# Sharpening the Focus of Political Will to Address Achievement Disparities

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University of Connecticut, 2011

The sharpening of political will to address achievement disparities between English Language Learner (ELL) and non-ELL students is examined from four different perspectives: (a) instructional leadership, (b) professional learning, (c) policy implementation, and (d) social justice leadership. Literature in these four areas is compared to current practices in MidCity, a mid-sized diverse urban district. The analysis of MidCity from these four perspectives provides a basis for recommendations on how to sharpen the focus of political will among educational leaders to lessen achievement disparities between ELL and non-ELL students.

Recommendations include (a) improving the instructional and social justice leadership among administrators; (b) creating coalitions with community leaders; (c) increasing teacher and parent input in the decision-making process; (d) improving opportunities for teachers' professional learning; and (e) auditing policy implementation practices systematically to ensure that they are equitable for all students.

Running Head: SHARPENING THE FOCUS OF POLITICAL WILL TO ADDRESS ACHIEVEMENT DISPARITIES

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# SHARPENING THE FOCUS OF POLITICAL WILL TO ADDRESS ACHIEVEMENT DISPARITIES

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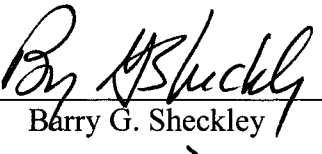
Major Advisor 
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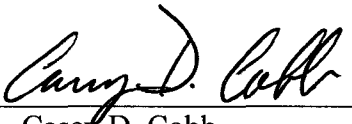
Associate Advisor 
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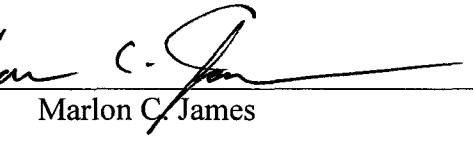
Associate Advisor 
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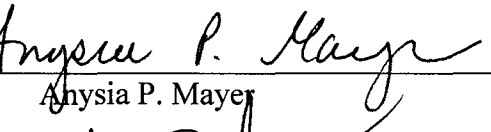
Committee Reader 
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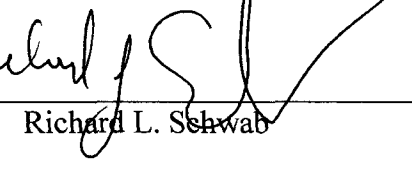
Committee Reader 
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Miguel Angel Cardona

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## Sharpening the Focus of Political Will to Address Achievement Disparities

As documented by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2008), a comparison between Hispanic and White students found that although the Hispanic-White achievement gap is the smallest it has been in years, (a) the gap is still large (e.g., at the 4th grade level Hispanics scored, on average, 26 points lower than Whites on a 500 point National Assessment of Educational Progress scale) and (b) there has been little progress with reducing this achievement gap during the past 15 years. Similarly, Kewal-Ramami, Gilbertson, Fox, and Provasnik (2007) found that Hispanic students scored lower than their White counterparts in the Program for International Study (PISA), an assessment given every three years by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). In a mathematics assessment done in 2004, White students in the United States scored 12 points higher than the average score (M = 500) for all students on the 1000-point OECD scale, while the average score for Hispanics was 57 points lower than the average score. Kewal-Ramami et al. (2007) also found that Hispanic students scored lower than Whites on the American College Testing (ACT) program ($M_{Whites}$ = 21.5 vs. $M_{Hispanic}$ = 18.5 on a 36 point scale) and the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) in verbal ability ($M_{Whites}$ = 527 vs. $M_{Hispanic}$ = 458 on an 800 point scale) and mathematics ($M_{Whites}$ = 536 vs. $M_{Hispanic}$ = 463 on an 800 point scale) (pp. 79-81).

Similarly, the National Association of Educational Progress (2008) reported that there are also gaps in achievement scores between English Language Learner (ELL) students and White students. [1] Specifically Fry (2007) found in his analysis of the National Association of Educational Progress data that ELL students —most from Hispanic backgrounds— were

[1] Because the majority of ELL students are Hispanic, the academic performance of ELL students as a group mirrors the performance of Hispanic students as a group (Fry, 2007). Because of this overlap in categories, the reviews in this study will use information on students in the ELL category with an understanding that this information may not exactly represent the performance of all Hispanic students. As such, use of information on ELL students may be a limitation of the review in terms of examining achievement for Hispanic students.

struggling more than other groups on standardized achievement tests. He noted that in the 2005 assessment, 46% of ELL students nation-wide achieved at the "below basic" level, the lowest of four levels, in 4th grade math. In reading, 73% of ELL students scored in the "below basic" category. In contrast, among White students, only 11% scored in the "below basic" category in math and only 25% were in the "basic" category in reading. On the 8th grade test, 71% of ELL students scored in the "below basic" category for both math and reading. In contrast, about 20% of 8th grade White students scored in the "below basic" level for math and reading.

The achievement gap data in Connecticut show patterns similar to the national trends. According to the Connecticut State Department of Education, notable gaps in achievement exist between Hispanic and White students (CT Reports, 2009). On average, large differences exist between the percentages of 3rd grade Hispanic students (39% at goal in Mathematics), and their White counterparts (75% at goal in Mathematics). The percentage of third grade Hispanic students who met goal in reading (27%) is roughly 40 percentage points lower than White students (67%). As outlined in the report, this same trend continues for reading and mathematics in grades four and five (e.g., $M_{\text{reading -Hispanics-Grade 5}} = 38\%$ at or higher than goal vs. $M_{\text{reading-Whites-Grade 5}} = 80\%$ at or higher than goal) (CT Reports, 2009).

Researchers and educational scholars have worked to identify causes and solutions to the problem of the achievement gaps in the U.S. Some researchers view the problem as a lack of programming rigor and educational opportunities (Barton, 2003; Barton & Coley, 2009) or low teacher quality (Peske & Haycock, 2006). Other researchers believe that teachers' lower expectations limit Hispanics students' opportunities to succeed (Noguera, 2002; Ogbu, 1987). Despite various beliefs about why the gaps exist, reform efforts aimed at closing the gaps in

achievement remain a priority for educational leaders (Rothstein, 2004; Singham, 2003; Haskins & Rouse, 2005).

An important step in addressing these differences in achievement is to identify factors that contribute to these gaps. According to the research reviewed for this study, one factor that may contribute to the lack of improvement in academic disparities is a diffuse political will on the part of educators and policy makers that is not sharply focused on addressing the issues that contribute to and sustain the achievement gaps (Gorey, 2009; Hirota & Jacobs, 2003; EdSource, 2004; Coalition for Community Schools, 2006). From this perspective, "political will" is referred to as the determination of an individual or organization to challenge inequities through advocacy and activism aimed at changing the political and organizational structures that exist (Marshall & Oliva, 2009). In his study, Gorey (2009), described a sharply focused political will as the educational leaders' commitment—or will—to make the necessary improvements in academic programs that can reduce gaps in student achievement. For this study, political will wass utilized for educational purposes as the exertion of continual pressure for change aimed at reducing achievement gaps during every phase of educational reform programs (Coalition for Community Schools, 2006; Marshall & Oliva, 2009; Noguera, 2002).

The ineffectiveness of major reform efforts in education in the US and abroad has been linked to the educational leaders involved having diffuse political will that was not sharply focused on addressing educational inequities (Nicolae, 2007; Caoli-Rodriguez, 2008; Lindert, & National Bureau of Economic, 2009; Kosack, 2009). In his critique of the European Commission's role in the implementation of policy aimed at promoting racial equality in the European Union, Nicolae (2007) described the Commission's actions as that of a passive observer—a role that did not actively include all stakeholders in advancing reform. In the

Philippines, Caoli-Rodriguez (2008) found that despite the presence of policies aimed at addressing the Education For All goals by 2015, the lack of a sharply focused political will among educational leaders has stalled the progress. Lindert (2009) studied educational funding in Western Europe and found that an underinvestment in public education continues to exist because leaders can not muster the political will to support increased funding. He concluded that their political will was scattered, not sharply focused on the effort.

In the United States, Gorey's (2009) meta-analysis of 34 studies found that educational achievement inequities in American schools "could be eliminated through concerted political will and ample resource commitments to evidence-based educational programs" (p. 1). Gorey found that Title 1 funding, Title 1 mandates, and Title 1 sanctions are not enough to close achievement gaps. He found that, overall, Title 1 policies have had limited impact on closing the achievement gap. He also concluded that when school leaders sharply focused their political will on embedding improvement strategies in larger comprehensive reform efforts (CRE), their efforts had an impact on closing the achievement gap. Specifically he reported that schools where leaders focused their political will on CRE were less likely to have a difference between race and achievement ($d_{\text{race-achievement}} = 0.15$) in comparison to Title 1 compensatory programs where leaders did not focus their political will on reform programs that required comprehensive change or reorganization ($d_{\text{race-achievement}} = 0.68$) (Gorey, 2009).

Due to the emphasis on the subgroup achievement scores within the No Child Left Behind benchmarks, there exists heightened public awareness of the gaps in the scores of White vs. Non-white students. According to Gorey (2009), without a focused commitment of political will among educational leaders to make the necessary improvements in academic programs, gaps in student achievement will likely persist. Throughout the literature,

educational analysts argue that in order to reduce the achievement gaps, the educational leaders involved (a) would possess a political will that is sharply focused on improving educational inequities and (b) would use this will to exert a continual pressure for change during every phase of educational reform programs (Coalition for Community Schools, 2006; Marshall & Oliva, 2009; Noguera, 2002).

The next section outlines a theoretical framework that could be used by educational leaders to guide their efforts in sharply focusing their political will on closing the achievement gaps.

