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The **Alabama Association of Professors of Educational Leadership (AAPEL)** is a non-profit professional society organized for the purpose of establishing and maintaining a collegial and collaborative organization in the State of Alabama. In addition, this organization exists for the purpose of:

1. Promoting continuous dialog among Educational Leadership Professors;

2. Exploring and promoting research, thus making distinctive contributions to the field;

3. Recognizing and examining strengths and weaknesses in Educational Leadership Programs,

4. Establishing informational and professional linkages with the State Department of Education and the Alabama Commission on Higher Education; and

5. Perpetuating a positive vision for Alabama Schools and other educational institutions.

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AAPEL Call for Papers and Publication Information

2017-2018

Theme: Leadership Matters: Developing a Professional Community of Leaders

Full research papers with results are preferred, but theoretical contributions, action research, position papers, and literature reviews are considered on a limited basis per volume. Submission must include a one hundred word (100) abstract and five (5) key words. Send one electronic copy of the manuscript, using Word or a Word-compatible word-processing program. A letter signed by the author(s) authorizing permission to publish must accompany the manuscript. In addition, a separate cover page must be included containing the article title, each author's name, professional title, highest degree obtained, institutional affiliation, email address, telephone and FAX numbers. Only the article title should appear on the subsequent pages to facilitate a triple-blind reviewing of the manuscript.

Submissions should be 2,000 to 3,000 words in length (approximately 15-20 pages including references). Submissions must adhere to the criteria and standards of the *APA Manual* (6th Edition) (http:///www.apastyle.org). Submissions must be double-spaced, upper and lower case, 12 point Times New Roman font with one inch margins on all sides, each page numbered. Submissions in different formats will be automatically rejected.

Deadline for submissions is April 1, 2018, in anticipation for a September 2018 publication date of the AAPEL Journal (AJEL) Volume 5, 2018. To submit materials for consideration, send one electronic copy of the manuscript and requested information, using Word or Word compatible word processing program to:

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Note from the Editor

Tonya Conner, Ed. D.
Troy University, Dothan

Welcome to Volume IV of the *Alabama Journal of Educational Leadership* (AJEL). AJEL uses a peer reviewed, triple-blind process upheld by the Alabama Association of Professors of Educational Leadership (AAPEL). AAPEL is celebrating the continued growth of AJEL with enthusiasm and is indexed with Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) at https://eric.ed.gov/ and has acquired the ISSN 2473-8115. Volume IV includes a variation of manuscripts stemming from a broad theme: Leadership Matters: Leading Schools to Success.

The first article of AJEL begins with Dooley, Vivanco, Connell, and Hannah regarding the effect of the differentiated state support on sustained school improvement among priority schools in Alabama. As you continue to read, you will learn how Ford and Grace share ideas on how the evolution of educational policies in the United States of America are designed to address poverty through education. Finally, I will provide my position on the significance of relationships within our school environment.

As we move forward, the continuation of various manuscripts for publication consideration is requested. We encourage submissions from novice and experienced faculty as well as students. The Alabama Journal of Educational Leadership is a refereed journal using a triple-blind review process.

I would like to acknowledge the many people supporting the continuation of AJEL. First, thank you to all of the authors for submitting manuscripts. I encourage you to continue presenting your work for consideration. In addition, an enormous thanks to the manuscript reviewers. Many reviewers took on the task to evaluate several manuscripts and provide insightful feedback to the authors. Furthermore, thank you to the AAPEL Editorial Board and AAPEL Advisory Board. I look forward to gaining momentum as AJEL and AAPEL provide continued opportunity for researchers to share their work and provide another avenue to bridge theory to practice.

Finally, to Jim Berry, Ted Creighton, and Brad Bizzell with ICPEL Publications, AJEL would literally not be possible without your direction, support, and publication platform. To the readers, I hope the content will provide you with a deeper awareness of the many features of Instructional Leadership, Teacher Leadership, and best practices within the field of education through AAPEL's continuous dedication to offer insightful and reflective research. Enjoy!

The Alabama Journal of Educational Leadership

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A Study of Differentiated State Support to Priority Schools in Alabama

Natalia A. Dooley, Kim H. Vivanco, Peggy H. Connell, and Julie P. Hannah

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the effect of the differentiated state support on sustained school improvement among priority schools in Alabama. This study was a mixed methods approach. The researchers randomly selected participants from 11 improved and 19 not improved priority schools for the survey. The quantitative findings showed no significant difference in improved and not improved schools' perceptions of the state support practices. The qualitative findings revealed six emerging themes for state support: relationships; instruction, curriculum, assessment, and intervention; use of data; school leadership; community partnerships and external resources; and staffing.

   Keywords: school improvement, differentiated state support, priority schools, school leadership, effectiveness of state support

Over 80% of the states reported prioritizing their efforts to turn around low-performing schools, but more than 50% considered it extremely challenging to turn around struggling schools (National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2015). Seemingly, a growing epidemic in America, an alarming statistic revealed that 7,988 American schools were in need of improvement in 2015 (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Regardless of billions of federal dollars pumped into school improvement efforts, these districts rarely created a comprehensive strategy or the capacity to implement massive reform. The location of these low-performing school districts varied, ranging from urban to rural. Common characteristics of these districts included ineffective leadership, unskilled teachers, and subpar curricula. In addition, the schools lacked the ability to analyze student data to drive instruction (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2011).

The National Center for Education Statistics (2013) reported that only 35% of fourth-grade students and 36% of eighth-grade students attending public schools in the United States met the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading proficiency standard for their grade level. Only 44% of fourth-grade students and 36% of eighth-grade students met the NAEP's mathematics proficiency standard for their grade level. According to Knight (2011), such data cause professional and social criticism and initiate feelings of frustration and defeat among public school educators. The feelings of frustration and defeat translate into the lack of desire among educators to continue learning and improving, which in return affects student learning in a negative way. To avoid the negative effect, Knight (2011) proposed a partnership approach to promote meaningful professional learning to build capacity and impact school improvement on a large scale.

