeteria.” Tee-M shrugged her shoulders and responded with “ummm” and a long pause when asked about her thoughts on the changes in the school environment and the teachers. After repeating the question, she responded, “I don’t remember.” When asked about the administrators and uniforms, Tee-M believed the administrators kept them safe, but she did not like wearing a uniform even though she thought it “helped to keep order in the halls and school.” Safety and security were important to Tee-M, and although her recollection of the fall 2005 is limited, she expressed joy and happiness when asked about her academic improvement during that time: “I just decided to do my work. When I was [promoted] to the eighth grade, I was happy and it just motivated me to keep doing my work and to keep going.”

Tee-M believed that nothing else changed for her as a result of her grades improving. She shared that she cannot remember a great deal, “It is so far back, I can’t remember anything,” she exclaimed. Tee-M’s limited recall of the events that occurred two and a half years prior to the interview did not detract from her ability to identify the contributing factors that led to her academic improvement:

The new program motivated me ... I just decided to do my work so that I could pass ... the teachers were helpful and they seemed like they cared about the
students and it made me want to do better. I saw other students doing work so I
just decided to do mine ...

Tee-M stated that her teachers and mother were helpful and supportive of her and that she
is “well liked” by her friends. When asked how her family felt about her being promoted
to the next grade, she answered: “I guess they was happy.” When asked how her friends
felt, she answered: “All my friends moved [to eighth grade] too, so they were happy.”
She noted that her school experience is “horrible” right now and admitted that “the work
is hard.” Tee-M said her most challenging class was math, but that she made plans to
meet with her math teacher to get extra help after school; she noted that a formal tutor
might also help. She seemed confident, though, that she will “get back on track once the
baby is here.”

Although Tee-M’s recollection of the events of the fall 2005 is less clear than
some subjects, Tee-M’s account of her academic improvement includes family, teachers,
and her personal decision to “just . . . do my work.” Likewise, Tee-M’s classmate, Visha,
who is very soft spoken and somewhat shy, expressed similar views and experiences. Her
interview narrative is a sparse account of the events and time period being studied.

Visha. Visha spent three years in the seventh grade prior to demonstrating
academic improvement and promotion to eighth grade. She now is 17 years old and in the
tenth grade. Visha lives with her mother, father and younger sister and remarked that she
has a close relationship with her mother. She mentioned doing well in school at this time
and credited her improved performance to motivation by her friends. “I like being around
kids who like to work. The people I hang around like to work and that’s what I want to be
like,” Visha shared. She stated that the work is harder than earlier years, but her friends
and teachers help keep her on task. Visha was happy that she is passing her classes and will not “have to go to summer school. I have one 9th grade class,” she shared. “but I was happy [to find out] that I do not have to attend summer school.” Things were not always positive for Visha. She recalled her behavior prior to the fall of 2005:

I was bad. I really wasn’t focused in school when it was Madison … but I became focused as we had more rules. It was better because usually I didn’t go to class, but when they had rules that people could listen to, I went. I was doing more work and paying attention and being focused on what the teacher was saying instead of not listening and talking to friends and my grades got better. People were doing better in school and everybody changed. There wasn’t that many skippers in the halls, the fights weren’t happening … the fights [were] bad when it was Madison, everybody knows that. I even fought one time when it was Madison.

When asked if the school environment had an impact on her behavior, she commented that, “Everybody wanted to pass and they ain’t want to fail again. I know I was like that.”

Not unlike TF and Cody, Visha did not have much to say regarding the different administrators and dress code policy. Other than calling the uniforms “stupid” and the new administrators “nice.” She recalled liking the changes in the school because they helped her “not skip class and get better grades.” Like Cody, Visha believed the change in the overall environment impacted her ability to focus more and thus, improve her grades.

Visha identified the factors contributing to her academic improvement in the fall of 2005 leading to a mid-year promotion to the eighth grade by saying, “I was doing more work and paying attention to the teachers, I liked the school rules.” She cited her
mother and wanting to make her happy in addition to “seeing my friends in a different grade, the grade I am supposed to be in,” as contributing factors in her improvement.

Visha credited her improvement to the changes in her behavior: she stopped skipping, paid attention in class, and completed her assignments. She acknowledged being in class allowed her to demonstrate her academic skills. She stated that she liked the new rules and changes in the school’s environment, claiming that they helped her change her behavior. Kim also liked the new rules and thought they helped to “keep order” in the school. Her account is another example of a limited recollection of the fall of 2005; however, her responses are important to this study.

Kim. Kim, a 17 year old tenth grader, lives with her mother and grandmother. As she compared her current academic performance to the fall of 2005 she revealed that she is less successful now than in 2005. She said, however, that she is happy with her current performance in school, believing she could do better, but making plans to meet with her teachers for extra help.

Kim remembered that the “whole atmosphere changed” when James Madison changed to Wilson Foundation Academy, and that “there were not a lot of fights like it used to be.” Like TM, Kim mentioned a lot of “chaos” and “mayhem” when it was Madison and she recalled being “happy” that the Wilson administrators “kept order and helped out a lot.” When asked about the changes in administration and the uniform policy, Kim commented that she “liked the administrators,” but reported that she didn’t get to know them well. In commenting on the uniform change she stated, “I really didn’t like the uniforms.”
Much like Cody and Visha, Kim believed the change in the overall environment influenced her ability to focus on school work which resulted in improved grades. She shared that she was “mad that I was back in the seventh grade again,” but “felt good,” after she improved academically and was promoted. Kim acknowledged that the personal assistance from teachers was major factor contributing to her academic improvement:

My attitude toward school changed because I could focus more in class. The teachers and tutors helped more and they broke [the information] down step by step and they made me understand more. Wilson’s program really helped me out a lot. [My] grades improved in math and my whole attitude changed. I actually tried harder to do my work. The teachers tried to help out more and I got a lot of help in math.

When asked how friends felt about her changed attitude toward school and her promotion to the next grade, Kim stated that she “really wasn’t into all that because I was focused on my work.” She did not see friends as contributing to her improved academic performance, but reported being motivated and inspired by adult encouragement and support. Kim also shared that the administrators and counselors “talked to the students about earning credits, graduation, and going to college.” She said the conversations about college helped motivate her to do well and increase her effort. Kim stated that, “Some of [the teachers] at Madison didn’t really care about the students’ education,” but overcame that adversity with encouragement from other adults. She shared that her grandmother was instrumental in her improvement and remarked, “... my grandmom talked to me about school and how it should be important.”
Kim mentioned her plans to attend college and how graduating from high school was important to her and her family. Both Kim and Cody shared strong feelings about post-secondary plans and were determined to accomplish this goal. Family also played an important part in Tee’s attitude toward school. “It is expected that you go to school and get good grades. There is no question in my family about that.” Tee said.