## Theoretical Framework

According to the literature reviewed for this capstone project, the disparities in achievement patterns between subgroups of students could be addressed if school leaders and policymakers applied their political will to reduce the achievement gap with a sharper focus in four areas: (1) providing instructional leadership that builds the capacity of teachers to enhance the learning of all students effectively, (2) supporting effective professional learning opportunities for teachers, (3) effectively implementing key reform policies that provide equity for students, and (4) advancing the principles of social justice leadership to create equitable outcomes for all students. As suggested by Figure 1, each of these four components contributes to the improvement of academic outcomes for underperforming students. As illustrated by the central area in the center of Figure 1—the Zone of Optimal impact—optimal effectiveness can be achieved when educational leaders sharply focus their political will on actions that align all four factors outlined in Figure 1 into a coordinated effort directed towards improving achievement for all students.

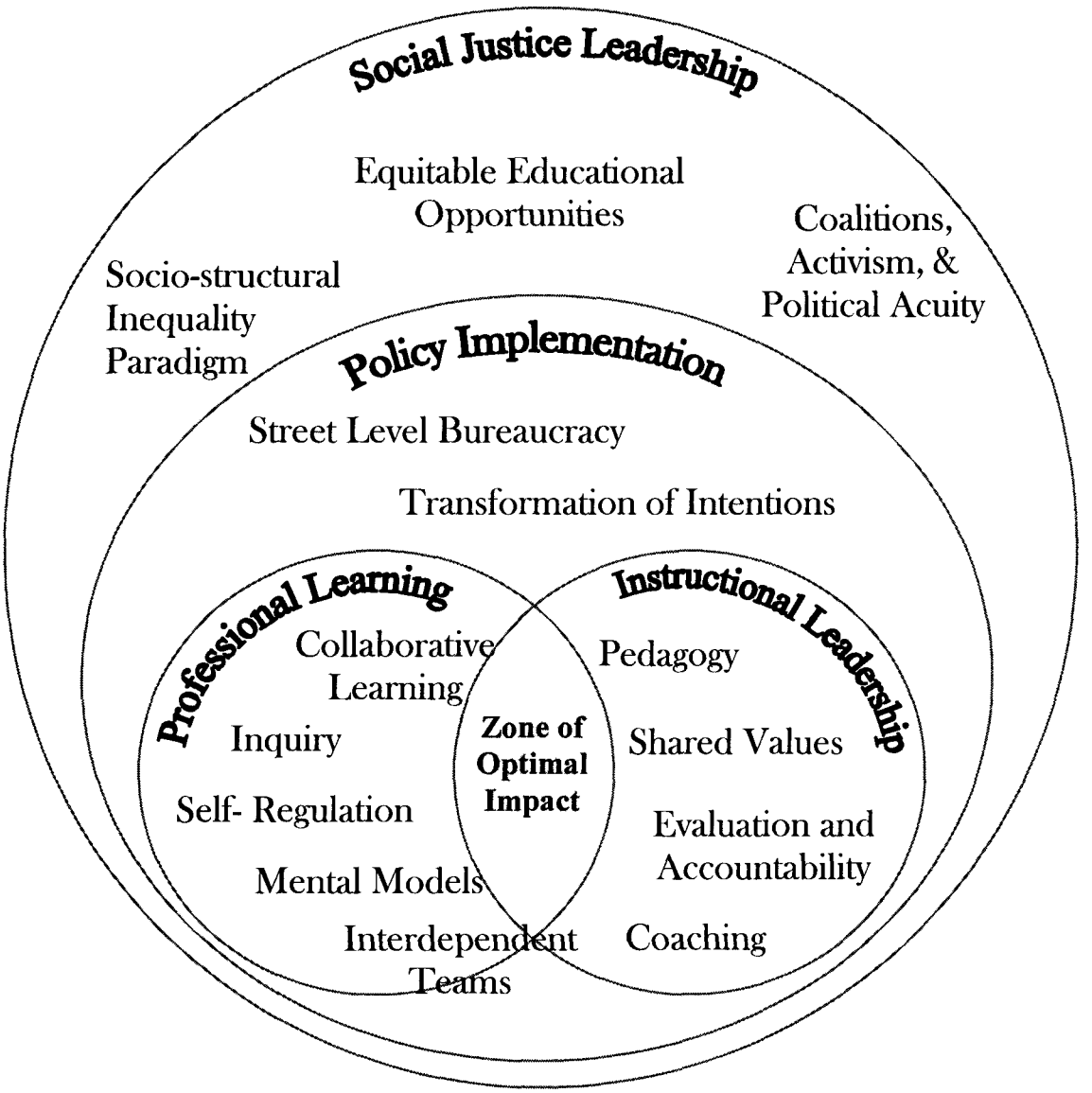


*Figure 1.* The Zone of Optimal Impact for Addressing Achievement Gaps

## Instructional Leadership

The first component of a comprehensive plan to sharpen the focus of educational leaders' political will on reducing achievement disparities, *Instructional Leadership*, is shown in the lower right section of Figure 1. Research studies suggest that when assisted by effective instructional leadership from school principals and when assisted by the resources of sound professional learning programs, teachers can improve their ability to enhance learning for all students (Rozenholtz, Bassler, Hoover-Dempsey, 1986; Kotter, 1990; Abelmann & Elmore, 1999; Siskin & Little, 1995). Due to norms of autonomy that pervade school buildings (Johnson & Donaldson, 2007) and the relative difficulty of changing engrained practices among adult teachers (Fullan, 2007), research also suggests that school leaders who are committed to reducing the achievement gap could do so by sharply focusing their political will to address these dual challenges that often impede efforts to reduce the achievement gap (Noguera & Wing, 2006; Marshall & Oliva, 2009; Kotter, 1990).

*Pedagogy.* Research indicates that effective teaching pedagogy is a cornerstone of reducing the achievement gap. Wright, Sanders and Horn (1994) found that when teachers engaged learners effectively and consistently for three years, students improved their achievement on standardized tests by 35 to 50 percentile points. According to Donovan, Bransford, and Pellegrino (1999), effective teaching pedagogy begins with the ideas and interests students bring to a classroom—and then builds upon these ideas and interests. This type of teaching requires techniques that differ from student to student. Similarly, Barber and Mourshed (2007) described good teachers as those who focused and differentiated their instruction for each child based on how that specific child understood the concept being taught.

In order to help reduce disparities in achievement between students of different ethnic backgrounds, Ladson-Billings (1995) described the need for teachers to "affirm and accept students' cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge the inequities that schools and other institutions perpetuate" (p. 469). In support of this perspective, Marchant (1990) found that students who were actively engaged in learning activities they judged as "relevant" developed a motivation to succeed.

In addition to providing instruction that affirms the diverse perspectives in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1995), teachers can also enhance students' learning by gearing instruction toward the linguistic needs of the students (Barber & Mourshed, 2007; Romaine, 1995). Following this research, ELL students learning English as a Second Language would learn best when teachers took into account students' (a) proficiency in their native language, and (b) current level of proficiency in English (Lightbown & Spada, 1999). Similarly, Chomsky (1980) suggests that effective second language learning begins with the development of the competence in grammar and language structures. This competence would then lead to proficiency in social language situations. Educational programming that was in concert with this line of research would simultaneously work on (a) building learners' skills in a new language (English) and (b) not subtracting from or minimizing learners' skills, cognitive proficiency, and language structures in their first language (Richard-Amato, 1995; Brisk & Harrington, 2000; Lee, 1996).

Without a sharp focus on political will from educational leaders to champion effective teaching practices that have promise to reduce the achievement gaps (e.g., the use of culturally relevant pedagogy, the use of appropriate language development programming), teachers may

not adopt these practices and, as a result, patterns of achievement delineated by race may continue unchanged (Noguera & Wing, 2006; Marshall & Oliva, 2009; Kotter, 1990).

*Shared Values.* As also outlined in Figure 1, instructional leadership can have a strong impact on helping teachers develop practices that improve academic success (Little, 1982; Rosenholtz et al., 1986; Kotter, 1990). For example, Little (1982) found that effective instructional leadership led to improved norms of collegiality. According to Little (1982),

> Successful schools, particularly those receptive to staff development, were differentiated from less successful (and less receptive) schools by patterned norms of interaction among staff. In successful schools more than in unsuccessful ones, teachers valued and participated in norms of collegiality and continuous improvement (experimentation); they pursued a greater range of professional interactions with fellow teachers or administrators, including talk about instruction, structured observation, and shared planning or preparation (p. 334).

In the process of developing these norms of collegiality, leaders also sharply focused their political will on creating a culture of shared values, shared beliefs, and shared responsibility for student success within a school. Louise, Marks, and Kruse (1996), found that in comparison to schools where learning communities were fragmented and teachers worked in isolation, student achievement was higher in schools in which teachers worked together in learning communities where teachers held common beliefs about student learning and shared responsibility for student success.

Overall the research indicates that leaders who create a school-wide commitment to shared values about student learning focus their political will on using differences in opinions within a faculty as opportunities to develop commonalities among teachers regarding their

beliefs about student learning (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996; Marshall & Oliva, 2009). In a study 11,692 high school students, for example, Lee and Smith (1996) found that students learned more in schools where the teachers have a high level of collective responsibility for their students' learning.

*Coaching.* Similarly, Rosenholtz et al. (1986) reported that instructional leaders who in the role of coaches provided guidance, helped foster teachers' learning, and provided regular feedback to teachers on their instructional practices, were more likely to enhance teachers' performance than leaders who did not see their role as instructional coaches. In a related work, Kotter (1990) asserted that true success as an instructional leader was dependent on the time a leader devoted to improving teaching and learning as opposed to time spent on day-to-day managerial tasks.