Fullan (2010) agreed that sustainable whole-system school improvement is possible only by building collective capacity through two-way partnerships. He insisted that two-way partnerships relying on interactions across and within communities, districts, and states provide pressure and support necessary for success. Partnerships among schools support truly effective school improvement efforts beyond the individual schools, if they occur simultaneously at the school, district, and state levels (Fullan, 2010; Knight, 2011; Schmoker, 2006). Schmoker (2006) supported state partnerships with districts to mimic a new set of results-oriented practices, policies, and job descriptions established by districts with successful school improvement records. The partnerships among states and districts promote sustainable school improvement on a larger scale.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 required that states create and utilize state support teams to improve achievement in low-performing schools (Davis, Krasnoff, Ishimaru, & Sage, 2010). However, the law provided states flexibility in determining the delivery model for state teams to support underperforming districts. The states designed their support based on the number of low-performing districts, amount of federal and state funding, state priorities, and capacity to deploy teams (Davis et al., 2010). Schmoker (2006) offered that state planning ensured the simplicity of the requirements for schools and based support efforts on the fundamental priorities. Significant school improvement has occurred when districts provide engaging professional learning and invest in improving instruction instead of satisfying complex state compliance requirements.

Literature Review

National Perspective

According to DuFour and Fullan (2013), the United States has continually scored low on areas of education performance. The performance gap has steadily increased between high and low-performing students. According to National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (2011), no school improvement efforts proved a panacea to address issues faced by low-performing schools, but states continued rigorous evaluations of best practices and conditions that they deemed necessary to impact and sustain school improvement.

The reviewed research (e.g., Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, & Lash, 2007; Gross & Jochim, 2013a; Gross & Jochim, 2013b; Le Floch, Boyle, & Therriault, 2008; Minnici, Hill, & Kober, 2007) pointed to evidence that most State Education Agencies (SEA) shifted their focus from compliance to performance management. States reorganized their support efforts to differentiate assistance to districts and schools based on student data. They focused on building local capacity in the areas of leadership, curriculum, and instruction.

To maximize the use of resources in meeting individual states' needs in the area of school improvement, 42 states along with the District of Columbia received waivers from certain provisions of the ESEA by the end of 2013 (Perlman, 2013). To receive a waiver from ESEA, states developed rigorous and comprehensive state plans committing to improve student performance, close achievement gaps, increase equity, and improve the quality of instruction. The reviewed literature pointed to capacity building as the focal point of current school improvement efforts for many states, including Alabama (Perlman, 2013).

State Perspective

The review of current research revealed that while many states experimented with implementing various research-based strategies to build capacity for improvement, no state successfully implemented changes that yielded a whole-system sustained improvement. A large body of research (e.g. Calkins et al., 2007; Heffernan, Norton, & Reville, 2007; Le Floch et al., 2008; Minnici et al., 2007; National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2015) found that limited capacity was a factor in providing quality state support for sustainable improvement.

A number of researchers (e.g. Archer, 2006; Calkins et al., 2007; Gross, Jochim, & Nafziger, 2013; Hanna, 2013; Redding & Walberg, 2007) suggested that states used effective support practices such as assistance with improvement plans, leadership training, data analysis, tiered intervention, direct support of teaching and learning, incentives and opportunities, innovation to utilize more effective practices, and collaboration between districts. These studies indicated that no one effective strategy, but a combination of best practices, yielded sustained school improvement. However, several trends became evident in the analysis of the existing literature on effective state support. These trends included professional development and coaching, external partnerships, collective capacity building, use of data, and incentives. Limited research examining specific actions of the state teams for the whole-system improvement pointed to a need for further research of this issue. Further research could provide a basis for future use of the best practices on a large scale.

Alabama, among many other states, recognized the challenges faced by the SEAs and modified its school improvement support model to provide differentiated assistance to districts and schools (ALSDE, 2015). Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) requested the federal government waive certain NCLB requirements to maximize the impact of the state differentiated support (ALSDE, 2015). The new model employed differentiated practices aimed at building capacity among schools and districts to continue and sustain improvement after state teams discontinued their support. In August 2012, ALSDE developed the School Turnaround Program to coordinate differentiated support and monitor progress of priority schools as identified through instructional audit, data analysis, and review of the feeder schools' data (ALSDE, 2015).

Local Perspective

Several studies (e.g. Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Fullan, 2010; Le Floch, 2015; Scott, 2010) reported their findings on strategies used by effective school districts to promote and sustain improvement. These strategies included: supporting leadership; hiring high quality staff; providing various professional development opportunities; using data to drive decisions; harvesting a collaborative culture; fostering program coherence through focus on central strategy; aligning curriculum to content standards; promoting parent-community ties; creating a student-centered learning climate; focusing on improving instruction; and promoting a sense of community among teachers, principals, and schools. The effective strategies centered on a holistic approach to district support for local schools. After reviewing dozens of case studies across a wide volume of organizations, Hassel and Hassel (2009) reported that successful districts invested in developing school leaders capable of leading and sustaining improvement. Additionally, states realized the valuable resource of local school boards when launching sustained school improvement (Rhim & Redding, 2014).

Recognizing the need to address the needs of low-performing schools, Alabama utilized the research on best improvement strategies implementing the continuous improvement planning process. Schools and districts familiarized themselves with this process utilizing state modules to support their efforts. The ALSDE (2015) noted that when developing Continuous Improvement Plans (CIPs), schools and districts compiled, evaluated, and prioritized school improvement data and needs. All underperforming schools assembled continuous improvement leadership teams. These teams used state support tools and processes to develop long-term actions and strategies to measure their impact on student achievement. School 30-60-90 day plans served as an addition to the CIP that addressed the urgent and immediate school needs. Regional planning teams worked with districts and schools to design state approved interventions. State teams collaborated with districts and schools to support and guide improvement (ALSDE, 2015).

Summary

According to Baroody (2011), chronically underperforming schools have experienced uneven improvement results because of the lack of differentiated support that recognizes the unique circumstances of the schools. Long-term school improvement success relies on district transformation. Collaboration among schools, districts, states, and communities sustains large-scale school improvement. The Center on Education Policy (2007) reported that to sustain

school improvement, states focus on comprehensive state support frameworks for capacity building rather than compliance with federal regulations.