Tee. Tee is 17 years old and lives with her grandmother. She volunteered that her grandmother “doesn’t play when it comes to grades” and remembered her grandmother’s satisfaction when she improved her grades after spending three years in the seventh grade. Similar to other subjects, Tee remembered the climate of the school when it was James Madison as being “out of control.” She spoke of the hallways, for example, in this way:

When it used to be Madison, it used to be kids everywhere [in the halls] and now it’s like nobody in the hallways. It used to always be a fight in the hallway. You used to always be stuck there and then late to class.

Tee mentioned that she could not remember a lot of things from the fall of 2005, but she did recall the changes in the uniform and the teachers. She commented on the uniforms by saying, “I think that sucks so bad!” She did not share an opinion on whether she believed the uniform made a difference in the way students behaved or treated one another. She noted that she was surprised that people “stuck to it,” referring to the high level of student buy-in and compliance with the uniform policy. “I guess everybody got used to it,” she added. Tee also recalled teachers spending more time with students after the change, and remembered getting more help with her work. She described her experience this way:
There were different teachers and you gotta have a relationship with the teachers 'cause if you don't, then it's just like they gonna treat you like the rest of the students that just don't want to do nothing. When I have a relationship with a teacher, I could talk to them and stuff and they would help me more. Other teachers would be like, 'yeah, if you don't understand it then I can't help you 'cause I already told you.' That does not happen with teachers I have a relationship with.

Tee attributed help from teachers as being an important factor in her academic improvement. She recalled feeling "happy" that she finally was being promoted. "I had been so long in the seventh grade ... it seemed like I had been there forever," she stated.

Tee also remembered her family encouraging her to "keep up the grades." "At my house," she added, "you gotta keep up with your house work and your school work at the same time." Tee shared that her grandmother was happy with the improved grades, but her aunt commented, "You getting an A is good, but it’s not the best because you are supposed to be getting A's." She recalled feeling frustrated by her aunt’s comment and admitted that she often feels the same way now when similar comments are made.

Tee claimed that her frustration comes from wanting to do well in school, but when she does not get the help she needs, her grades suffer. She disclosed that she seeks support from her counselor to help develop strategies to overcome periodic frustrations. Tee indicated that her attitude can sometimes impede her progress in school:

If I didn't have such an attitude with people, I could focus more on my work.

When my classes are nice middle-sized and not a big loud class, I didn’t get
frustrated too quick. I don’t get attitudes with the teachers so quick because I had
good grades and the teachers helping me and I didn’t get kicked out so much.

Assistance from teachers and smaller class size were factors that supported her
academically and Tee mentioned her relationship with friends as an important factor as
well:

My friends were moving on [to the next grade] and that made my grades drop
because I did not know anybody, didn’t like anybody because I don’t know them.
So I kept to myself, but that just made my grades drop. If I don’t know nobody...
I don’t trust them.”

With a sad facial expression and low voice volume, Tee added, “I don’t got no friends. I
don’t like nobody, don’t go nowhere, just sit in the house and do nothing.”

Tee’s account of her academic improvement in the fall of 2005 included the
relationships she built with her teachers and that her friends were promoted to the next
grade. Tee’s family, friends, and teachers emerged as central to her emotional well-being
and thus, her academic improvement. She shared that although the pressure of doing well
in school sometimes produces frustration, she is “determined to get through.” This
determination is shared also by Qreshia who is unwavering in her determination to earn a
high school diploma. “None of my mother’s children graduated from high school.”

Qreshia shared, but “I know I am smart.”

Qreshia. Qreshia is 16 years old and lives with her mother and two older brothers.
Qreshia identified herself as “smart” and “able to do the work because it is easy,” but
“failed the seventh grade [twice] because of poor behavior in school.” At the time of the
interview, Qreshia was on suspension from school and received instruction through the
school’s tutoring program. In this environment she mentioned doing well academically. She also recalled doing well in school during the fall of 2005 after multiple years of failing the seventh grade. She remembered that “everything changed” and commented on the changes this way:

I had better opportunities when it was Wilson. They brought people over who cared. More teachers, more learning opportunities that you can learn in the classroom and not just sit there and do nothing. You did work. [The teachers] put more learning [material] up [on the walls] and you could learn from the walls. [The teachers] cared more.

Qreshia mentioned that the students seemed to change. “We were all in class,” she said, and admitted to being one of the students who was “always in the hallway and didn’t go to class.” Like Cody, TM, C-Low and Visha, the new school rules were seen by Qreshia as important, making a difference in her behavior and the behavior of others. “[The former principal] wouldn’t put his foot down,” Qreshia commented and added, “He would let the kids run all over him. I am speaking of myself too.” She remarked that the new administrators were “kind,” and “understanding,” and remembered that they “allowed students the opportunity to speak and say how you feel.” She shared that when the school became Wilson Foundation Academy, “I became different. My attitude was different.” When asked what caused the difference in her attitude, Qreshia responded:

I wanted more ... a better opportunity. I felt like I could get a scholarship if I attend Wilson and if this school changed to Wilson, I can get a better life. I wanted more not just coming to school and sit here like we used to at Madison and do nothing, you did work and stuff ... Then coming here and having people
that really care and not just because they want a paycheck it’s because they really care about the children … that’s cool.

Qreshia remembered “wanting to wake up in the morning and go to school and not wanting to stay home. I just wanted to wake up the next morning and be ready for school.” Like Cody, Qreshia credited her academic improvement to wanting to do better and wanting more for herself. “Seeing and knowing I could do it, knowing that I know the work and wanting to be successful” were the reasons Qreshia gave for her improvement in the fall of 2005. “I know I am smart.” Qreshia repeated for the third time. “I know I can do the work – that was not the problem. Even if I do not know it, I can learn it. You can learn anything. I wanted to move on; I did not want to be stuck [in the seventh grade]. I did not want to be stuck on stupid.”

After a brief pause, Qreshia smiled and added, “I am proud of myself!” She reported that her attitude changed after she began experiencing success in school. She remembered how she felt in class after her improvement and mid-year promotion describing her experience this way:

I felt like I was smart. I felt like I could do more and I knew how to do math. That was the problem. I wouldn’t pay attention. I couldn’t comprehend things before because anything would distract me. I stopped letting people distract me and I saw myself maturing. I did not want to goof off anymore – you could do that outside of school and even outside of school, I did not want to hear it. So basically, I changed a lot.

Qreshia took a brief pause, shook her head and added with a chuckle. “I was terrible. I went to anger management two years in a row. I was terrible, my anger was terrible.”
Qreshia seemed embarrassed as she recalled her former attitude and behavior. She proudly shared:

When the school changed, I got new teachers who cared and who I know didn’t come here just because they get paid and they wanted to see us succeed and be successful. I gave them a chance. When you give people a chance and you know where they are really coming from, you know if they are real or not.

She commented on the relationship between her attitude and her performance in school by saying, “Not giving people a chance, not having anyone to talk to ... that sucks. So when you can open up to someone, that’s cool.”