*Evaluation and accountability.* In addition to the research on how instructional leadership practices can enhance teachers' development through coaching and providing timely feedback, research also indicated that establishing a clear system of evaluation and accountability can improve teachers' instruction (Rosenholtz et al., 1986; Abelman & Elmore, 1999). According to Abelman and Elmore (1999) educational leaders weave personal accountability (e.g., self-evaluations), collective accountability (e.g., school-wide measures of performance), and external accountability (e.g., standardized test scores) into a cohesive focus on improving achievement for all students. In this way, effective instructional leaders that are able to use a sharply focused political will include various accountability structures to maintain high expectations for teachers' performance while simultaneously setting agendas for professional growth of every teacher. Abelman and Elmore also indicated that an educational leader who established a well-structured accountability system communicated a direct message

to teachers about the values and practices that were the most important features of instructional practice.

The implications of this research may suggest that academic disparities can be addressed when educational leaders sharpen the focus of their political will to provide strong instructional leadership. As outlined in this section, educational leaders who are committed to addressing disparities in student achievement can sharply focus their political will to provide instructional leadership that (a) improves the teachers' instructional pedagogy, (b) develops a common set of values, beliefs, and commitments related to improving student learning, (c) provides coaching and related assistance to teachers in areas related to their teaching practice, and (d) establishes a well-defined set of accountability structures for teachers.

**Professional Learning**

A second factor outlined in Figure 1 (lower left-hand section) relates to educational leaders sharply focusing their political will to provide viable options to teachers for enhancing their professional learning (Donovan et al., 1999). As discussed in this paper, professional learning refers to the manner in which all members of a school community continually develop their ability to enhance student learning. According to Sheckley (2003), professionals learn best when they engage in a process that builds on their individual goals, engages them in key experiences that require them to reason deeply about problems of practice, and engages them in work settings that serve as laboratories of practice. As suggested by the research in the area of professional learning, educational leaders can be most effective when they focus their political will sharply on changing the predominant, yet largely ineffective, workshop based approach to professional learning (Saylor & Kehrhahn, 2001; Gully et al., 2002, Sheckley, 2003).

*Mental models, self-regulation, and inquiry.* As it relates to improving academic success among subgroups of students, one important goal of professional learning involves adding depth and breadth to teachers' understanding, or mental model (Seel, 2006), of how to work most effectively to enhance the learning of all students in classrooms populated by learners with heterogeneous backgrounds. One way educational leaders can help teachers to expand the mental models they use to guide their practice is to engage teachers in a carefully constructed inquiry process in which they can test out the efficacy of new ideas and practices (Sheckley, 2003). This inquiry process is most effective when teachers actively experiment with new ideas (Sheckley, 2003) and actively compare their current teaching approaches with effective teaching strategies identified by research studies (Stroup & Robins, 1972; Marchant, 1990; Bakken, 2002). In a study of an inquiry-based professional learning process with teacher teams at a middle school, Sheckley and Allen (2005) found large gains (d= 2.10) in the teachers' ability to apply in their classrooms the information they learned about ways to enhance student learning. Teachers also reported gains in the student behaviors they targeted in their inquiry. For example, teachers reported a pre-post gain both in homework completion (d= .54) and a marked increase in the percentage of students who exceeded the minimum requirements of homework assignments (d= .78) (Sheckley & Allen, 2005). The learning that results from such inquiry efforts can be deepened if educational leaders also give teachers the license to self-regulate their learning; that is, allow them choices on how they plan, monitor, and evaluate their work as it pertains to improving the achievement of all learners (Ertmer & Newby, 1996).

Overall the research on professional learning indicated that when professionals used an inquiry process to work actively on a problem of practice and expanded the ways in which they

planned, monitored, and evaluated their learning, they were more likely to transfer their learning to use in new situations (e.g., improving the teaching strategies they use when they worked with students who had diverse backgrounds) (Ertmer & Newby, 1996; Clark & Elen, 2006).

*Collaborative learning.* Educational leaders can also work to address the achievement gaps by sharpening their political will to focus on improving the professional learning patterns that occur within a school building. Gully, Beaubien, Incalcaterra, and Joshi (2002), for example, indicated that interventions at the group level had about twice the impact on learning and performance (d= .39) than did interventions on the individual level (d=.20). In a related study, Saylor and Kehrhahn (2001) demonstrated that a professional learning program that focused on providing interdependent team-based supports for learning resulted in a 79% utilization rate of new technologies among teachers at a middle school. The strong effect of such group-learning interventions may be related to individuals (a) feeling greater intrinsic motivation to learn and (b) experiencing more satisfaction as team efficacy and performance improved (Cress & Hesse, 2006; Gully et al., 2002).

Overall, educational leaders who are committed to addressing the achievement gaps could also work to sharpen the focus of their political will on improving the professional learning opportunities for teachers. In this effort they might consider diverting resources from a menu of professional development workshops to a set of initiatives that revitalizes a school building as a setting where all teachers are actively inquiring into ways that they can improve the achievement of all learners.

**Policy Implementation**

The third area where educational leaders can sharply focus their political will on reducing the achievement gaps involves changing policies that impair instructional leadership, narrow professional learning opportunities, and marginalize students. In Figure 1, the middle circle labeled *Policy Implementation* surrounds the *Instructional Leadership* and *Professional Learning* circles because the fidelity with which equitable policy is implemented often determines the effectiveness of programs that enhance instructional leadership, improve professional learning, and address academic disparities.

*Street level bureaucracy.* In many cases, the emergence of street level bureaucracy (Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977; Summers & Semrud-Clikeman, 2000) results in policies that were designed to reduce the achievement gaps being filtered at the local school level. Street Level Bureaucracy (SLB) is the act of modifying and diluting the work required to implement a policy in order to balance the demands and the reality of personal and organizational limitations (Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977). Street level bureaucrats are individuals who use discretion in executing their policy-related work for two major reasons. First these bureaucrats often cannot meet the wide range of expectations put on them through policy development (Honig, 2006). Second, because there is little monitoring by policy makers of the professionals entrusted to implement the policy, the street level bureaucrats have flexibility in how they implement policies. In many cases street level bureaucracy operates freely because there are no clear expectations that policy regulations will be followed or there are no clear prioritizations of regulations (Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977, p.72). As a result, observable practices often differ from the actual policies that govern these specific practices.

For example, in their analysis of the implementation of Chapter 766 law—a policy that was intended to provide guidelines for special education testing and service delivery—Weatherly and Lipsky (1977) discovered common patterns of behaviors among street level bureaucrats. Implementers at the ground level, or street level bureaucrats, rationed the number of assessments they performed, neglected to do some assessments, prioritized and biased the schedule of assessments based on particular areas of interest or alignment with specialists' strengths, and prioritized those student assessments that would be less of a financial drain on the district expenses. Weatherly and Lipsky (1977) summarized the study in this way:

> Like police officers who are required to enforce so many regulations that they are effectively free to enforce the law selectively, or the public welfare workers who cannot master the encyclopedic and constantly changing eligibility requirements and so operate with a much smaller set of regulations, special education personnel had to contrive their own adjustments to the multiple demands they encountered (p. 68).

In a similar study, Summers and Semrud-Clikeman (2000) examined the pattern of street level bureaucracy in the implementation of special education law by school psychologists. When the demands of the policy became too great for the time available to them, school psychologists responded by selectively enforcing policies governing special education evaluation. In this case, minimal supervision of psychologists by district leaders and excessive discretion given to them to use their professional judgment led to street level bureaucracy.

Street level bureaucracy can surface in many professions. Its presence creates a gap between the intended policy and the actual implementation. In such cases, practices evolve into their own ad-hoc policies in which the focus is often determined by the street level

bureaucrats. Weatherly and Lipsky (1977) summarized the end result of the street level bureaucracy they found in their study of the Boston Schools: "Special services in the Boston Public School Department, then serve the system rather than the children" (p. 8). Educational leaders who implemented policies effectively often found themselves sharply focusing their political will—and risking the comfort of adhering to current practice—in order to change patterns of street level bureaucracy (Marshall & Oliva, 2009).

*Transformation of intentions.* In other instances, transformation of intentions (TOI) can emerge within a school district in a way that deflates comprehensive school reform initiatives (Placier, Hall, McKendall & Cockrell, 2000; Hall & McGinty, 1997; Arias, 2005). From this perspective, intentions are defined as the goals meant to shape the behaviors of actors in an organization (Placier, Hall, McKendall, & Cockrell, 2000). Transformation of the original intent happens when actors, or groups of actors, are introduced in the planning and implementation of policy. Placier et al. (2000) argue that "policy is not a concrete text to be implemented but a transformation of intentions in which content, practices, and consequences are generated in the dynamics" (p. 260).

Placier et al.'s (2000) case study on the development of a multicultural education policy showed how the transformation of intentions among members of a committee charged with leading the implementation of multicultural education created an environment where maintaining existing district-wide conventions became more important than changing current practices. As a result, the intention of the group leadership transformed from working as advocates who were commitment to multicultural education to working as protectors of the status quo.

Hall and McGinty's (1997) case study on the policy development for a teacher career ladder—a situation rich with varying actors, interests, and agendas—provided a good example of how TOI can surface. According to the TOI perspective, (a) each policy has actors who influence its development and implementation and, in turn, (b) each actor or group of actors has reasons for wanting to influence the policy. In Hall and McGinty's study, the governor, legislators, state education department officials, and teachers had vested interests—and different perspectives—on how the policy regarding a career ladder for teachers should be developed. When a disagreement occurred in the development of the teacher career ladder policy, members of the 36-member committee resorted to control of resources and domination through role (Hall & McGinty, 1997). The governor, in this case, went around the committee and worked directly with the commissioner of education to lobby for a specific career ladder. The governor's plan had favor with a powerful group of constituents. In essence, this process transformed his intentions from the implementation of a teacher career ladder policy to actions that resulted in political gain for the governor.