In recent years, several studies researched state support systems and their influence on school improvement (e.g. Boyle, Le Floch, Therriault, & Holzman, 2009; Hanna, 2013; Heffernan et al., 2007; Hergert, Gleason, Urbano, & North, 2009; Jochim & Murphy, 2013; National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2015; Rhim, 2013). Davis et al. (2010) reported that few studies examined the activities of state support teams working with low-performing schools and districts. Therefore, the knowledge related to support team characteristics, roles, and how they function on school and district levels is scarce.

Research related to differentiated state support and its impact on priority schools in Alabama is limited. A study of the effectiveness of differentiated state support to low-performing priority schools in Alabama may identify practices that prove effective in building partnerships and capacity for school improvement. The ALSDE support teams, schools, and districts may find the results of this study beneficial because of their statewide emphasis on building capacity and improving student achievement. Additionally, support teams from other states may consider the findings of this study valuable to guide their school improvement process. The results may enable state education agencies to develop and implement state support team programs that could address the unique needs of each low performing school district while utilizing proven practices to build capacity at the district level. This study could benefit the school districts as well as priority schools by identifying state support practices that were effective in improving schools in Alabama. Moreover, the results of this study could provide state support teams, district leaders, and school administrators a better understanding of the state support practices necessary to create effective partnerships for school improvement.

The purpose of this study was to determine the effect of the differentiated state support team practices on school improvement among priority schools in Alabama. Therefore, the null hypothesis for the study was: There is no statistically significant difference between the level of school improvement (improved and not improved) and participant-perceived effectiveness of the state differentiated support for priority schools in Alabama. This study investigated the differentiated support practices employed by the state support teams working with priority schools in Alabama. The research intended to identify participant-perceived effective state support team practices for improving schools in Alabama and practices generating the least significant school improvement. Additionally, the researchers identified external factors and partnerships affecting school improvement in Alabama.

Method

Research Design

This study was a mixed methods approach that used survey design with descriptive statistical analysis for quantitative research and interviews for qualitative research. According to Creswell (2012), a mixed method design is a type of research that uses a combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods linking data for advanced research. Using survey responses, the researchers identified trends in behaviors, opinions, characteristics, or attitudes of the population. The researchers employed a grounded theory design to analyze the qualitative findings and develop a theory to explain the phenomenon of the differentiated state support to priority schools in Alabama. Creswell (2012) stated that researchers use grounded theory design

when they need to generate a broad theory grounded in data. The researchers chose the mixed method approach to gather data to gain a deeper understanding of the differentiated state support phenomenon.

In this research, the independent variable was the type of schools, improved or not improved priority schools, and the independent variable was nominal level data. The dependent variable was the perceptions of differentiated state support effectiveness, and the dependent variable was interval level data. Threats to internal validity were minimal in a quantitative survey design. However, limited survey items could result in deflated or inflated responses due to self-reporting. The research study included qualitative interviews to counterbalance the potential threats to internal validity.

Sampling Procedures

The researchers used stratified cluster sampling and according to Creswell (2012), stratification is appropriate if the population is imbalanced based on a characteristic of a sample. The researchers identified improved priority schools as (1) high schools that demonstrated improvement in student achievement as measured by ACT Plan combined Mathematics and English subtests for 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 school years; and (2) elementary and middle schools that showed improvement in student achievement as measured by ACT Aspire combined Mathematics and Reading subtests for 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 school years.

The researchers stratified priority schools by improvement status and grade span. Therefore, researchers selected 30 schools with approximately 330 participants to include 2 improved and 12 not improved high schools, 7 improved and 6 not improved middle schools, and 2 improved and 1 not improved elementary schools. The randomly selected sample of 11 improved priority schools in Alabama included 5 rural schools, 5 urban schools, and 1 suburban school. The randomly selected sample of 19 not improved priority schools in Alabama included 6 rural schools, 10 urban schools, and 3 suburban schools.

For the qualitative phase of the study, the researchers used purposeful sampling for identification of the participants. According to Creswell (2012), purposeful sampling is when "researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon" (p. 206). The researchers selected four most improved priority schools for the interview based on the improved student achievement measured by ACT Aspire state assessment for elementary and middle schools and ACT Plan state assessment for high schools. The researchers interviewed a principal, a member of the school leadership team, a district school improvement team leader, and a regional support coordinator from four of the most improved priority schools.

Participants

For the quantitative phase of the study, the researchers distributed the survey to 30 priority schools and 209 participants in Alabama. The participants included superintendents, central office leaders, principals, and school leadership team members from a stratified random sample of 11 improved and 19 not improved schools. The participants from three improved (one middle and two high schools) and two not improved schools (one middle and one high school) included in the initial sample declined to participate in the survey. The researchers randomly

selected new participants from the list of remaining priority middle and high schools to replace these participants. For the quantitative phase of the study, 48% of the respondents were from 11 not improved schools, and 52% of the respondents were from 9 improved schools with the total of 20 schools responding to the survey. The population of the participating schools ranged from 191 to 996 students with average student population being 527 (see Table 1). Poverty rate among participating schools ranged from 63% to 99%. Minority student population ranged from 31% to 100%. Six of the participating schools were rural, three were suburban, and 11 were urban.

The researchers interviewed participants from one most improved elementary, one middle, and two high schools. The interviewees were a regional support coordinator, a district school improvement team leader, a principal, and a member of the school leadership team from each of the four most improved priority schools that agreed to participate in the qualitative interviews. Three of the most improved participating schools were urban and one school was rural. The student enrollment of the most improved schools participating in the interview ranged from 469 to 782 with average being 575 students (see Table 2). Poverty rate ranged from 68% to 100%, and minority student population in these schools ranged from 31% to 100%.