Qreshia remembered her friends being happy for her, but quickly specifies, “My real friends, not the ones who wanted me down and wanted me to be with them because they did not move on. My real friends wanted to follow.” She then adds, “I felt like a leader. Everybody was like, ‘oh [Qreshia] did this so let’s do it.’ Sometimes I felt like I had a lot of pressure on me and I still do; even right now.” Qreshia added that her mother did not have children who graduated from high school and her family was relying on her to be the first. Thus, her improved performance in school was and remains important to her as well as to her family. “I think my attitude [about school] changed my brothers. They don’t want to be in the streets and they settled down,” Qreshia shared. Pleasing her family is important to Qreshia who adds, “I don’t want to disappoint people.” Qreshia ends her comments by saying with sincerity, “I just want to thank people for where I am and where I am going because I am not finished yet.” Qreshia’s determination to get through school is echoed by all subjects, including Johnson whose quest to complete high school is evidenced by her voluntary transfer to another school in the district.
Johnson is the only subject in this study who no longer attends Wilson. Regarding her decision to transfer schools, Johnson stated that she “wanted a fresh start ... away from old friends and other distractions.” She remarked that she wanted to be in a place where she “did not know anyone” and “have a new atmosphere for learning.”

Johnson is a 16 year old tenth grader who lives with her mother and grandmother. She recalled her years at James Madison and remembered the changes when it became Wilson Foundation Academy by stating:

I remember there were different teachers and we were in uniforms. Everybody was on point. All the students acted different. Students went to class and there were fewer students in the halls. There were some teachers at [Madison] that didn’t want to work and like they [were] coming just to get paid. They [weren’t] really doing their job like they are supposed to. When it became Wilson, I seen a whole change around ... teachers were answering our questions and wanted to tell students to stay after [school] for academic help.

Johnson is the only subject who commented that the uniforms caused the adults to look at the students differently. She remarked, “The uniforms gave a different outlook on us ... better than how [teachers] looked at us when we were in regular clothes.” Johnson shared that the way the teachers viewed the students made her “feel better and I knew the adults were looking at us different and they expect better from us and they knew that we could do better so they looked at us differently.” She stated that the teachers viewed them differently than in the past and “more adults was looking at us and [treatting] us different. Adults were offering to do fundraisers and events [with students].” She also stated that, “All the students acted different while they were in uniforms ... [students] went to class.
and there were less students in [the] hall.” Johnson credited the uniforms for “less arguments... people argued over who got more clothes ... or name brand stuff. So [wearing] uniforms kept all [arguing] down.”

She spoke less favorably of her performance prior to the change by saying, “I felt like I wasn’t getting anywhere and it was time for me to do better. When it was Madison students were skipping [and there were] students in the halls constantly.” Johnson offered a more positive description of her experience when commenting on her personal change during the fall 2005 in saying:

I was trying hard and putting more effort into what we did. I got tired of being in the same [grade] so I just had to step it up a little. The teachers helped me focus more and I started doing my homework more often, paying attention in class, getting to class on time ... teachers really cared about you. I was really proud of myself that I did it and I could have a better life. Just because I got retained in the seventh grade don’t mean I can’t do better. Probably being retained made me think about [school] and improve ... if I weren’t retained I don’t think I would be doing better. I think it was meant to be retained because it made me focus more because I had to do something. I was tired of being in the same grade.

Johnson shared that being retained helped her realize that she had to do better and “to get a better education.” She expressed that the “better education” would come as a result of her own efforts, but along with the other subjects, she gave credit for her improvement to the teachers who “gave extra help and showed that they cared about the students.” When asked what she believed contributed to her improvement in fall 2005, Johnson responded:
I was cooperating with the teachers to get my grades [up to passing] because I did not want to be in there another year. I decided to buckle down more and get my grades up to where they are supposed to be so that I could get out. [I was] trying hard and putting more effort into what we did because I got tired of being in the same spot so just had to step it up a little.

After a brief pause she reflected, “trying hard and putting more effort into what was done.” Johnson mentioned the “tutors from the University of Rochester and Monroe Community College” provided additional help for her in the after-school program in which she was enrolled.

When asked how her friends responded to her improvement, she stated, “We were happy for ourselves because me and my friend were in the same predicament so I was happy for her and she was happy for me.” Johnson’s parents “were very happy” as well and encouraged her to “do homework and to make sure to score well on tests.” Johnson stated that she liked school and that her attitude toward school is positive.

Johnson felt “proud” of her accomplishments and acknowledged that her hard work in improving her grades to the level of honor status following multiple years of failing deserved recognition. She noted, “I feel that I came this far … so getting my grades up and keeping them at that point … I am doing what I am supposed to do. [As a result] I made the honor roll.”

*Emerging Themes*

The themes that emerged from the interviews focused on the subjects’ opinions about the change in school climate, teachers, family members, and feelings about their academic failure and improvement. During the interviews, subjects shared their
perceptions of school and their teachers. They voiced opinions about the influences on
t heir academic performance and shared personal experiences. The results from the
interviews revealed several themes that include but are not limited to (a) school climate
improvement from James Madison to Wilson Foundation Academy, (b) positive feelings
about Wilson teachers, (c) the significance of family; and (d) personal effort and
motivation.

Theme one: school climate improvement from James Madison to Wilson
Foundation Academy. Nine of nine subjects cited that prior to the school reform in the
fall of 2005, the hallways of the school were filled with students skipping class and 89%
of the case study subjects spoke of frequent fighting among students that occurred at
school. TF described the climate as existing in “mayhem” and Kim used the term “chaos”
to portray the school’s crowded and violent environment. “Students were squished and
fighting ... it used to always be a fight in the hallway,” recalled Tee. Likewise, Visha
remembered the fights being “really bad at Madison,” and Johnson disclosed that there
were “arguments among students.” All subjects recalled having rules and expectations
that were consistently enforced once the school changes were implemented.

C-Low, Qreshia, and Johnson spoke of “better opportunities” and “better
learning” as a result of the changes at school. “It was a whole different school,”
commented Cody and Johnson. Visha remembered that “people were doing better in
school and everybody changed,” and that she, “liked the [changes] because it helped me
... I wasn’t skipping ... I became focused.” C-Low shared that at Madison “they let you
do what you want to do,” but when James Madison underwent the change, C-Low stated
that “things changed ... no more students doing bad things and you could learn better.”
and that “when it became Wilson, they really made sure your education is first and make sure you stay on track.” Similarly, Cody stated that “you couldn’t get away with some of the stuff that you got away with at Madison.”

“Without reconstruction, the whole building changed,” TF said. TF spoke candidly about the need for change by saying “it should have happened way earlier.”

Nine of nine subjects shared that the school climate was different and that there was more focus on learning once James Madison was reorganized. Six of the nine subjects spoke specifically about “the new rules.” Visha claimed that “I like the rules because I began going to class and focusing on my class work.” Kim shared, “The whole atmosphere changed” and she began “getting the extra help” that she needed with her course work. Qreshia also mentioned learning opportunities and that “there was more learning stuff on the walls ... you can learn in the classroom ... and we did not just sit there and do nothing, you did work.” All subjects identified the changes in school climate during the fall of 2005 as positive, needed, and effective in changing the culture and climate of the school.