Another example of TOI was evident in Arias' (2005) case study. Here she found that the transformation of intentions (TOI) can take place over a period of time. In this case a court decision ruled that the schools in the inner part of San Jose were inferior to the outermost city schools. According to the ruling, the district was allowed to bus students from these lesser performing schools to higher performing schools. The intention was to increase student success by providing them with the opportunity to attend a high performing school. Over time, the plaintiffs realized that the eventual dissolution of the original community schools had an unintended negative effect on the local community such as long bus rides and the feeling that they were visitors in other students' schools. As a result, the plaintiffs fought to bring the

bused students back into their original schools and focus instead on improving these local schools. The transformation in this case was influenced by both the various actors and the time involved.

In this case (Arias, 2005), the TOI process ended up having positive benefits for students. What began as a policy that was initially focused on desegregation was eventually transformed into a policy that was focused on providing quality educational programming at all schools. This case, and the lessons learned from it, support Hall and McGinty's assertion that policy be "presented as the process of ongoing practical accomplishment of the transformation of intentions" (p. 439).

In each of these cases, street level bureaucracy and transformation of intentions influenced policy implementation. When SLB and TOI deter educational opportunities for all students, leaders can address the situation by exerting a strong political will to combat these forces and ensure that their implementation does not limit educational opportunities for all students. When policies are introduced and supported by leaders with the political will to counter forces (e.g., SLB and TOI) that dilute educational opportunities for all students, the policies have a greater chance of solving the problems they were intended to address.

**Social Justice Leadership**

The fourth area where educational leaders can sharpen their political will to reduce academic disparities is Social Justice Leadership (SJL). As outlined in the outermost ring of Figure 1, *Social Justice Leadership* refers to leadership that focuses on "changing current practices and structures within educational organizations that overtly or covertly perpetrate inequity" (Marshall & Oliva, 2009, p. 210). Educational leaders can engage in SJL by

"removing one's blinders, engaging in one's emotions, mobilizing and empowering parents, and taking political risks" (Lopez, Gonzalez, & Fierro, 2009, p. 112).

*Coalitions, activism, and political acuity.* Marshall and Oliva (2009) described social justice leaders in terms of three major attributes. First, they were willing to serve as activists for change. Whether it was championing a cause for students or the parents of students who were suffering inequities, social justice leaders' efforts stemmed from a "moral outrage at the unmet needs of students and a desire for a caring community" (p. 9).

Second, effective social justice leaders formed coalitions with like-minded people or organizations. Marshall and Oliva (2009) described how coalitions formed by educational leaders who were committed to social justice focused efforts to improve learning opportunities for all students. For example Marshall and Oliva (2009) described how effective social justice leaders used groups such as the "Consortium on Race Equity in K-12 Education," a group formed out of the University of Miami aimed at addressing "racism and its harmful effects on classroom learning" (p. 47), and "Frontera," a grassroots parents' advocacy group whose focus was to advocate for social change and utilize the political system to share their voices and concerns. Similarly, Marshall and Oliva (2009) discuss how effective social justice leaders use tools like the "Action Continuum," a facilitator guide that to help members of a school community determine if the actions of their organization support or confront oppressive practices. This Action Continuum also helps parents self-assess their behaviors and attitude toward social justice work. The descriptions provided by Marshall and Oliva (2009) highlighted the important role of educational leaders in coalition building because in each case the educational leaders were involved as partners who focused their political will on mobilizing and organizing the effort. Once the groups were formed, the school leaders, as partners in the

effort, did not have to be directly involved in leading the groups for each group's advocacy work to continue.

Third, Marshall and Oliva (2009) emphasized that effective social justice leaders had a strong sense of political acuity. Leaders navigated the political environment to help their cause. In one case, Marshall and Oliva highlighted the political acuity of Texas lawmakers who argued for higher achievement equity by showing how such equity benefitted the economy. They argued that students who performed better in school would earn more, and therefore contribute in a better way to the economy. Also, as a result of their political acuity, these lawmakers were able to form a Pre-Kindergarten through 16 Council that worked to encourage collaboration within educational organizations.

Through coalitions, activism, and political acuity to create social justice, researchers such as Marshall and Oliva (2009) showed how educational leaders were able to make a difference for groups of students and parents whose struggles might have been greater than most and whose voices are quieter than most. To accomplish this difficult task of providing SJL, school leaders had to sharpen the focus of their political will to marshal every resource in a school and community in an effort to advance the learning of all students equitably (Marshall & Oliva, 2009; Noguera & Wing, 2006; Gorey, 2009).

*Equal Education Opportunities.* When educational leaders sharpened the focus of their political will on implementing SJL they often had to confront many of the factors that contributed to achievement gaps that existed between groups of students (Marshall & Oliva, 2009). In some cases they had to address academic disparities that had become normalized, or accepted complacently, as the status quo within a school system (Noguera & Wing, 2006).

In their assessment of Berkeley High School in California, for example, Noguera and Wing (2006) found that students looking to get into college after high school could not rely on the overburdened guidance staff of the high school. Counselors assigned to provide college track advice, preparation, and guidance rarely met with students who needed their guidance. In the absence of assistance from school counselors, students who had the financial means to pay for private services hired their own guidance counselors to assist them in preparing for college. Possibly related to this assistance, these students had a higher success rate in getting admitted to colleges than did the students who did not have the means to hire private counselors (Noguera & Wing, 2006). The results of this study demonstrated how school inequity impacted the post-high school opportunities for students. Specifically, a student's ability to succeed after high school was related to a family's ability to retain a private college counselor and not solely to that student's academic credentials. As documented by Noguera and Wing (2006), this disparity existed, unchallenged, at Berkeley High School. The school community became complacent in accepting this as a routine practice. There was no uproar or challenge to the governing Board of Education.

*Inequalities*. Lewis, James, Hancock, and Hill-Jackson (2008) indicated that the complacency evident in situations like Berkeley High School (Noguera & Wing, 2006) often conforms to a social-structural inequality paradigm—a viewpoint that translates into lower expectations for some students. In turn, these lower expectations are often translated into sub-par academic programs, support, and expectations for the some students.

Skrla, McKenzie, and Scheurich (2009) also concluded that in addition to identifying and challenging lowered expectations and support for marginalized students, educational leaders must possess the political will to challenge "equity traps" such as: (a) deficit beliefs

that often minimize perspectives teachers have about students' potential, (b) practices that erase cultural and racial values that can provide a foundation for student learning, (c) negative situations that are accepted as normal procedures. In their research on the use of equity audits to identify Social Justice Leadership opportunities, Skrla et al. (2009) describe how these equity traps can pervade a school and district in ways that can institutionalize inequities. In turn, as students internalize these inequities (e.g., come to believe that they are deficient as learners because of their race or ethnic background), they often disengage from school. Once students disengage from school, their academic performance often decreases. In too many cases, disengagement also leads to students dropping out of school (Marchant, 1990).

As indicated by the research reviewed in this section, Social Justice Leadership is a necessary component of the efforts needed to address the achievement gaps. To address issues of social justice, educational leaders have a responsibility to muster their political will—and make the related personal sacrifices—to stand up for students and families who would not otherwise have an influential voice. In doing so, educational leaders with a sharply focused political will could help to remove the inequities that serve as impediments to academic achievement for many students (Marshall & Oliva, 2009; Skrla et al., 2009).

**Zone of Optimal Impact**

Before closing this section, I want to propose the Zone of Optimal Impact as an area of future research. I hypothesize that if political will is exerted in the areas described above as Figure 1 suggests, there would be a greater efficiency at addressing achievement disparities.

The Zone of Optimal Impact (ZOI) in Figure 1 suggests that addressing and eliminating the achievement gap can be accomplished best when educational leaders sharply focus their political will on a convergence of the four factors outlined in the figure: *Instructional*

*Leadership, Professional Learning; Policy Implementation; Social Justice Leadership.* The Zone of Optimal development indicates that the four factors working together will have a stronger impact than each factor working in isolation.

At the operational level, closest to the students, efforts to focus educational leaders' political will in the areas of *Professional Learning* and *Instructional Leadership* overlap and exert a combined influence on improving teaching and learning for all students. In the next circle, educational leaders who sharply focus their political will on *Policy Implementation* work to (a) influence the inner circles, *Professional Learning* and *Instructional Leadership* and (b) the outer circle, *Social Justice Leadership.* In turn, for districts to implement policies in a way that improves educational opportunities for all students, the educational leaders interested in addressing the achievement gaps would also be most effective if they focused their political will on using principles of *Social Justice Leadership.* The relationship of *Social Justice Leadership*, as noted in Figure 1, is overarching in nature. It encompasses the beliefs and values that would drive the work in the three inner circles. When educational leaders sharply focus their political will in the area of *Social Justice Leadership* in a way that influences the inner three circles, the overall impact on addressing achievement gaps is optimal.

The section that follows analyzes the situation in a school district, MidCity, from the perspective of the four factors outlined above: instructional leadership, professional learning, policy implementation, and social justice leadership. The analysis focuses on the importance of district leaders summoning political will to address the achievement disparities that exist.

## MidCity: An Analysis Using the Four Factors

### Context

The MidCity school district consists of eight elementary schools, two middle schools, and two high schools under the direction of the local Board of Education. The district enrolls approximately 9000 students. Of this population, 56% receive free/reduced lunch, 41% are White, 43% are Hispanic, and 13% are Black.