Table 1
Survey Participants

Smallest School Population (Students)	Largest School Population (Students)	Lowest Poverty Rate (%)	Highest Poverty Rate (%)	Lowest Minority Rate (%)	Highest Minority Rate (%)
191	996	63	99	31	100

Table 2
Interview Participants

Smallest School Population (Students)	Largest School Population (Students)	Lowest Poverty Rate (%)	Highest Poverty Rate (%)	Lowest Minority Rate (%)	Highest Minority Rate (%)
469	782	68	100	31	100

Results

The researchers analyzed the quantitative findings for each construct of the survey distributed to improved and not improved schools. Then, the researchers analyzed the results of

the qualitative interviews from the four most improved priority schools. Qualitative analysis provided findings for themes developed in the process of analyzing the interview data.

The researchers utilized an independent *t*-test to analyze the quantitative survey data. Based on Levene's Test for Equality of Variances, the assumption of homogeneity of variances was not violated, $F(62) = .07$, $p = .79$ (see Table 10). An independent groups *t*-test revealed participants' perceptions of effectiveness of state differentiated support were not significantly different between improved (M = 2.89, SD = .57) and not improved (M = 2.89, SD = .48) schools, $t(62) = .01$, $p = .99$. Therefore, the results from the quantitative research found no statistical difference in perceptions of the effectiveness of the state support practices among improved and not improved priority schools in the state of Alabama.

The researchers analyzed and reported quantitative survey data by the following constructs: school leadership; school climate and culture; instruction, curriculum, assessment, and intervention; staffing; use of data; use of time; and family and community engagement. The construct means for improved and not improved schools were similar and only varied from 0.02 to 0.13 points. The results of the survey indicated participants' agreement that state practices provided by regional teams supported schools in their improvement efforts. Additional comments and ratings supported these findings.

Qualitative findings from the interviews with four most improved schools identified the following themes: (1) relationships; (2) instruction, curriculum, assessment, and intervention; (3) use of data; (4) school leadership; (5) community partnerships and external resources; and (6) staffing. The theme of relationships was one of the most frequently discussed themes in the interviews. Participants stated that building relationships of trust and collaboration was critical for the effectiveness of the partnership between the state support teams and local schools. Interview data analysis found that 14 out of 14 participants spoke about the importance of building relationships as the glue that holds all support and interactions together. Participant F: "They're not just going to be critiquing you. They are your partners, and then they start coming in with smiles." The participants described the changed relationship between the ALSDE and schools and districts. Participant N: "There have been many years prior to maybe Dr. Bice coming on board. . . . There is a serious mistrust of schools and school districts of the State Department. People came in, and the schools viewed them as compliance minded. . . . So, that was a problem . . . in making sure that folks from Montgomery . . . are actually people that live in the areas they serve." Participant F: "The professionalism that they conveyed, that message 'we are going to support you' . . . . When I look at my cell phone, you ask me three or four years ago if I had a number to call anybody in the State Department, I would have told you no. Now . . . . I got four or five numbers of contacts and resources."

The themes of state support in the areas of instruction, curriculum, assessment, and intervention; use of data; school leadership; and community partnerships and external resources provided participants' perceptions of these practices as beneficial for school improvement. For the theme of instruction, 14 of the 14 interview participants shared their perceptions of the effectiveness of the practice of supporting instruction. Participant G: "When they [Alabama Reading Initiative coaches] come and do an in-service . . . sit in and explain to teachers . . . through different workshops . . . it helps us understand what we are doing." Participants noted that state support staff built local capacity to continue instructional collaboration even when the state support was no longer available. Participant M: "Our teachers meet vertically and horizontally. They meet by grade level and by content area . . . depending on our needs. . . . Our school is truly becoming a professional learning community." The theme of instruction was

evident when four of 14 interviewees shared that state support practices allowed for effective interventions to address the needs of struggling students. Participant I: "I was allowed to . . . use the funds to do intervention enrichment that directly impacts the children every day." In the theme of instruction, four of the 14 interviewees spoke about using state support to guide instruction to include new standards for higher student achievement. Participant J: "The teachers unwrapped all of the standards. . . . Then moving from that to the student trackers, so the students were becoming accountable for their learning." Cross planning was another effective practice that supported the theme of instruction and was evident during 5 of 14 interviews. Participant M: "We pair them [teachers] up by grade level, and they are sharing best practices. . . . They are coming up with common lessons, with common strategies that they are going to use in English and social studies. . . . This has been the most effective . . . practice that we have implemented."

For the theme of data, the researchers analyzed the interview data and found that 13 out of 14 participants included state support in the use of data as an effective practice for school improvement. When participants discussed data in terms of effective practices, they mentioned needs assessment, formative and summative data, data analysis meetings, and streamlining reporting requirements. Participant A stated, "When we started digging into the data and seeing where we needed to go . . . our administration got a grasp on it. . . . Faculty started getting their feet wet."

For the theme of school leadership, nine out of 14 participants (1) shared their perceptions related to the effectiveness of the state support for leadership and (2) commented on sustaining improvement efforts after support was removed. Out of 14 interviewees, 9 considered leadership support an effective state support practice. Participant L: "We do have representatives from the state that frequent our leadership meetings . . . and provide guidance. . . . They have experience in turning around schools, so it's nice when they come and just offer support, advice." Six participants spoke about the shift in the state practices from compliance to meaningful and differentiated support. Participant N commented that the state team had moved away from reporting and compliance to providing individualized local teacher and leader coaching, support, and professional development. Participant L: "In the past, the turnaround specialist was documentation liaison . . . between the district, the school, and the state, and now I definitely . . . partner to assist in the classrooms. . . . I have more instructional time for teachers and for the students."

The researchers noted that 12 out of 14 participants' shared effective ways they used external resources and community partnerships to support and sustain improvement. Business organizations, local churches, and community resources were among the most frequently mentioned community partnerships supporting school improvement. Participant H named a number of partnerships with local businesses and volunteer organizations supporting schools through mentoring; Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) resources; field trips; summer programs; and interventions. Participant E: "Our relationship and our partnership with hotels . . . restaurants . . . have been very beneficial to our kids."