Theme two: positive feelings about teachers. The subjects’ comments concerning the classroom environment centered on the teachers’ willingness to help students. TF, Qreshia, and Johnson shared an appreciation for the learning environment in the classroom. TF liked the fact that “the teachers were teaching the curriculum,” rather than, “teaching outside the curriculum. The Madison teachers made their own curriculum ... and because they taught out of the curriculum a lot of kids wasn’t learning.” Qreshia was confident in her ability to learn. “I am smart,” she stated more than once. Similarly,
Johnson shared that “adults were looking at us different … that felt better because I know that adults expect better from us and that they know that we could do better.”

Both TF and Qreshia acknowledged the work that the teachers did in the classroom. TF shared, “The teachers did extra. They went out of their way to help students. For example, my math teacher stayed after school with me and a couple of other students and we got work done and it was worth it ‘cause she went out of her way to help us and I appreciate that.” Qreshia commented that “[teachers] cared more … they really cared about the children. They wanted to see us succeed and be successful … I just want to thank everybody.” Tee-M emphasized the importance of having a relationship with one’s teacher and how that makes a difference in the manner in which you are treated.

Seven of the nine subjects (78%) acknowledged the teachers’ “help” and “care.” C-Low shared that “the teachers put in more effort with you if you need it. They give you more help, stay after [school] with you,” and sadly added, during the “James Madison days, they wouldn’t even bother.” Cody, Kim, Tee, Qreshia, and Johnson, spoke specifically about the teachers demonstrating that they “care about students.” TF shared excitedly, “Everywhere you looked it was somebody doing their work so you had no other choice but to do it. It was a learning environment so you got to get with it.”

Theme three: significance of family. Seven (78%) subjects live in a family consisting of father, mother, and siblings. Two subjects (22%) were living in an extended family, one with the grandparent as the legal guardian and another identified a grandparent living in the home as well. Most families were reported to be supportive, surprised at the mid-year promotion, and encouraged a productive future. Analyses revealed that seven of the nine (78%) subjects recognized that parents and other family
members wanted them to do well in school and continued to encourage them. The subjects were concerned that failing seventh grade disappointed their family and that demonstrating improvement and the mid-year promotion made everyone happy and proud.

When asked how their families viewed their academic improvements and mid-year promotion, eight subjects cited that their family members were “happy.” One subject, Tee-M, shared reflectively: “I guess they [were] happy.” Qreshia remarked that her mother is relying on her to be the first high school graduate in her immediate family. She shared that there is a lot of pressure not “to disappoint people.” Likewise, pleasing her family is important to Visha who shared, “My mom was happy and I’m gonna make my mom happy.” C-Low was also motivated by his mother’s encouragement which came in the form of inspiring words, such as, “Keep it up, you can do it.”

Family expectations were a large part of the subjects’ motivation to do well in school. All subjects stated that when their grades began to improve their family acknowledged their efforts in school. TF commented:

They expected more of me because they know what I am capable of and they know I dropped the ball but then I grabbed it again. So, they wanted me to take that shot and finish doing what I got to do.

Similar expectations were placed on Tee yet the support and positive encouragement was absent from the family’s conversations. Tee expressed that she is often “frustrated and aggravated” by the high level of expectation her family placed on her to do well in school. She shared that her family expects A’s and B’s and are “not satisfied” with anything else. She remarked that “they got so used to good grades when [the grades]
started going down, they were like, "Tee, [isn't any] use in [you] going to school. you are a failure." This made Tee feel "frustrated and aggravated" and she stated, "I was like forget it then, might as well say "forget it" and drop out." Yet, Cody and Kim commented that their family encouraged them to keep working hard in school and to consider college options.

Kim reported that her grandmother inspired her and talked "to me about school and how it should be important." Cody stated that his mother "liked my improvement 'cause she said she knew that I could to it ... I was letting my friends get in the way of what I was doing so I had to eliminate some of my friends." Cody claimed that he had to "do what I got to do." Cody also pointed out that his two college-enrolled sisters are an inspiration and often help him with his school work. Both Kim and Cody stated that they appreciate the conversations with school- and home-based adults regarding college. They both shared plans of attending college after high school. In addition, they expressed similar sentiment regarding friends. Cody eliminated the ones who were bad influences and Kim shared, "I really wasn't into all of that because I was focused on my work."

Analyses revealed positive relationships with parents and other extended family members as significant factors that influenced their academic performance in the fall of 2005.

**Theme four: self-determination and effort.** Effort and attitude emerged as important findings that influenced participants' academic improvement during the fall of 2005. A number of the participants answered "just deciding to do my work" when asked what contributed to their improvement in school after years of failure.
Four participants (44%) said that they just made up their mind to do better, aside from the other contributing factors, such as, school climate, teacher interaction, and family encouragement.

TF pointed out that he was surprised to see his younger brother’s friend in class and was motivated to “abide by the rules and started to do everything I had to do.” He also mentioned his attitude toward school changed:

Now I can go into class right now and just sit down because I don’t have the same mind state and mentality that I had when it was Madison. I just walk in and see everybody getting their work done and I can get mine … I was back to being focused.

Similarly, Tee-M responded, “I just decided to do my work.” when asked what contributed to her improvement. She stated that being promoted to the next grade motivated her to continue to do her work, but recognized that initially, she “just did it.”

Likewise, Cody shared, “I guess just being tired of being held back; it was time to move up … I had to do what I had to do to get [my grades] up.” In a similar way, Johnson responded, “I did not want to be in there another year so I decided to buckle down more and get my grades up to where they are supposed to be so that I could get out of [the seventh grade].”

Four participants (44%) acknowledged that they realized they could do the work and then were more focused and motivated. Qreshia and C-Low shared the same sentiment with regard to their academic improvement. Qreshia commented, “Just seeing and knowing I could do it. Knowing that I know the work and wanting to be more and be successful.” She then acknowledged she did not want to be “stuck.” C-Low also
commented that he "stepped it up" once he saw "that I could do it and it wasn't that difficult. All you had to do is put in that effort and you could do whatever you want." Kim and Visha claimed they "tried harder" to complete and "focus on the work." They both shared that the change in school environment helped to create more focus on education which helped them "concentrate on school work." Visha stated that "Everybody wanted to pass and they didn't want to fail again. I know I was like that."

Summary of Results of the Study

Findings indicated that school climate, teacher interaction, and family support provided the motivation for the participants to put forth personal effort to improve their academic performance in school. The following four themes emerged as factors contributing to academic improvement among the study participants: (a) school climate improvement, (b) positive feelings about teachers, (c) the significance of family, and (d) personal effort and determination.