Two of the elementary schools, Primary Elementary and Intermediate Elementary, house the Bilingual Education Program (BEP). This program serves a majority of the ELL students from through out the district. The students who are enrolled in the BEP (100% are Hispanic) are bused to one of these two elementary schools. Because most of the students in the BEP (90+ %) do not live within the district lines of Primary or Intermediate Elementary, these schools are not considered their "home base" school. The ELL students in the BEP attend Primary Elementary School from Kindergarten through grade two and Intermediate Elementary School from grades three to five. Sections of BEP for second grade students are split between the two schools: One BEP section is offered at Intermediate Elementary, the other section—where the majority of second graders attend—is offered at Primary Elementary.

ELL students spend up to 30 months in the BEP. The majority of the ELL students in the BEP spend at least one year in each of the two elementary schools that house the BEP. Once the 30 months of bilingual programming is completed, ELL students are withdrawn from Primary or Intermediate Elementary and enrolled in their home base school.

A closer look at the profile of Intermediate Elementary School highlights the need for district educational leaders to develop a sharply focused political will in order to address the achievement disparities that exist in MidCity. Intermediate Elementary is a thriving school

nestled in a corner of MidCity. Of the approximately 550 students in this Pre-kindergarten through grade 5 school, close to 50% of the students (n=264) qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. More than 30% of the students (n=176) are Hispanic. A majority (69%) of these Hispanic students (n=121) are enrolled in the BEP and are bussed to Intermediate School (2008-2009 Strategic School Profile). ELL students in the BEP comprise about 22% of the overall student population at the school. All but three ELL students are enrolled in the BEP.

Table 1 outlines the achievement disparities that existed at Intermediate Elementary School between ELL and non-ELL learners in 2008-2009—a year in which the highest academic performance for students in the ELL and economically disadvantaged subgroups occurred. Even with this distinctive performance among disadvantaged subgroups of students, only 6% of the third through fifth grade ELL students met proficiency in reading on District

Table 1
*2008-2009 Percentage of Students at Intermediate School at or Above Proficiency on District Assessments*

| Assessment | ELL students at or above proficiency | Non-ELL students at or above proficiency | All students in district at or above proficiency |
|---|---|---|---|
| DA- Reading (3-5) | 6% | 72% | 53% |
| DA- Math(3-5) | 39% | 91% | 72% |
| DRP- Reading (3-5) | 14% | 88% | 61% |

Assessments (DA). In mathematics, the percentage of ELL students who met proficiency (39%) was 52 percentage points lower than non-ELL students (91%).

As indicated by Table 1, as early as third grade, a clear discrepancy exists between the achievement of ELL students at this one school (e.g., 6% of ELL students achieve proficiency

in reading) and non-ELL students both at the school (72% achieve proficiency in reading) and throughout the district (53% achieve proficiency in reading). The disparities outlined in Table 1 may represent the beginning of a trajectory for these ELL students that, according to researchers, may include years of constant remediation, years filled with increasing frustration, years marked by an increasingly poor self-concept, and years with fewer opportunities to succeed in secondary and post-secondary settings (Marchant, 1990; Noguera, 2006).

**Revision of the Language Arts Curriculum**

The recent revision of the language arts curriculum and materials at Intermediate Elementary School, and all other MidCity elementary schools, depicts some of the difficulties that occurred when reform efforts lacked political will to take into account the academic needs of lower performing students.

The revision of the language arts curriculum that occurred five years prior to this analysis was led and coordinated by district-level leaders. Input from teachers, parents, or principals was not sought. As a result of the planning process a popular commercial program was purchased for the district. This commercial program included components for reading, writing, and other content-related instruction. The language arts curriculum centered on stories that were presented in an "anthology book," or students' textbook. All students at Intermediate Elementary School—including those ELL students in the BEP—were required to follow the same curriculum, the same pace, and the same sequence of topics. Teachers were required to use the materials, pacing guides, and skill continuums that were included in the program. Simultaneously, teachers were expected to remove all of the materials—books, lessons, and supplemental support resources—associated with former programs.

Because the program was purchased mid-year, its implementation interrupted the use of the existing curriculum. The materials were delivered directly to the schools where administrators and reading teachers distributed them to the classrooms. None of the elementary principals had experience with the program; therefore, they were limited in providing instructional leadership to help and guide teachers in using the program. During the first year of implementation, professional development for the program was done sporadically in the form of mandatory meetings after school hours. Teachers were required to learn about the curriculum mostly through their experience with it for the first several months. More formal professional development came the following full school year.

Because many of the former programs included materials that were designed for ELL students, the removal of these materials created a gap in the availability of appropriate resources for ELL students. Many ELL students who had just arrived in the country and had limited English language skills were expected to follow the paced curriculum. The standardized approach prevented teachers from using books written in ELL students' native language, in most cases, Spanish. The guidelines for implementing the curriculum restricted teachers from (a) making variations to the core materials, (b) using differentiated strategies for ELL and monolingual Spanish speaking students, and (c) using ELL-specific materials. In essence, the materials that were used prior to the new program, including developmentally and linguistically appropriate materials, were disallowed. A uniform curricular approach for all students was the order of the day.

In their plan for implementing the new Language Arts curriculum, the central office leadership favored the streamlining of curricular materials and instructional planning. They did not consider a host of research studies that argued against this uniform approach by

indicating: (a) that student achievement is best enhanced when a curriculum provides opportunities for teachers to address students preconceptions and begin instruction at students' current level of functioning (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Donovan et al., 1999); (b) the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995); (c) the need for ELL students to have a print and visually rich learning environment with linguistic objectives (Richard-Amato, 1995; Lightbown & Spada; 1999; Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004); and (d) the effectiveness of inquiry-based and discovery learning (Barber & Mourshed (2007).

Teachers interviewed for this study indicated that the implementation of the new Language Arts curriculum left them with feelings of "restriction," "disengagement," and lack of "ownership and control." In an effort to keep up with the pace and sequence of the curricular map for the new literacy program, teachers indicated that they felt pressed to limit their use of best practices for enhancing the progress of ELL students such as (a) discovery-based learning (Stigler & Hiebert 1999) (b) culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson Billings, 1995), and (c) practices that transferred linguistic concepts from their native Spanish language to English (Lightbown & Spada, 1999; Richard-Amato, 1995).

Interview data and observations made as a participant observer also suggested that teachers were frustrated with the new curriculum and the manner in which it was implemented. For example, Robin, a highly respected teacher in one of the elementary schools, described how she taught students using a discovery-based learning approach throughout her long career. She described the many challenges she faced when forced to implement the new paced curriculum. After emphasizing that Japan uses a discovery-based model to teach depth over breadth, she quipped, "As administrators, you have to give us time!" She continued that due to

the one size fits all mentality; she has been reduced to "covering the curriculum." This was a common sentiment with the teachers and administrators interviewed for this study.

Teachers of ELL students also felt frustrated. They reported feeling disempowered due to the removal of the resources needed to address the linguistic needs of their students. In my role as participant observer, I made classroom visits during the first three years of implementation that surfaced the use of non-approved teaching materials by teachers. Teachers purchased and copied materials they felt their students needed. Without seeking approval, the teachers used these materials because the materials focused more explicitly on language development. Teachers of ELL students openly commented that their students were being penalized and ignored by having to use the same curriculum used by fluent English speakers.

The frustration of teachers of ELL students also became apparent in the grade level meetings and professional development workshops held at the building. Due to uniformity of curriculum and assessments, the test data would serve to remind teachers of the gap between underperforming ELL students and White students that showed growth. Because of its format, the data used for grade level meetings did not show the achievement gains of ELL students.

At one grade level meeting during the first year of the implementation, one BEP teacher became emotional and later commented to me that despite all of the work she does, her students' growth is difficult to showcase with the curriculum and assessment protocols in the district. She shared that she was feeling "burnt-out" and "discouraged" teaching in the BEP.

Professional development workshops held three times during the first two years of implementation often focused on the new literacy curriculum. My observations noted that teachers of ELL students would often sit together and be separated from the mainstream

conversation of the presenter. Conversations with these teachers often resulted in the same set of questions: ELL teachers wondered how they could adapt the professional development topics for the needs of their learners. From their comments to me and from my observations, I found that they often left the workshops frustrated and overwhelmed. At the conclusion of a professional development workshop on the new Language Arts curriculum, for example, one teacher who has taught in the district for over 20 years and is considered by most to be an excellent teacher commented that he preferred to be left alone with his students to implement instruction the way his students needed it.

In each of the interviews and conversations with teachers in my role as participant observer, the curriculum implementation process and limitations within the curriculum that was implemented surfaced as two of the major factors that impeded the academic achievement of ELL students in MidCity. As my analysis suggests, both of these limitations appeared to be related, in part, to a lack of political will on the part of district leaders to address these limitations.

**My Role as Participant-Observer**

*My Role*. At the time of this writing, I am serving in my eighth year as principal in a Connecticut school and thirteenth year as an educator. My thoughts are shaped by the experiences, values, and perceptions I have made serving as a principal and living in a community that has schools with high levels of diversity.

As participant observer for this study, I was closely linked to the school and district during the time of the study. I attended each of the nine professional development workshops regarding Language Arts curriculum implementation, supervised curriculum implementation in my school, and worked with ELL teachers to "make the best" with the materials at hand. In

my role as a participant observer for this study, I also attended monthly district level meetings for administrators. I also attended quarterly district-wide ELL committee meetings. A great deal of time was spent engaging with teachers, observing their instruction, and meeting with them to facilitate the curriculum implementation. Additionally, I had numerous meetings and discussions regarding the issues presented in this study with teachers, parents, and district leaders in my role as participant observer.