The theme of staffing conveyed participants' perceptions regarding state and school staffing practices affecting improvement. The theme of staffing emerged with the subthemes of state staffing and school staffing. For the subtheme of state staffing, participants stated their perceptions regarding effectiveness of ARI and AMSTI staff, differences in state support team strengths, and knowledge gaps of the state support team members. Participant N: "[There are] 11 regional teams, and each team is very different. . . . So, there are times when what [one state

team] is doing . . . is not necessarily, what another [state team] is doing. . . . Perhaps, there could be a little more standardization in [state support] approach, but I hesitate to say that because [state teams] have flexibility as different regions are very different." Four participants discussed the knowledge gaps of the state support members who were supporting school leadership. Participant H: "One problem . . . that I noticed . . . in the very first year, there wasn't a lot of knowledge. . . . It wasn't probably until the second or third year when they started giving information." Subtheme of school staffing evolved as the participants provided their perceptions regarding state support for school staffing decisions for improvement. Four participants noted that they would like to see more state support and involvement in guiding district staffing decisions aimed at sustaining school improvement. Participants J and L reflected that the school's high turnover rate was challenging in sustaining the improvement efforts. Participant J: "At the end of the year [the school] lost . . . 60 to 70% of the faculty, and they had been trained with all of those things." Participant L: "We had high turnover. . . . It's a little more difficult with high turnover to redo the same training every year."

Discussion

This study was a mixed methods research that combined survey design and descriptive statistical analysis for quantitative research and interviews for qualitative research. After receiving differentiated state support, 37% of Alabama's priority schools demonstrated improvement. Participants from the improved and not improved schools perceived that Alabama state support teams were consistent in their effectiveness. While quantitative surveys found no significant difference between improved and not improved schools' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the state support, qualitative interviews with the most improved schools revealed important information essential for supporting priority schools. As key themes emerged from qualitative interviews, four most improved schools stressed strong relationships as a critical factor that promoted the effectiveness of the state support and school improvement partnership between the state teams and local schools. These findings support the use of a mixed methods approach to study the effectiveness of differentiated state support to priority schools in Alabama.

For the quantitative phase of the study, the participants agreed that state support was equally effective as perceived by improved and not improved schools. Additional comments and ratings supported these findings. The combined findings from the quantitative and qualitative data indicated that participants perceived a combination of support strategies for school leadership; instruction, curriculum, assessment, and intervention; use of data; school climate and culture; and use of time as effective in supporting improvement. Support in the areas of staffing and family and community engagement was slightly effective.

This study was limited to a random stratified sample of priority schools in Alabama. The focus on state support practices used with priority schools only in Alabama limited the generalizability of the findings to other states, in that some conditions support, and factors vary by state influencing the outcomes. Additionally, this study examined state support practices without considering additional factors contributing to school improvement. Such factors could include unique characteristics of individual state teams, school culture, socio-economic status, leader competence, local policy, and teaching practices.

The research on the effectiveness of the differentiated state support for low-performing schools is scarce. Boyle et al. (2009) pointed out the need for more research in the area of effective approaches to state support for school improvement to provide states with strategies to

enhance their support to underperforming schools. This study contributes to the limited knowledge and practices employed by the state teams to support underperforming schools. This study adds new findings to current research on the effectiveness of differentiated state support teams and their most powerful support practices. The results may enable state education agencies to develop and implement state support team programs that could address the unique needs of each low performing school district while utilizing proven practices to build capacity at the district level. Moreover, the results of this study could provide state support teams, district leaders, and school administrators a better understanding of the state support practices necessary to create effective partnerships for school improvement.

The most obvious finding from this study, that is also consistent with prior research by Corbett and Redding (2015), Gross and Jochim (2014), and Scott (2010), supports utilizing a combination of effective state support practices targeted at individual school needs as the most effective model for improving low-performing schools. The implications for practice and theory would involve employing and examining the use of the combination approach in unique school settings. This could help determine the effect of the combination approach on improvement and identify factors influencing success. Understanding the complexity of the combination approach to state support for school improvement would provide SEAs and underperforming schools with the knowledge to make effective decisions that positively affect low-performing schools. Effectively implemented combination of practices in Alabama included support for school leadership; support for instruction, curriculum, assessment, and intervention, use of data; support for school culture and climate; and use of time. Staffing support and support for family and community engagement were slightly effective practices.

The recommendations for further studies include: (1) larger sample size across multiple states, (2) longitudinal study examining state support practices for low-performing schools to observe sustainability of improvement over a long period of time could provide additional insight into long-term sustained improvement, (3) additional research to examine various factors affecting school improvement, (4) study of differences in support team structures and interactions may help identify a correlation between support practices, effective state team structure, and improvement, (5) research to examine effective strategies to build trusting relationships, (6) study researching the effect of aligning community engagement and partnerships focused on instruction for school improvement may help identify community engagement practices beneficial for low-performing schools, (7) research examining a correlation between state teams' caseloads, expertise, and school improvement, and (8) additional research to study combinations of best state support practices and how they relate to unique school settings would provide new knowledge for school improvement leaders.

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The Impact of Poverty on Student Outcomes

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Abstract

Education is a standards-driven business where accountability is at the forefront of its practices and endeavors. This research represents the evolution of educational policies in the United States of America designed to address poverty through education. The current federal policy governing K-12 education is the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The legislation was signed into law in December 2015 and because ESSA does not take effect until the 2017 – 2018 school year, there is no data available on its effectiveness. Prior to ESSA, the federal government legislated a prime policy initiative titled, Race to the Top (RTT). The purpose of the initiative was to aid the improvement of learning outcomes for high-needs students and English Language Learners through increased efforts in evaluating the performance of educators while sustaining states with grant funding for school improvement (Dragoset, L., Thomas, J., Herrmann, M., Deke, J., James-Burdumy, S., Graczewski, C., Boyle, A., Tanenbaum, C., Giffin, J., & Upton, R., 2016). In brief, a decisive conclusion on the impact of the initiative has yet to be reached because of the uneven progression of states implementation of the policy (2016). Unlike the above policies, prevalent details are available regarding the impact of the 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act on closing the achievement gap.