Participants recalled having rules and expectations that were consistently enforced in the new environment. All of the participants commented that prior to the fall of 2005, students were missing classes, fighting at school and based on their comments appeared that school climate did not reflect a focus on instruction and learning. "Mayhem" and "chaos" were terms used to describe the school climate prior to the changes in the fall of 2005; however, all participants report that the changes in the school environment led to a greater focus on instruction and learning and recognized this as a major influence on improving the school.

All participants viewed teachers as important factors in their improvement. The teachers "showed that they cared," participants stated, "and they took time to work with
students” outside of the normal teaching schedule. All participants shared that these traits were absent in the teachers they remembered at James Madison. Participants believed their performance improved because the new teachers demonstrated that they cared and were willing to help.

Eight of the nine participants (89%) claimed that they “just decided to do my work” because they either realized their academic potential or were “just tired” of being retained, and decided to “step it up.” Most participants believed both their change in personal effort and attitude toward school as well as a desire to do better contributed to their academic improvement. This change in attitude and effort appeared related to the new school climate, teacher behaviors, and family support.

Family influence emerged as a key factor impacting the participants’ performance in school. The participants seemed concerned that failing in school disappointed their parents and other family members. They recognized that their parents wanted them to do well in school and for the most part parents and other family members continued to encourage improvement. All participants shared that their families were happy with their improvement during the fall of 2005 and their mid-year promotion to the eighth grade. One subject mentioned feeling a lot of pressure from parents and other relatives to “get A’s and B’s” and another felt pressure to become the only child in the family to graduate from high school. Despite multiple years of failing, each subject mentioned family as an influence in their improved academic performance in school.

Effort and self-determination emerged as important elements of academic improvement for the participants during the fall of 2005. Failure appeared to have laid the foundation for academic resilience and when added to self-determination it motivated the
participants to succeed. C-Low made this major improvement seem simple when he said, “If you try you can do it. You put in that effort you could see the good results, but if you don’t try, you will see the bad.” The implications of these findings will be linked with relevant literature and discussed in Chapter 5.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

This chapter presents the implications of the findings of this study as well as limitations, recommendations for further research, and a comprehensive summary of the study. The problem the study investigated was a search for the factors leading to the academic improvement of two- and three-time retained seventh grade students in a low-performing middle school following implementation of new school leadership and instructional teams as well as modifications of the school's academic program. Individual subject interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. Findings may advance understanding of some key factors promoting academic success among previously failing students in low-performing urban schools. Findings revealed that school climate, teacher behaviors, family influence, and personal effort and self-determination were major factors contributing to the academic improvement of participants in this study.

Implications of Findings

The purpose of this study was to determine the factors supporting academic achievement among students who have experienced multiple retentions in the seventh grade. Using a qualitative case study research design the researcher gathered data addressing the problem statement and factors leading to the academic improvement of retained seventh graders. Research findings addressed the problem the study investigated and agreed with findings in the related research literature. Results revealed that school
climate, teacher behaviors, family influence, personal effort, and self-determination were factors contributing to the academic improvement of participants in this study.

School Climate

Results of the study suggest that creating a climate supportive of learning and achievement have a significant impact on academic performance and outcomes. Nine of the nine participants (100%) recalled a distinct difference in climate following the changes implemented in the school. All participants claimed the hallways of James Madison were filled with students skipping class and nearly all (89%) of the participants mentioned frequent fighting among students at former school. Kim and TF used the terms chaos and mayhem respectively in describing the climate of James Madison, and were pleased with the changes they witnessed at Wilson. Other participants also seemed to appreciate the changes as they spoke of new rules, expectations and more orderly environment. TF wished the changes would have occurred sooner. The description of the change in school climate suggests that expectations for behavior and the reinforcement of rules led to a more orderly learning atmosphere, fewer students skipping class, and less fighting among students.

These findings concur with research suggesting a strong correlation between student achievement and healthy, positive school cultures (Grolnick & Ryan, 1987; McCaslin, 2006; Ryan, Stiller, Lynch, 1994; Wentzel, 1998; Hootstein 1996). Other studies found a positive relationship between school climates and student achievement suggesting that a positive school climate optimizes student performance and achievement (McCaslin, 2006; Wentzel, 1998; Hootstein 1996). According to Ruebling et al. (2004)
the key to student achievement lies in the responsibility of school leaders to create a climate reflecting an academic focus.

Based on results from this study and other research studies, it seems reasonable to conclude that clearly articulating and reinforcing high expectations for behavior and learning outcomes are characteristics of positive school climates that may yield improved student performance.

Teacher Behaviors

Results of the study also suggested that teacher behaviors and interactions with students had significant impact on academic performance and outcomes. All participants mentioned the help, care, and attention that they received from their new teachers. The participants identified teacher behaviors, such as teaching the curriculum, showing care, and providing help, as important to their academic improvement. C-Low remarked that Wilson teachers were encouraging and showed him that he could do the work. TF reported doing homework for the first time since elementary school whereas Kim and Visha stated they became more focused in class. All participants reported having improved attitudes and motivation toward school.

Findings support the research suggesting that student achievement is directly linked to teacher interpersonal behavior (Kaplan & Owings, 2001); learning is optimized under conditions that facilitate active autonomous involvement on the part of the learner (Grolnick & Ryan, 1987); and the perception of a caring, supportive relationship with a teacher and a positive classroom environment are directly related to student academic motivation and overall school satisfaction (Murdock & Miller, 2003). Additionally, results concur with Kaplan and Owings (2001) who suggest that improved student
achievement depends on the quality of teaching that supports a nurturing environment. Overall findings of this study and related research indicate that caring, concerned, and compassionate teachers are crucial to student achievement and success.

Family Influence

Results of the study indicated family and parental involvement contributed to participants’ continued academic improvement. Families were reported to be supportive of participants, pleased with the mid-year promotion, and encouraged a productive future.

Seven of the nine (78%) participants noted their parents and other family members wanted them to do well in school and continued encouraging them to do so. Visha acknowledged she did not want to disappoint her mother. Qreshia spoke of being the first in her family to graduate from high school. Cody’s sisters attended college and remarked that his family expected the same of him. Participants described specific family behaviors such as homework help, talks about high school graduation and college, encouraging comments, and tangible gifts and rewards as most influential to their improvement.

Based on results of the study, it seems reasonable to conclude that family influence became prevalent after participants showed improvement in their grades. None of the participants identified family as impacting their initial improvement, but rather after they demonstrated improvement and particularly after promotion to the next grade. Nonetheless, data suggested that parents and extended family members were important to academic achievement of participants. Family support and encouragement appeared to have been the impetus for many of the participants’ motivation and determination to do well in school.
Student Effort and Self-determination

Results from the study indicated that effort and self-determination influenced the participants’ academic improvement. Eight of the nine (89%) participants identified personal effort, motivation, or self-determination as factors that led to their academic improvement. TF, Cody, and C-Low reported there were more students completing work and attending classes and therefore, they had no choice but to do the same. Similar feelings were expressed by Cody, Visha, Johnson, Tee-M and Qreshia who seemed adamant about not repeating the seventh grade and therefore, put forth greater effort toward attending class and completing their school work. They believe that as a result their grades improved.