For this study, I conducted seven semi-structured interviews with district teachers and administrators. Additionally I reviewed the minutes of the last three years' monthly elementary principals' administrative meetings, monthly district administrators' meetings, and seven ELL Committee meetings that were held over the last two years. Lastly, I analyzed a number of district documents that were available in the public domain including the Cambridge Audit Report, District Improvement Plan, and Strategic School Profiles. Information from these documents helped me to identify the educational needs of students within the district as well as efforts taken by district leaders to address these needs. Lastly, I completed an equity audit in which I analyzed the differences between ELL and non-ELL students in a number of areas including: (a) percentage of students at goal or advanced versus basic and below basic, (b) inclusion of ELL in enrichment afterschool programming, and (c) diversity of materials intended to meet their academic needs.

*Subjectivity Statement.* Growing up, I attended schools that were very diverse and similar to the current analysis of MidCity. I was fortunate to have a supportive family that encouraged my success in school. Despite learning English as my second language, I was never considered an English Language Learner in school. Before entering kindergarten, I spoke English. Even so, I have always been very conscious of race and language status and

how it is perceived by students and adults in school. Being of Puerto Rican decent, but born in Connecticut, I have always had an awareness of my Hispanic heritage, and like many students, struggled with my identity growing up. During my later school years and into adulthood, I embraced my Hispanic-American identity and now encourage my two young children to do the same.

Issues of equity and human rights are important to me. As a youngster, I was interested in historical accounts of inequity, racism, and the subsequent efforts to reverse these maladies in our society. Studying the political history of Puerto Rico and the civil rights movements in this country have shaped how I view the issue of achievement gaps delineated by race. In analyses of gaps, I looked at contributing factors that may be institutionalized, such as policies, beliefs, and leadership norms.

It is my firm belief that addressing the disparities in achievement outcomes of our students requires an understanding of their experiences as students. As a participant observer, I tried to include observational data that surfaced the emotions felt by families of students that had to transition from school to school, or teachers that felt disempowered by their curriculum. I also believe that issues of achievement equity are closely related to instructional equity. I believe that our ability to adapt the latter to the needs of our students will determine our success with the former. Lastly, I believe that the values of a school district are evident in the degree of political will it uses to address issues of inequity present in its schools.

The issue of using political will to address disparities in achievement became important for me to examine. In the course of this study, the analyses surfaced areas that suggested that a lack of political will seemed to exist on the part of district leaders to address issues that led to

achievement gaps. As a researcher, I must admit that my experiences and predisposition to uncover issues of inequity have influenced my interest and perspective in this study.

The analyses presented in the next section will suggest that the achievement gaps that existed in MidCity could possibly have been addressed if educational leaders summoned their political will to improve instructional leadership, to improve professional learning opportunities for teachers, to ensure equitable implementation of policies, and to implement social justice leadership.

**Instructional Leadership**

As indicated in Figure 1, *The Zone of Optimal Impact for Addressing Achievement Gaps,* instructional leadership is an important component of districts' efforts to reduce the achievement gaps between ELL and non-ELL students. Specifically, as evident in the research that is integrated into Figure 1, instructional leadership that effectively addresses the achievement gap would focus on four key issues: Pedagogy, Shared Values, Evaluation, and Coaching.

*Pedagogy.* As noted above, research on effective pedagogy suggests that the use of culturally relevant pedagogy can increase students' motivation to learn by (a) engaging them actively in a learning process, and (b) through this active engagement affirming their identity as both individuals and learners (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Marchant, 1990). According to the research reviewed, determining students' interests, their current level of understanding, and differentiating instruction based on this information is related to greater academic success (Donavan, Bransford & Pellegrino, 1999; Barber & Mourshed, 2007).

Evidence gathered as a participant observer suggests that MidCity lacked the use of appropriate pedagogical strategies needed to address disparities in achievement. Specifically

the educational leaders appeared to lack the political will as instructional leaders to make decisions that took into account (a) the learning needs of diverse learners in Intermediate Elementary School—as well as throughout the entire MidCity District—and (b) the related need to differentiate instruction and materials for this diverse set of learners (Cohen & Ball, 1999). One teacher interviewee commented that, "the people in charge need to realize that one size does not fit all." She stated this in reference to the approach the district leaders took implementing uniform curriculum materials.

The disparity in opportunities for ELL and non-ELL students was highlighted in the report prepared by the Cambridge Educational Associates, the independent education auditors who reviewed the district in 2007. The audit was conducted because MidCity was named as a district in need of improvement for four consecutive years under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) benchmarks.

In their final report, auditors cited deficiencies in the districts' instructional leadership by strongly recommending that MidCity must, "[i]mprove the district leadership by...making better use of data at a macro level to chart *cause and effect* in learning and achievement. This should include triangulating different types of data to build a picture...in regard to why subgroups are underperforming" (Cambridge Education, 2007, page 2). The Cambridge audit indicated there was lack of appropriate support materials as well as ineffective teaching practices for ELL students in MidCity.

These findings supported the information gathered from my interviews and informal observations. For example, data collected for the equity audit, observations as a participant-observer, and interview data gathered from faculty members indicated that teachers did not have access to pedagogical materials that supported linguistic development in older students

who were learning English as a second language. Due to the lack of higher-level Spanish reading materials, ELL students in the upper grades used pre-primer to grade-two reading materials high in phonetic development. The reading materials used by these third, fourth, and fifth grade students were basic. They lacked the higher-level language structures that students in these higher grade levels typically learn. Because of this practice their primary exposure to reading involved the use of lower-level picture books and other books intended for children three to four years younger.

Overall, the lack of political will to address the clear need for differentiation in pedagogy may have been one of the factors that contributed to the glaring disparities in achievement in MidCity.

*Evaluation and Accountability.* As noted in the summary of the literature, research on evaluation and accountability suggests that teachers are most effective when they have tools that allow them to assess student growth and make instructional decisions based on the results of such assessments (Abelman & Elmore, 1999). This research suggests that through a collective accountability system in a school and within a district, teachers can receive valuable information that can guide their classroom practices as well as provide information on avenues for their own professional growth.

In MidCity, the data I collected as a participant observer indicated that there was not an evaluation and accountability system in place that identified specific areas of need for students who were underperforming. All components of the district-wide evaluation system—district assessments, Degrees of Reading Power tests, and standardized assessments (e.g., the Connecticut Mastery Test and Developmental Reading Assessment)—were administered in English. As a result these test data provided little information about whether ELL students'

learning needs were content-based or linguistic. For students who were new arrivals to MidCity from Spanish speaking countries, the information from these examinations was difficult to interpret. Teachers were left to their own devices to determine if the students were not succeeding because (a) they did not understand the content of the curriculum, or (b) they did not understand the language in which they were being instructed and assessed. Because test results for ELL students consistently placed these students in "deficient" or "below basic" categories, the test data created a stigma that ELL students did not have the academic ability of their non-ELL peers.

As indicated in the prior sections of this paper, the auditors from Cambridge Associates strongly recommended that the district make improvements (a) in the student assessment system and (b) in the use of differentiated materials for ELL students. Despite the emphatic recommendations from Cambridge Associates to provide, the district made few changes in the conventional assessment of ELL students.

The information summarized in this section suggests that district administrators in MidCity may have lacked the political will to develop assessment measures that target the needs of ELL students—despite the suggestions by from Cambridge Associates and the requests by teachers. In turn the lack of appropriate assessment measures may have contributed to the disparities in student achievement in MidCity.

*Coaching.* Instructional Leadership, or the time a leader devotes to the development of teaching and learning, is an important component in fostering student success (Kotter, 1990). The research reviewed for this study suggests that effective educational leaders serve as instructional coaches who guide, provide feedback, and foster teachers' learning (Rozenholtz et al., 1986).

Evidence collected in my role as a participant observer suggested that district control of curricular decisions coupled with the lack of coaching from district-level leaders in MidCity may have contributed to disparities in student achievement. Despite the pleas from teachers of ELL students and intermediate supervisors concerning the lack of resources, guidance, and specific data on the academic deficiencies of these students, educational leaders in the district failed to address the problems. Teachers' requests for guidance from instructional leaders in the district on how to provide differentiated instruction to ELL students were not addressed. Because site-based changes to curriculum were not allowed, the silence from the district level leaders indicated that the pacing guide was the order of the day. There was no option available to teachers for differentiating instruction for ELL students. Coaching, when necessary, focused only on how to use the pacing guide and ways to follow the requirements of the standardized LA curriculum.

As a participant observer who attended many of the meetings that planned the implementation of the curriculum, topics such as the need for differentiation were not entertained with any interest by district leaders. Personal conversations I had on this topic with leaders often ended with responses such as "We'll see what needs arise after two years once we implement this curriculum as mandated", or, "You can't really tell what the problems will be until you try it out for a little while." Continued advocacy for the differentiated needs of ELL students resulted in pointed comments that questioned my intent: "Are you suggesting that we use a lower set of expectations for ELL students?" and, "All I am hearing are excuses for those students." In essence, the message sent to me was that advocating for differentiated materials and comprehensible input for ELL students was synonymous with lowered expectations.

Developing a curricular plan that took into account the needs of ELL learners may have changed the implementation timeline and amount of resources needed to adequately equip schools in MidCity with the appropriate materials to reduce the achievement gap for ELL students. It would have required that educational leaders focus on this underperforming subgroup of students. In turn, this attention might have placed a spotlight on the achievement disparities in MidCity. Instead of facing this difficult issue directly, my observations indicated that district leaders chose not to address the need to alter the paced curriculum which would have followed the research-supported best practice of initiating instruction at students' actual instructional level (Donovan, Bransford & Pellegrino, 1999; Barber & Mourshed, 2007).