According to Anyon and Greene (2007), the premise of NCLB was the assumption that an increase in educational achievement is the path out of poverty for students from low socioeconomics. Because of NCLB, educational efforts were extended to equally spread educational opportunities among all student demographics. Moreover, the famous legislation has been credited with closing the achievement gap between students from diverse backgrounds. It is commonly known among educational researchers, that the United States has a history of enacting educational policies as intervention for closing the gaps in achievement among all student learners.

Keywords: educational policies, student outcomes, poverty, achievement gap, socioeconomic status

Poverty is potentially one of the most ignored factors in education that poses a serious threat to student achievement. The challenges children of poverty face are beyond the issue of not having the essential supplies for school. These students come from homes where purchasing school supplies is a compromise between the supplies and household utilities. It is not difficult to comprehend how learning can be impeded by poverty when a child's basic needs are not constantly met. With that said, the continuous failure of this nation to properly address the impact of poverty on student achievement is a conscious betrayal, annually, to millions of children.

The purpose of this research was to examine the damaging impact of poverty on student achievement based on children from low socioeconomic backgrounds according to normed academic standards. The intent of the study was to investigate poverty through an educational lens in relation to student achievement. The definition coined for poverty by the United States Census Bureau will be the basis for determining children of poverty. For the purpose of this study, the associated characteristics include conditions that are related to poverty such as cognitive difficulties, environmental factors, apathy, social problems, poor nutrition, and stress.

Education legislation is discussed in length to contrast its address of poverty. In particular, the overarching idea of this study was to focus attention on the seriousness of poverty on student achievement. It is vexing that a child's socioeconomic status is even a significant variable in his or her quality of education. Poverty is beyond the control of children, yet it is able to block them from beneficial opportunities. Research by Prince and Howard (2002) supported the notion that in this 21st century, the United States has not made an honest commitment to care for and educate all children, in particular, the poor. The authors vehemently stressed that too many children are being reared at a disadvantage to others based on supporting data (Prince & Howard, 2002). The achievement gap that has existed for decades between the poverty subgroup and its counterparts has become noticeable.

The Realities of Poverty

Poverty does not cause low achievement, but it can be viewed as a contributing factor. Equally important, poverty is not a race issue, but perhaps, a matter of equality for all of humanity. The concentration of poverty in a school is crucially significant to its achievement (Lippman, Burns, & McAuthor, 1996). "The challenge in measuring educational achievement nationally is to measure achievement consistently across diverse populations of students throughout the country, who are exposed to a wide range of teaching quality and practices, school resources, and curricula" (Lippman, et al., 1996).

National assessments have been developed to enable nationwide comparisons of the performance of students who are educated in widely different circumstances; however, these assessments do not account for the varying factors that plague student achievement (Lippman, et al., 1996). Specifically, school's poverty rates are acknowledged on national achievement tests, but largely ignored, when it comes to comparing and recognizing the impact of poverty.

Poverty can and often does affect children's outcomes in various negative ways, such as, poor nutrition, exposure to violence, reduced access to medical care, and adverse parenting patterns, apathy in school, and emotional problems (Currie & Tekin, 2006). Related to schooling, students from low-income environments are far more likely to disengage in school. Some might argue that if students from low social economic status backgrounds are the same cognitively as students from affluent backgrounds and both groups are given the same

instruction, the outcomes should be the same. While this sounds feasible, from a practically perspective it is simply not true. Jensen (2013) pointed to a national study of 81,000 students that concluded more affluent students have far higher levels of engagement than those on free and reduced lunch programs. The report also corroborates the premise that poverty has some very unambiguous negative impacts on students, which ultimately influence engagement. Related literature on the subject explains more specific causes of this phenomenon.

According to Jensen (2013), whose work served as a theoretical framework for this research, the seven major factors associated with poverty that have been found to impact student engagement and outcomes are health and nutrition, vocabulary, effort, hope and growth mindset, cognition, relationships, and distress. All of these factors are noteworthy, but it is quite interesting how health and nutrition are linked to intelligence (Gray & Thompson, 2004). Relative to health and nutrition, poor children experience more ailments such ear infections, hearing loss, and greater exposure to lead than their affluent peers. Trends show that children living under the threshold of poverty are at least nearly one and half times more likely to experience developmental problems and learning disabilities than their more affluent counterparts are.   Furthermore, poor children experience frequent low birth weight rates and elevated lead blood levels; both conditions are associated with lower reading, math, and IQ scores (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997).   Reduced cognitive abilities are also manifested in diminished literacy skills.

Along these lines, Jensen (2013) further corroborated that vocabulary development is greatly reduced among children living in poverty as compared to that of more children that are affluent. For example, poor children hear approximately 3 million words by the age of four, compared to 26 million heard by their more affluent peers (Hart & Risley, 1995) by the same age. Moreover, vocabulary has a direct impact on memory and cognition. When children have difficulty, learning it encourages disengagement.

As it relates to effort, poor children are more likely to disengage, in school because of lack of hope. Buttereworth, Olesen, & Leach (2012) suggested that low social economic status is correlated with financial hardship hopelessness, and depression. Armstrong (2010) suggested biological factors or the manner in which poor children's neural systems develop negatively impacts their language development, memory, ability to plan, executive function, and ability to pay attention in school. It is not difficult to understand how these conditions can have an impact on their effort and positive perceptions of their self-efficacy.

Concerning hope and growth mind-set, poverty is likewise associated with decreased expectations about future outcomes. For instance, if students perceive failure as being a likely outcome, it diminishes their motivation, *self-efficacy* or will to try (Jensen, 2013). This leads to apathy, decreased school engagement, and reasoning difficulties.

Furthermore, children from low social economic status backgrounds demonstrate cognition problems associated with high levels of distractibility, short attention spans, meta-cognitive problems, and difficulty applying logic or engaging in critical thinking. As suggested earlier, Brooks-Duncan (1997) pointing to a study using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth study poor children scored 6 to 13 points lower on IQ tests, which could mean the difference in being place in special education classes or not. This factor along with others mentioned above is further exacerbated by poor home environments and interactions.