These results support Vroom’s (1964) Expectancy Theory which states that individuals have a variety of goals that motivate if they believe that effort and performance result in desirable outcomes. Results also carry implications that seem to agree with Deci and Ryan’s (2000) Self-Determination Theory which states that a person’s level of motivation is related to the degree to which innate needs of competence, connectedness, and autonomy are satisfied. Findings also appear to support Akey (2006) who argues that engagement and motivation are critical elements in student success and learning.

Each participant, subsequent to multiple years of retention, earned passing grades. Participants in this study appeared to defy the research which suggests that retained students are more likely to drop out of school, have low self-esteem, and low academic performance (Jimerson et al., 2001). This finding should not be seen as setting aside the preponderance of evidence suggesting that there is no sustainable benefit to grade

Some participants remarked that they just decided to do their work and were determined not to repeat the seventh grade again. There may be many factors that led to the participants' motivation and effort, but it seems reasonable to infer that favorable experiences such as passing grades, positive feedback from teachers, and encouragement from family caused the increase in effort and attitude toward school. Research in the area of adolescent brain development by Paul George and emotional, social, and academic growth of middle school-level children by John Lounsbury may help explain how why participants seemed to suddenly decide to complete their school work. Their background and expertise in the area of adolescent behavior may provide further understanding of the participants' physiological and emotional development and rationale for sudden change in determination to improve academically. At the same time such understanding may explain the absence of motivation to complete the seventh grade in previous years.

Limitations

The study was limited by a focus on a specific time period and may not reflect the long-term performance of the students being studied. Another limitation is that the interviews took place two and a half years after the grade-level retention and academic improvement; therefore, participants' ability to remember events and experiences may have been diminished. A third limitation is the role of the researcher who held an administrative position both before and after the expansion of Wilson Magnet High School where the case study participants were enrolled when their academic improvement occurred. The researcher currently serves as principal of Wilson
Foundation Academy and has direct supervision responsibility for two of participants who are enrolled at the Foundation Academy. Effort was made to reduce bias in the study.

Receommendations

Karweit (1991) wrote that both promotion and retention with additional instruction are more effective than social promotion or retention alone. Results of this study appear to support this claim. The retained participants in this study initially experienced retention without additional support and intervention, a common model. Moreover, they experienced this for two consecutive years. Concurrent with their second year of retention, the participants experienced a school reform that included a change in school environment, teachers, and instructional program. Each subject spoke of the personal help, attention, and level of care they experienced with their Wilson teachers. They spoke of the different rules and behavioral expectations established by the new school administrators and teachers. Findings suggest that student learning was impacted by the change of climate in the school as well as the varied instructional and learning experiences within the classroom.

Retention has not been proven to be an effective strategy to increase academic achievement (Jimerson, 2001; Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jackson, 1975). Similarly, social promotion does not appear to work Jimerson’s (2001) and Frymer’s (1997). There are many alternative strategies that can be employed that will result in more effective education for students than either retention or social promotion Jimerson’s (2001) and Frymer’s (1997).
Based on the literature review and results of this study, the following recommendations are viewed as promoting academic success for students. These recommendations concern school climate and leadership, teachers, parents, and potential future research.

**Recommendations for School Climate and Leadership**

School leaders can promote academic improvement among students by building school climates that foster relationships between students, teachers, and other adults in the school (Darling-Hammond, 1997). Based on the findings of this study and broader research, recommendations for school leaders include:

1. Creating a climate that is safe, orderly, and conducive to learning is an essential first step toward improved student achievement and outcomes. This can be done by articulating and reinforcing the rules and expectations supporting academic achievement. Participants of this study spoke of the change in school environment in a way that supported teaching and learning. The halls were clear and there was a noticeable reduction in the number of fights and conflicts among students. The hallways and classrooms had displays of student work and other meaningful learning material. According to all participants, the classroom became a place where learning seemed to be the new norm.

2. Participants identified teachers' help and support as influencing their improvement. This appears to endorse organizational changes providing extended contact between teachers and students. This may be accomplished by creating teams of teachers responsible for instructing and advising the
same students and carrying this responsibility over multiple years. This *looping* strategy helps to establish close, sustained relationships between teachers and students and strengthens relationships that support academic and emotional growth.

3. Participants mentioned a difference in classroom instruction and presentation of curriculum following the school change. This may suggest that by providing instructional support for teachers it may subsequently advance student achievement. Instructional support may include frequent collegial conversations, classroom visits, and professional development opportunities addressing identified needs for improvement (e.g. classroom management, parent involvement, time management, and effective strategies for teaching in a block-period schedule).

4. Receiving additional help from teachers and others were identified as factors supporting participants' improvement. Thus, it may follow that school leaders should ensure that support services (i.e. counseling, tutoring, and after-school or Saturday programs) are readily available and accessible for all students, especially those who have been retained. These strategies should be used to identify students at-risk and provide intervention prior to the determination to retain.

5. Finally, findings advance the need to thoroughly examine school-based and district-based promotion policies to ensure that the criteria for promotion include strategies and actions that prevent or limit the use of retention as the only response to academic failure.
Recommendations for Teachers

Participants of this study perceived their teachers as caring when they held high academic expectations and reinforced classroom rules. Based on participants’ responses, it seems appropriate to conclude that teachers can influence academic achievement by demonstrating concern for students in tangible ways such as use of engaging lessons, identifying specific needs of students, and developing an instructional plan to ensure success. Findings of this study yield the following recommendations for teachers:

1. Promote academic improvement by having high expectations for students.
2. Create lessons that allow students to fully participate in the learning experience.
3. Teach the prescribed curriculum.
4. Provide additional and personalized help to build relationships, produce expected learning outcomes, and increase student achievement.

Recommendations for Parents

Seven of the nine participants (78%) recognized their parents and other family members as central to their improved academic performance. Participants were concerned that failing seventh grade disappointed their families and that demonstrating improvement and receiving a mid-year promotion made their families happy and proud. All nine participants stated that their families acknowledged their efforts in school when grades improved. Parents and family encouraged participants to continue their efforts, held conversations about college and high school graduation, and presented tangible gifts.
as rewards for better grades. Findings from this study yield the following parent recommendations:

1. Promote academic improvement in children by encouraging them to do well in school and talking to them about school-related topics such as classes, course assignments, homework, as well as graduation or college.

2. Engage in school-based activities that support students (e.g. attending teacher conferences, sporting events, or volunteering in the school) as well as home-based activities that do the same (e.g. assisting with homework, visiting a local science museum, or having conversations about school and future educational choices).