The apparent lack of political will to provide instructional coaching to accommodate the educational needs of ELL students may have contributed to the disparities in achievement that existed in MidCity that existed between ELL and non-ELL students.

*Shared Values.* As outlined in Figure 1, The Zone of Optimal Impact for Addressing Achievement Gaps, the research suggests that instructional leadership involves the development of a shared value system among all teachers (Little, 1982). According to this research, schools and districts that successfully enhance student achievement focus on creating a culture in which everyone involved with students shares common values regarding (a) a belief that all students can learn and (b) everyone in a school or district is responsible for students' success (Louise, Marks, & Kruse, 1996).

The evidence gathered in MidCity suggested that educational leaders did not invest in creating a culture where everyone involved with students committed to a clear set of values about and responsibility for student success. Specifically, the district leaders did not communicate to teachers and administrators about the importance of attending to the growth

and development of all learners—including ELL students. ELL students' teacher responses to a professional development survey, for example, indicated that teachers (a) wanted training on how to differentiate instruction for ELL students and (b) wanted more materials to support such differentiated instruction. Despite such requests, district leaders did not assume the responsibility to address the dissonance between the values and beliefs embedded within the standardized curriculum and the beliefs regarding differentiated instruction that were reflected in the survey results.

As noted previously, my observations as a participant observer indicated that such requests for differentiated instruction were viewed by district leaders as comments from (a) insubordinate or disgruntled employees complaining about doing their jobs, or (b) school leaders who had low expectations for ELL students' success. These reactions from district leaders did little to create a culture of shared values and a sense of shared responsibility for the success of all students throughout MidCity.

The lack of shared values was reflected in comments made to me by teachers of ELL students. They felt that their students were being neglected. As a result, teachers in the BEP felt isolated and disconnected from the meetings and workshops with teachers whose students benefitted from the mainstream curriculum and evaluation system. As these teachers viewed the situation, there was not a common set of shared values regarding the success for all students.

The information I gathered a participant observer suggests that leaders in the district may have lacked the political will to develop a district-wide set of shared values about the importance of providing equal learning opportunities for all students. As a result, a situation existed in MidCity where students—primarily those learning English—did not have access to

the learning materials and instructional practices that could have alleviated the academic gaps in achievement (Marshall & Oliva, 2009). The top down, or controlled (Rowan, 1990) approach of the implementation of the literacy curriculum—and the seeming lack of political will to address the issues of inequity in the language arts program—appeared to result in an organizational acceptance of tiered achievement between ELL and non-ELL students.

In the concluding section of this paper, I will outline several recommendations that educational leaders in situations similar to MidCity might consider as they work to reduce the achievement gaps between ELL and non-ELL students. These recommendations will focus on ways educational leaders can sharply focus their political will on providing the instructional leadership that is required to ensure that all equal educational opportunities exist for all students.

**Professional Learning**

As indicated in Figure 1, *The Zone of Optimal Impact for Addressing Achievement Gaps*, professional learning is an important component of districts' efforts to reduce the achievement gaps between ELL and non-ELL students. Specifically, as evident in the research that is integrated into Figure 1, an effective professional learning program would include (1) involving teachers in collaborative learning activities as members of interdependent teams of teachers, (b) helping teachers to self-regulate their own professional learning, (c) focus all learning activities on helping teachers develop intricate mental models they could use to guide their practices effectively, and (d) involving teachers in on-going inquiry about ways to resolve problems of practice related to student achievement.

*Collaborative Learning and Interdependent Teams.* As noted by the research above, professional learning is enhanced when collaboration is encouraged amongst learners. Saylor

and Kehrhahn (2001) reported that a sustained, year-long program that immersed teachers in a collaborative learning process resulted in 79% of teachers adopting and utilizing a reform-based initiative in their classroom. Related research by Gully et al. (2002) indicated that team-based, collaborative approaches to learning had twice the impact on performance in contrast to initiatives that focused only on individuals within an organization.

Despite the body of research on the benefits of collaborative learning and professional development, however, MidCity relied heavily on an more traditional, workshop-based system to foster teachers' professional learning. In this format, teachers were expected to attend three professional development days each year to receive direct training on district initiatives. Specifically, during the time period of this study, the majority of professional development sessions teachers attended involved direct instruction workshops about the implementation of the new language arts curriculum. Teachers sat through these sessions as passive participants who listened to presentations. They had few opportunities to discuss issues with their colleagues, to process how the information might be used in their classrooms, and to figure out how this new curriculum fit within the context of teaching at each individual school.

Interview data from teachers and administrators in MidCity suggested that in order to compensate for a professional development program that did little to help them work more effectively with students, individuals that worked with ELL students accessed resources that were available to them and used these resources as opportunities to enhance their own professional learning.

One administrator, Suzanne, demonstrated how a sharply focused political will along with an effective approach to professional learning resulted in increasing her proficiency as an administrator in enhancing the learning opportunities for a Hispanic ELL student. First, an

acute focus on a difficult problem of practice—along with a finely honed political will—was at the core of her professional learning effort. As she describes her professional learning, Suzanne took it upon herself to help a struggling Hispanic student who lost interest in attending school. When asked the steps she took to address the student's needs, she described a collaborative process: "I assembled a team of people who could help including the school resource officer, parent, teachers, guidance counselor, and me. We worked hard to find ways to support him to come to school, and to do well when he was here." She also described how the learning effort involved ongoing inquiry. When asked about the actions she took to learn about this problem of truancy for the seventh grader, she explained, "We came up with strategies to help him, every once in a while we would have to meet and adjust the approach. When something worked, we did more of that. Eventually, we found things that worked and we kept doing them." This collaborative, inquiry-based approach to learning reflects many of the principles outlined in the research on effective professional learning (Gully et al., 2002; Sheckley, 2003; Cresse & Hess, 2006).

The professional learning process described by Suzanne provided a counterexample to the professional development options I observed in MidCity. When asked about the professional learning approaches used in MidCity and her perception of it, one accomplished teacher commented, "We are not a part of the process. We are like robots being told what to do." This sentiment is shared by others. The feedback I received from teachers about the professional development was mostly negative. Teachers admitted to feeling frustrated and generally overwhelmed. They were left to themselves, or informal peer groups, to process the information and implement it according to their interpretation.

Despite the general acceptance of collaborative learning as an effective strategy for student learning in educational settings (Slavin, 1980) and the individual attempts from administrators to use collaborative team principles in their practice (Little, 1982; Louis et al.,1996; Rosenholtz et al.,1986), the MidCity professional learning plan for teachers relied on teachers as individuals participating in workshops where information was given to them and where they were expected to process it and move on. There appeared to be a lack of will among district leaders to change the current professional learning system in favor of one that acknowledged the teachers' interest in working together and that allowed teachers to learn from one another's experiences. Doing so would have required scheduling shifts and may have surfaced the ineffectiveness of the current system; therefore, changing it to a more collaborative model was never attempted.

*Self-Regulation, Mental Models, and Inquiry-Based Learning.* Research on these strategies for professional learning suggests that, if used consistently, student achievement can increase at a greater rate than if these strategies are not used (Sheckley & Allen, 2005; Ertmer & Newby, 1996). According to the research reviewed for this study, when teachers are allowed to expand their understanding of the problems that they face in their classroom practice, and are given the opportunity to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning to address these problems, their ability to transfer their learning to the immediate issue—as well as future situation—is greatly increased (Seel, 2006; Ertmer & Newby, 1996).

The data collected during interviews and as a participant observer suggest that the MidCity professional learning model offered few opportunities for teachers to engage in these research-proven approaches to professional growth. The professional development workshops were focused on the Language Arts implementation. Even teachers and specialists such as

social workers and psychologists whose responsibilities did not include teaching reading were expected to attend.

The information I gathered indicated that professionals who did not teach reading (e.g., social workers, psychologists, and teachers of specialized educational programs) attempted to develop opportunities for their own targeted professional learning opportunities during these professional development workshop days. Without the support of district-level administration, however, these attempts were derailed. Everyone was required to attend the language arts workshop.

As I observed them, most of the workshops were conducted by consultants or presenters from outside the district. Typically the sessions were highly structured and focused entirely on the components of the curriculum. Teachers were not given opportunities (a) to examine or discuss the similarities and differences between the mental models they used to guide their current practice and the requirements of the new curriculum, or (b) to plan, monitor, or evaluate their own learning goals and discuss ways to implement the information provided in the workshop into their individual classroom context.

From my perspective, I saw that this situation was especially challenging for teachers of second language learners. These ELL teachers not only had to learn the requirements of the new curriculum but also had to determine how to integrate this new information for their ELL students. Because they received no support or assistance in connecting the requirements of the new curriculum with the needs of their students, teachers in the BEP program became increasingly frustrated with the new curriculum initiative. In turn, this frustration led to (a) the BEP teachers being increasingly isolated and (b) the BEP teachers having few opportunities to collaborate with teachers of non-ELL students.

Overall, in the professional development approach used by the MidCity district, teachers were not given an opportunity to develop a deep understanding of the content being presented in the workshops (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999) or reflect on how the new information linked to the mental model they used to guide their professional practice (Seel, 2006). In the district's professional development model, teachers were not allowed to plan, monitor, or assess their own learning in order to make it relevant and meaningful (Ertmer & Newby, 1996; Deci & Ryan, 2000).