Adverse relationships negatively affect poor children's school experiences in some very specific ways. Poor children receive many more reprimands than positive comments; this variable is reversed when it comes to more children that are affluent. Disruptive relationships

create mistrust in students, which results in increased impulsivity, use of inappropriate language and acts of disrespect. Finally, distress or chronic stress causes chronic activation of children's immune systems, affects brain development, reduces academic success, impairs behaviors, decreases memory, and diminishes attentional control. There is little doubt among researchers that each of these factors has negatively influenced student outcomes and have collectively diminished poor children's quality of life and school experiences, but it is simply not enough to proclaim detriment and yet walk away. What can and should educators do to address these problems?

Though there seems to be little effort among policy makers to eradicate the root causes of poverty, there are myriad suggestions, put forth throughout related literature, regarding ways to minimize or alleviate poverty's impact on the outcomes of poor children. A common thread or emerging theme focused on relational and structural behavioral behaviors. Relational behaviors are designed to build trust and show support. Whereas structural behaviors are designed to identify, and, define goals and roles in the organization that will personnel achieve the objectives. There should be a balance between these two orientations, paying too much attention to one at the expense of the other, could be damaging. Likewise, failure to consider environmental factors when formulating strategic counter-measures can be just as damaging.

Environmental Factors: A Major Influence on Educational Failure

In a report published by Lippman, et al. (1996) with the National Center for Educational Statistics Research (NCES), it was suggested that the differences in the composition of neighborhoods weigh significantly in the outcomes of schools and students performance. In general, poor neighborhoods, regardless of location, have been found to negatively affect students' education outcomes (1996). The negligence of ignoring of environmental factors harmfully influences the degree of student learning at a very early age. The adverse effects of environment factors are sometimes so detrimental on children of poverty until it is common practice that some of the students enter school at-risk. The federal government, in its efforts to combat generational poverty, has passed multiple laws targeting at-risk student populations.

As alluded to above, policy makers frequently put forth simple solutions to the multifaceted difficulties related to poverty often ignoring its root causes (Armstrong, 2010). The government is notorious for creating a bandage approach to a crisis. This is a shortcoming of the government in its address of education and poverty. Various legislative bills have been passed addressing the issue of poverty, but only as a lesser truth.

The War on Poverty's Education Agenda: The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965

The first educational bill passed by congress was the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965. The federal bill was extensive in its address of poverty and education. The bill was iconic and has driven the landscape of educational legislation in America for over fifty years. President Lyndon Johnson introduced the bill, shortly after he declared a "War of Poverty." It is believed that the presidency of Johnson was defined largely by its efforts to combat poverty.

Laurent (2015) suggested that Johnson's War on Poverty paralleled the nation's uprising civil rights movement. During this era, the civil rights movement was strengthening across the nation and drew attention to the blatant inequalities that existed among populations of race. The

potential economic influence of the movement would have been detrimental to the nation's economy if it had flourished in the direction it was heading. America's newly found consciousness for the escalating inequalities between the various populations of race and the subgroups that make up the population inspired the passage of immigration, affirmative action, the equal pay act, and, most significantly, the ESEA Act. Fifty years after the passage of the ESEA, the educational struggles for children of poverty are surreal. It was during this time that America witnessed some gains in student performance and significant gap closures.

The Reauthorization of ESEA

Decades of school reform followed the passage of ESEA because it did not deliver the anticipated results in closing the achievement gap (Standerfer, 2006). Between 1965 and 1980, the original legislation had been reauthorized four times by Congress, and each amendment specified more precisely the legislative intent of Title I, which was to assist educationally disadvantaged students from low-income families (Peterson, Rabe, & Wong, 1991). The Title I program was an important entity of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. It was designed, specifically, to improve the academic achievement of children of poverty.

Following its predecessors, Congress passed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 as the "education" bill of the George W. Bush presidency. Keeping the focus of ESEA, No Child Left Behind was adopted with an anti-poverty agenda, to close the achievement gap between subgroups of the population (Anyon & Greene, 2007). In particular, this law's goal was to strengthen the existing achievement requirements, establish measurable proficiency and performance checkpoints, and outline the actions when states, districts, and schools did not meet the standards for improvements based on the requirements (Shaul & Ganson, 2005).

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001

The No Child Left behind Act (NCLB) increased the accountability of schools to ensure that all students met rigorous achievement standards (US Department of Education, 2009). As stated by Anyon and Greene (2007), the premise of NCLB was the assumption that an increase in educational achievement is the route out of poverty for low-income families and individuals. Because of NCLB, efforts have been taken to disperse educational opportunities significantly among all subgroups of students. NCLB is credited for closing the achievement gap for students with low-poverty and high-poverty backgrounds.

Overall, one of the most effective aspects of NCLB was its responsiveness to closing the achievement gap. The federal government was a key player in monitoring NCLB for the assurance that all students, particularly children of poverty, were indeed benefitting from the educational services that promoted sustainable and enhanced learning, produced higher graduation rates, and fostered matriculation into higher education or employment opportunities.

Most educators believe equitable public schooling begins with teaching poor children what their parents want them to know and proceeds to providing an education commensurate with that of their middle class peers (Edmonds, 1979). The NCLB Act enabled a responsiveness by principals to student learning that exceeded the previous hallmarks. Students in both rural and urban schools, because of NCLB, did receive "attempted" equitable education. In the NCES report, published by Lippman, Burns, and McAuthor (1996), students in schools with high poverty concentrations also achieved at lower levels than those in most other schools. However,

unfortunately not enough Blacks at any socioeconomic level fared as well in the wake of the NCLB era as expected (Swain, 2006).

Children living in poverty frequently attend the lowest performing schools (Center for Public Education, 2005). Furthermore, many of today's economic realities and continuous wage inequities suggested that the promise of good jobs and better pay by NCLB was false for many people, especially low-income minority students (Anyon & Greene, 2007). In terms of NCLB, the promise of economic success because of enhanced educational achievement was not delivered (Anyon & Greene, 2007). The result of this mandate, ironically, left the poorest children, whose parents could not afford to send them to another school remaining at a failing school.