Recommendations for Future Research

School leaders must begin to think about student success and failure in new ways. As educational practices, neither social promotion nor retention has been found to be adequate responses to subpar student achievement (Holmes & Saturday, 2000). As a result of this study and related research the following recommendations for future research are suggested:

1. Examine this topic with other groups of participants with similar experiences and academic backgrounds.

2. Examine the effects of teaching methodologies and positive school environments on improved student achievement.

3. Follow up research with current study participants. Despite research suggesting no long-term benefit to retention (Jimerson, 2001; Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jackson, 1975), participants of this study seemed
to have defied some research by demonstrating academic improvement even though they were retained at grade level. It would be advantageous to conduct other studies with the same participants to determine if their academic success continued over time.

4. Research on determining appropriate academic alternatives for students who experience multiple years of retention is needed.

5. Identify the generic characteristics of caring teachers. Participants spoke of caring, helpful teachers as contributing to their academic improvement. Further research should be done to identify the specific characteristics of teachers who made a significant difference in the lives of these participants.

6. Examine practices that provide support and education for families of retained students.

Summary

Participants recognized school climate, caring teachers, supportive families, and self-determination as direct factors contributing to their academic achievement following grade-level retention. School climate change, caring teachers, and family influence emerged as themes that dominated student perceptions of the reasons for their improvement. Effort, motivation, and self-determination also were important factors. The researcher speculated that the degree of motivation and effort is likely a result of other factors (e.g., climate change and teacher behaviors). Finding of this study suggest that students can experience academic success after grade-level retention, yet this evidence does not support retention as a form of academic intervention for struggling students. In contrast, research suggests that there is no reliable evidence supporting grade retention.
(Frey, 2005; Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jackson, 1975; Jimerson, 2001; Jimerson et al., 1997; Karweit, 1999; Resnick et al., 1997). It is incumbent upon educators to implement programs that support academic achievement while providing a safe learning environment. Findings suggested that learning is impacted by school climate, parent support, and varied instructional and learning experiences in the classroom.

Conclusion

The problem this study examined was the factors that led to the academic improvement of two- and three-time retained seventh grade students in a low-performing school after implementing new leadership and instructional teams and modifying the school's academic program. This study examined the effects of grade retention, school climate, teacher-student relationship, parent influence, and self-effort and determination on academic performance. A qualitative case study design was used to investigate the factors contributing to students' academic improvement.

Chapter 1 presented the purpose and background necessary to framing the context of this study. The purpose of the study was to determine if school climate, teacher-student interaction, and effort and self-determination were factors supporting academic achievement among students who have been retained. The questionable benefits of grade retention have been debated by researchers and educators alike. As Frey (2005), Karweit (1999), Jackson (1975) and Holmes and Matthews (1984) stated there is no reliable evidence to suggest grade retention is more beneficial than grade promotion for students with academic difficulties. Although researchers have shown that grade retention has a long history in the United States, they also present evidence that does not support using grade retention as an academic intervention (Holmes, 1980; Holmes & Matthews, 1984;
This study supports the idea that improving the learning environment is a more powerful agent in increasing student achievement than is grade retention.

Chapter 2 provided a review of existing literature supporting the need for further research. The review of the literature on the effects of grade retention showed that retention failed to demonstrate long-term effectiveness in academic achievement (Jimerson, 2001; Holmes, 1989). Alternatively, creating a positive school climate where classroom instruction is valued and supported optimizes student performance and achievement (Cotton, 2003). Darling-Hammond (1998) identified teacher preparedness and expertise as the most important factors influencing students' school performance.

Chapter 3 provided an explanation of the methodology used in this study. Using interviews as the data collection instrument, the study examined factors contributing to the academic improvement of these previously failing seventh grade students. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed.

Chapter 4 described the results of qualitative analyses of this study. The themes that emerged from the interviews focused on participants' opinions regarding the changes in school climate, teachers, family members, and feelings about their academic failure and improvement. The results from the interviews revealed several themes that include but are not limited to: (a) school climate change from James Madison to Wilson Foundation Academy, (b) feelings about the teachers, (c) the significance of family, and (d) personal effort and attitude.

Chapter 5 presented additional discussion regarding the study's general findings and implications and recommendations for future research, school leaders, teachers, and
parents. Limitations of the study as well as a summary and conclusions of this investigation were provided.

Findings of this study may carry implications for understanding key factors promoting academic improvement among retained students and may add to existing knowledge on what influences student achievement. Despite limitations, the results of this study suggest that there is little evidence that retaining students improves academic achievement. Therefore, when the question of how to raise the academic achievement level of students is posed, educational policymakers and practitioners should look to other strategies like those identified in this study.

Final Thoughts

As “academic excellence” emerges as a prominent national issue, it is important that society accept responsibility of facilitating the progress of students who do not meet district, school, or state standards. Student failures are society’s failures. Educational professionals, families, communities, and students must collaborate to create and sustain safe, nurturing, academically challenging environments encouraging student progress toward educational standards. In an era emphasizing standards and increasing accountability in education, school leaders and educational professionals may use the results of this study as one element in nearly a century of research advocating for strategies other than retention for students at risk of failing.

Although the participants in this study represent a very small sample, their perception of what is needed to aid student success and achievement exemplify what experts, researchers, and educators have found. Demonstrating care and concern for children through high expectations and taking time to develop relationships are tied
directly to successful academic results. The old adage "Kids don't care what you know until they know how much you care" exemplifies this belief and encapsulates much of what was found in this study.
References


Appendix A

Rochester City School District Approval Letter

November 2, 2007

Dear Ms. Matthews:

This letter serves as formal Rochester City School District approval for your proposed project, "The Academic Improvement of Retained Students: A Case Study." Please feel free to forward this formal approval to your Research Subjects Review Board and any other appropriate organization.

With nearly 200 outside research surveys and intervention requests per year, a number of specific criteria must be met in order to gain District approval for a proposal. Among them, it is most beneficial to students, their parents, staff, or schools or departments. It must be supported by the schools or departments impacted. Alignment with District goals is highly preferred. Your proposal meets all of these criteria.

Please continue to work with Andrew MacGowan and Dr. Jeannette Silvers of the Department of Research, Evaluation and Testing, my designee as liaison for your project. We will be most interested in meeting with you once your findings are completed.

We wish you every success in your study.

Very truly yours,

[Signature]

[Name]

Chief, Research, Evaluation and Testing

[Name]

Research, Evaluation and Testing

We, Andrew MacGowan

Dr. Jeannette Silvers
Appendix B

Approval Letter for Study

February 13, 2016

File No. S81-022108-02

Dear Ms. Matthew,

Thank you for submitting your research proposal to the Institutional Review Board. I am pleased to inform you that the board has approved your Exploratory Review Project, “The examination of the academic improvement of retained students.”

Following federal guidelines, research-related records should be maintained in a secure area for three years following the completion of the project at which time they may be destroyed.