Period of Legislative Transition

The nation's education system went into a tailspin of reforms at the end of the No Child Left Behind (NLCB) era. The current administration of the federal government proposed several reforms to follow-up NCLB with the aims of improving education on a state-by-state basis. In the interim, states begin a revolt against the federal government for what many believed to be was governmental overreach. For the last decade, governments have fought for charge of their state's education systems. This initiative led to the acceptance of the Common Core initiative.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) reform effort was a nationwide initiative for school reform, prescriptively designed to replace and/or balance states previous courses of study standards. The foundation of the CCSS was derived based on international, high school graduation, and college or career preparation benchmarked standards (Kornhaber, Griffith, & Tyler, 2014). In short, it was stated that the Common Core was designed to close the gap between zip codes.

The Common Core State Standards reform agenda, like that of NCLB, promised a new era of accountability in which no child would be left behind. However, the reform effort further marginalized and worsened the inequities for children of poverty and those with disabilities (Wexler, 2014). Today, the focus of education has drastically shifted from providing an education inclusive of the poor to testing. The extent to which education is currently meeting the needs of all children is highly questionable. Today, educational policy initiatives either deny or set aside the basic body of evidence documenting that students from disadvantaged households, on average, are performing worse in schools compared to their counterparts" (Ladd, 2012). In particular, the Common Core has resulted in more privatizing, restructuring, and ironically, leaving behind the poorest children whose parents cannot afford to transfer their children out of failing schools (Kornhaber, et al., 2014).

The Next Steps: An Equal Society

As reported by Child Trends Data Bank (2015), children of poverty are at higher risk of lower cognitive ability, lower academic performance, poor school attendance, lower academic achievement in reading and math, shorter attention spans, becoming an early dropout, and higher rates of grade failure. These risk factors are common among children of poverty from all geographical locations and must be addressed if these students are to succeed academically. Above all, it is crucial that this nation begins providing all students with an equal opportunity for success in schools that are equally excellent. In short, policymakers must avoid establishing the

same high achievement standards for all schools and requiring all students to meet the same level of proficiency (Ladd, 2012). Serving disadvantaged children is complex and cannot be fixed by increasing testing. The following are policy recommendations for improving the educational experience of low-income students: smaller class size and devoted teachers; gender-based classrooms; vocational education; school uniforms; and school choice programs, such as voucher, charter schools, and magnet schools (Swain, 2006).

Conclusion

The research revealed that poverty was and remains a damaging risk in the overall development of a child. When considering its impact on education, it seemed especially harmful. The nation's wealth gap has drastically widened between the upper and lower socioeconomic groups in the last decade, which signals a matter of inequality. Factors known to have significant negative influence on student outcomes are associated with and seem to be a direct result of poverty. Health and nutrition, vocabulary, effort, hope and growth mindset, cognition, relationships, and distress are all identified in relevant literature as having a negative impact on student outcomes related to school a success in life. Though this is common knowledge, policymakers seem overly reluctant to address the root causes of poverty. Instead, they develop policies that address symptoms as opposed to addressing causes.

From the era of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the educational landscape of the nation has changed. Achievement testing was the focus. Federal, state, and local agencies must pay greater attention to meeting the needs of children of poverty. The question remains prevalent, how much longer can this nation ignore the impact that poverty has on student performance? Education was in the past and remains a determining factor in the availability of opportunities that children of poverty will have at their disposal. There is little doubt that in order for children living in poverty to reap the same benefit from their educational experiences as their more affluent counter parts, policy makers and other stakeholders must work to eliminate the barriers and obstacles that stand in their way.

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Relationships: Leading Schools to Success

Position Paper

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Merriman-Webster defines the term *relationship* as the way people behave toward others, the state of being connected, or mutual dealings. Our lives and careers revolve around relationships of family, friends, colleagues, and faith. Successful school leadership depends on building strong relationships with students, faculty, parents, and community. With this in mind, relationship building is not always pretty. We go through cycles of trust, commitment, denial, and fear. Goleman (2012) explained one's *emotional intelligence* is defined on how well we handle each other and ourselves. Those with a higher *emotional quotient* (EQ) are far more successful than those with high IQs and excellent technical skills, but with low *emotional intelligence*. Goleman suggests five factors to measure someone's EQ: 1) self-awareness 2) self-control 3) motivation 4) empathy and 5) social networking. All of these factors certainly contribute to building successful relationships.

Robust and progressive relationships are needed at all levels throughout our schools. Students interviewed in upper elementary, middle, and high schools reported the desire to have a better relationship with their teachers (Conner, 2016). Participants explained it is the connection and identification with the teacher that motivates or reinforces their desire to learn. In other words, an emotional connection supports improved cognitive and behavioral engagement. Interestingly, teachers at the elementary and high school reported behavior to be the most important component and the emotional connection as least important regarding the classroom environment. This is a distressing disconnect between the teachers and students. We must find a way to bridge these differing perceptions.

Many times teachers lack trust, camaraderie, and collaboration with each other and administration. Trust begins with effective leadership. Often cooperation is confused with collaboration. Cooperation is supporting someone in attaining a goal. Authentic collaboration is much deeper by working with someone to jointly create, produce, or attain a shared goal (Troen and Boles, 2012). Educators must build personal and professional relationships among themselves to model positive communication, collaboration, and camaraderie for an effective learning environment.

Some of the most significant leadership strengths are comprised of relationship building, influencing others, executing ideas, and strategic thinking (Rath and Conchi, 2008). The constructing of relationships is the most crucial leadership skill. It is quite difficult to influence others, execute ideas, or propose your strategic plans if you do not have sturdy relationships in place. Merchant (2012) suggested communication styles between men and women show differences even at a young age. Boys tend to prefer action by doing things together while girls tend to simply talk and express their feelings. Male leaders negotiate and women make connections. As professors, we must make sure we encourage our male and female students to keep in mind gender differences and follow their personal leadership style, while ensuring relationships are at the core of their leadership and mentoring efforts.

Positive relationships are crucial to the success of schools. These internal learning partnerships are an essential strength woven throughout the learning environment. Therefore, creating a fruitful school community is dependent upon effective relationships with all stakeholders.

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