Should you have any questions about this process or your responsibilities, please contact me at 385-3200 or by email at research@stjohnfisher.edu. If unable to reach me, please contact the Administrative Assistant to the IRB, Jamie Moreau, at 385-8548, or email irb@stjohnfisher.edu.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

[Name, Title, and Date]

[Address]

Research Coordinator

ST JOHN
FISHER
COLLEGE

Appendix B

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Sincerely,

[Signature]

[Name, Title, and Date]

[Address]

Research Coordinator

ST JOHN
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Appendix B

Approval Letter for Study

February 13, 2016

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Sincerely,

[Signature]

[Name, Title, and Date]

[Address]

Research Coordinator

ST JOHN
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Appendix C

Letter of Introduction to the Participants

Dear Student:

I am a doctoral candidate in the Ed.D. in Executive Leadership Program at St. John Fisher College. The Institutional Review Board at St. John Fisher College has reviewed and approved this study.

I am conducting a study that involves examining the academic improvement of middle school students in an urban public middle school who demonstrated academic improvement after multiple years of being retained in the seventh grade.

A qualitative research design using document analysis and interviews will be used to attain answers to the proposed study’s research questions. All information will remain confidential and individuals will not be identified, but numerically coded and only the researcher will have access.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you were enrolled in James Madison School of Excellence prior to 2005 and were a retained seventh grade student at the time James Madison was changed to Wilson Magnet High School Foundation Academy. For this study, you will be asked a series of questions regarding your perception of the changes that occurred at James Madison and in your academic performance in fall 2005.

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

Thank you very much for considering this request. It is my hope that this information will be useful to those considering the factors that contribute to student achievement. To this end, the major findings of the study and recommendations will be shared with participants, educators and school leaders.

Sincerely,

Deasur A. Matthew, Principal
Wilson Magnet High School Foundation Academy
Rochester City School District, Rochester, NY
Appendix D

Consent Form

St. John Fisher College

Title of study: An examination of the factors contributing to the academic improvement of two-and three-time retained seventh grade students.

Name(s) of researcher(s): Deasure A. Matthew

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Steven K. Million Phone for further information:

Purpose of study: The purpose of this qualitative research study will examine the major factors contributing to the academic improvement of two- and three-time retained seventh grade students in a low-performing middle school after installing new school leadership and instructional teams and modifying the school’s academic program.

Approval of study: This study has not been reviewed and approved by the St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Place of study: Wilson Magnet High School Foundation and Commencement Academies, Rochester, NY

Length of participation: one semester

Risks and benefits: The expected risks and benefits of participation in this study are explained below:

There are no expected risks to participating in this study other than personal identification of the participants by the researcher only. All identifiable information related to the study will be kept in a secure location.

The benefits to participating in this study include receiving the results and recommendations from the study. The results of the study may be used contribute to the existing knowledge and studies on factors contributing to improvement and overall academic success of retained students.

Method for protecting confidentiality privacy: Participants' names will be concealed and changed to protect privacy and confidentiality.

Your rights: As a research participant, you have the right to:

1. Have the purpose of the study, and the expected risks and benefits fully explained to you before you choose to participate.
2. Withdraw from participation at any time without penalty
3. Refuse to answer a particular question without penalty.
4. Be informed of appropriate alternative procedures or courses of treatment, if any, that might be advantageous to you.
5. Be informed of the results of the study.
I have read the above, received a copy of this form, and I agree to participate in the above-named study.

Print name (Participant) ____________________________ Signature ____________________________
Date ____________________________

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 received a copy of this form.

Print name (Parent Guardian) ____________________________ Signature ____________________________
Date ____________________________

Print name (Investigator) ____________________________ Signature ____________________________
Date ____________________________

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please contact the researcher listed above. If you experience emotional or physical discomfort due to participation in this study, please contact the Office of Academic Affairs at 385-8034 or the Wellness Center at 385-8280 for appropriate referrals.
Appendix E

Interview Questions

Directions: Please answer the following questions completely and honestly:

A. Demographic Information:
1) What is your current age?
2) Are you currently in school?
3) If so, what school do you attend?
4) If not, did you complete a General Equivalency Diploma (GED)?
5) Where do you live (street and or zip code)?
6) Who do you live with?
7) Who did you live with in the fall 2005 when James Madison was changed to Wilson Magnet High School Foundation Academy?

B. Experience
1) As you think about fall semester of 2005, when James Madison School of Excellence was changed to Wilson Magnet High School Foundation Academy.
   a. What were some things that seemed different about the school after the change from earlier years?
   b. What things about the school seemed the same to you after the change?
   c. What were your feelings about the changes in the school environment?
      i. Teachers:
      ii. Principal:
      iii. Other Administrators:
      iv. Uniforms:

2) Do you think your feelings about the new school had an impact on your success as a student? What impact did it have?
   a. Did anything else change for you as a result of the change in the school?
   b. What other effects did the changes in the school environment have on you both in and out of school?

3) As you remember, you made improvement in your course work during the first semester that was recognized by a mid-year promotion to the next grade.
   a. What do you believe caused the noted improvement?
   b. How many things can you name that contributed to your success?
4) How do you feel about the way you performed in school academically following the changes at the school?

5) What, if anything, changed for you as a result of your improved academic performance?
   a. How did friends act in response to your improvement?
   b. How did family act in response to your improvement?

6) Do you believe changes in your behavior contributed to your improved performance in school following the change?
   a. Do you believe improved performance in school led to changes in your behavior in school?
   b. At home?

7) Do you believe there were changes in your attitude that contributed to your improved performance in school following the change?

8) Can you think of anything else that contributed to your improved performance following the changes at school?

9) Are you in school now?
   a. How are you doing compared to fall semester 2005?
      i. If (better, same or worse), why do you think this is?

10) How do you feel about your current school situation?
    a. What causes you to feel that way?
Appendix F

Assent Statement

This study will be conducted by Mrs. Matthew as part of my Doctorate in Education (Ed.D.) from St. John Fisher College. The purpose of this research is to explore the major factors that may have contributed to the academic improvement of retained seventh grade students. You are being asked to participate in this study because you were enrolled in James Madison School of Excellence prior to 2005 and were being retained in the 7th grade at the time James Madison was changed to Wilson Magnet High School Foundation Academy and you improved your grades during the first semester. For this study, I have interview questions about your views and feelings about the changes that occurred at James Madison and your academic performance in fall 2005.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You do not have to be interviewed. Your participation in this study will not impact your academic or behavioral record in school. There will not be any reference to your participation placed in your school records. You do not have to participate because of my role and position as principal. You are free not to participate or to withdraw at any time, for whatever reason, without risking any current role or level of academic performance in school.

This interview will be audio taped. The tape is used so that your ideas and thoughts are exactly what you said. No one else will hear the tape and it will be kept in a secure place. In the event that you do withdraw from this study, the information you have already provided will be kept confidential. If you choose to participate, all information will be kept in a secure locked location and will be destroyed after three years. If you are uncertain about continuing in this study, you will be given time to consider whether you would like to participate. Would you like time to think about continuing? Are you prepared to continue at this time with the interview? If you choose to continue with the research, do you agree to answer the questions honestly even if our answer may not be
what you think I would want to hear? Do you have any questions about this study? If there are no questions regarding this study, then we will begin the tape recorded interview at this time.