At the district level, if the will existed to support and implement such a professional learning process for all teachers, many of the difficulties and shortcomings associated with the curriculum reform initiative (a) may have been avoided, and (b) may have been rectified going forward. If such a professional learning approach were in place teachers' experiences, reflections, and inputs could have informed an implementation of the curricular changes that benefitted all students including ELL. But in the absence at the district level to implement a professional learning process that prioritizes the learning needs of the teachers who have the most contact with students, meaningful change in practices at the classroom level were thwarted. In turn, the achievement disparities that existed between ELL and non-ELL students remained. There was little opportunity for teachers to learn and use research-based best practices to address these disparities in achievement (Marshall & Oliva, 2009; Gorey, 2009).

In the concluding section of this paper, I will outline several recommendations that educational leaders in situations similar to MidCity might consider as they work to reduce the achievement gaps between ELL and non-ELL students. These recommendations will focus on ways educational leaders can sharply focus their political will to redesign professional learning opportunities for teachers to ensure that all students' needs are addressed.

**Policy Implementation**

As indicated in Figure 1, *The Zone of Optimal Impact for Addressing Achievement Gaps,* policy implementation is an important component of districts' efforts to reduce the achievement gaps between ELL and non-ELL students. Specifically, as evident in the research that is integrated into Figure 1, when policies are implemented effectively the implementation process avoids the limiting practices referred to as "Street Level Bureaucracy" (SLB) (Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977) and "Transformation of Intentions" (TOI) (Hall & McGinty, 1997). The data gathered in this study and observations I made as a participant observer indicated that district-level leaders in MidCity may have lacked the political will to implement policies in a way that could have minimized the negative impact on ELL students in MidCity.

*Street-Level Bureaucracy (SLB).* As noted above, research on SLB suggests that it surfaces when policy implementers, or street-level bureaucrats, dilute the requirements of policy (a) to balance the excessive demands placed on them, and (b) in response to their personal or organizational limitations (Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977). Typically street level bureaucracy results in policies that are diluted and selectively enforced (Honig, 2006).

As a participant observer in a school that houses an elementary bilingual education program, Intermediate Elementary School, I observed several ways that SLB operated to create and maintain inequities between ELL and non-ELL students. For example, street-level bureaucracy was evident in the ways district officials implemented CT Statue 10-226 (e)—a statute that required districts to achieve a racial balance within all schools. The Connecticut State Department of Education, however, provided little or no oversight on how the policy was implemented by local districts.

In MidCity, due to the enormity of redistricting and the potential political controversy of moving outer-city students into the inner-city, the district-level leaders implemented the statute in a way that avoided disruptions within the district. According to the frame provided by Weatherly and Lipsky (1977) the district leaders in MidCity developed "coping strategies" to accommodate the State's requirement that the district achieve racial balance within the schools. Specifically the district leaders redefined the requirement to achieve diversity into terms and practices that were most beneficial to the district. The easiest way to achieve racial balance, as the district leaders seemed to conceive the issue, was to bus all BEP students to two schools, Intermediate and Primary Elementary School. Other options to achieve the racial balance mandated by CT Statute 10-226 (e) (e.g., redistricting) would have required extensive resources. The other option would also have required a strong political will to confront the social and racial issues that often arise when students are redistricted from one school to another. As I viewed the situation, a redistricting plan would have jeopardized the favor and support of key educational leaders in town. According to the analysis of SLB provided by Summers and Semrud-Clikeman (2000), the district leaders adopted an approach that involved the "control (of) clients [students] for bureaucratic purposes" (p.256).

Another component of SLB evident in this case occurred because of the low level of evaluation from policymakers (Honig, 2006). The legislative policymakers, in this case, were geographically distant from the MidCity decision-makers who put the policy into action. As a result, the State of Connecticut's Department of Education solely focused their monitoring on corrective action plans for districts that fell out of compliance (Section 10-226c). This lack on monitoring by the State allowed the district leaders in MidCity to implement the policy in a way that had a minimal disruption within the district.

Once the district leaders in MidCity implemented the policy to achieve minimal disruption within the district, this implementation plan became the "rule." As I witnessed parents complaining about the distance their children had to travel to school—or that their children were placed in two separate schools, Primary Elementary and Intermediate Elementary—the district leaders responded by citing the State statute as the "rule." My discussions with parents and my observations as a participant observer confirm that these parent complaints often went no further than the school secretary or building principal. Self-advocacy by parents of students in the BEP at Board of Education meetings or public forums was non-existent. A review of BOE meeting minutes from 2007-2009 indicated that the BOE never once discussed the way in which this policy was implemented.

Consistent with the SLB practices that are described within the literature, the "coping strategies" adopted by leaders using a SLB approach typically involved adaptations of a policy that impacted clients who were least able to challenge ad-hoc policy implementation. In Mid City, besides speaking Spanish as their primary or only language, many of the parents of ELL students had children in various schools, lived far from the school to which their child was bussed, and worked hours that were not conducive to visiting the school. Furthermore, most of the students in the BEP program were recent migrants to the United States. Understandably, the likelihood of one of their parents taking a stand against an institution like an educational system was minimal. This lack of advocacy on behalf of ELL students allowed the SLB process to operate within MidCity with little resistance.

*Transformation of Intentions (TOI).* As noted above, the literature on TOI provided examples of how the intentions of policies transform as new actors involved in the implementation of the policies (Placier et al., 2000; Hall & McGinty, 1997) and when

unintended outcomes over time change the intentions (Arias, 2005). To guard against these issues, careful monitoring of policy implementation is required in order to ensure that the intention of the policy is maintained with fidelity as it is implemented.

Data collected and observations made as a participant observer in MidCity suggest that district-level leaders did not have the political will to implement the policy to achieve racial balance in a manner that protected against TOI. The transformation in this case centered on the racial balance statute referenced above, CT Statute 10-226 (e). As defined by the statute "racial imbalance" is "a condition wherein the proportion of pupils of racial minorities in all grades of a public school of the secondary level or below taken together substantially exceeds or falls short of the proportion of such public school pupils in all of the same grades of the school district in which said school is situated taken together."

In MidCity, the intention of the policy to create racial balance was guided by the interpretations of the single district administrator who was responsible for maintaining compliance. Following these interpretations, placing the BEP program in two schools addressed the strategic goal of providing the racial balance required by CT Statute 10-226 (e) in an otherwise segregated district. My observations as a participant observer, however, indicated that the racial balance achieved in these schools did little to promote equal educational opportunities for all students or to achieve a racial balance in the schools that reflected the diversity in MidCity. In its current state, students who are sent to Intermediate and Primary Schools for BEP classes remain in the program. The BEP classrooms filled with Hispanic ELL students neighbor classrooms filled with mostly White children. The two sets of students are not integrated into common classrooms, however. Due to their movements from school to school each year, ELL students in the BEP program have commented that they felt

like "visitors" when they enrolled at Intermediate Elementary School. One student, who was scheduled to transfer to his home-based school the following year, wrote a letter pleading to be allowed to stay as a fifth grader at Intermediate. In the letter, he stated that he made friends at Intermediate School and hoped to have earned a safety patrol post the following year.

The intention of CT Statute 10-226 (e) to achieve racial balance—and in the process achieve equal educational opportunities for all students—shifted as it went from the general statute to its implementation in MidCity. When implementing the policy, the district leaders in MidCity favored a path of least resistance that was in line with the letter of the law but did not reflect the spirit of the law to achieve equal educational opportunities for all students.

As a result of the SLB and TOI processes, ELL students in the BEP were subjected to frequent district-imposed transfers from school to school. This imposed transfer of BEP (ELL) students to three schools within four to five years, from my perspective, contributed to the achievement gap that existed between ELL and non-ELL students. The forced transfer of ELL students continued despite the research that shows a negative impact moving students from school to school has on academic achievement (d= -0.34) (Hattie, 2009, p. 81). Similarly, in their meta-analysis of twenty-six studies, Mehana and Reynolds' (1995) reported a strong inverse relationship between a high movement of students among schools and the reading achievement scores of sixth grade urban students for reading (d=-0.25) and mathematics (d=-0.22). Stroup and Robins (1972) identified school change as one of the leading factors (d=0.31) that contributed to high school drop out.

As outlined in this section, MidCity district leaders may have lacked the political will to implement policy in a manner that was equitable and just. The process of redistricting to achieve racial balance in all the schools would have required extensive work on the part of

everyone in the district as well as open lines of communication with parents, political groups, and businesses in the community. A redistricting process, for example, may have created concern among parents whose children possibly would have had to attend a different school permanently. Instead of focusing their political will on a redistricting process that would have been in line with the intent of CT State Statute 10-226 (e), the implementation of policy, as I observed the process, was done (a) by transforming the intentions based on the interpretation of those who were responsible for implementation as opposed to the policymakers who created it and, (b) in a way that accommodated the interests of the district leaders over underperforming ELL students. As defined by Muhammad (2009), this suggested a compliance mentality in MidCity. That is, MidCity accepted the potential negative effects of mobility on a vulnerable population in order to strategically adhere to regulations.

In the concluding section of this paper, I will outline several recommendations that educational leaders in situations similar to MidCity might consider as they work to reduce the achievement gaps between ELL and non-ELL students. These recommendations will include a focus on ways educational leaders can sharply focus their political will to develop and implement equitable policies to ensure that all students' needs are addressed.

**Social Justice Leadership**

As indicated in Figure 1, *The Zone of Optimal Impact for Addressing Achievement Gaps,* Social Justice Leadership (SJL) is an overarching component of districts' efforts to reduce the achievement gaps between ELL and non-ELL students. Specifically, as evident in the research that is integrated into Figure 1, Social Justice Leaders are most effective when they have political acuity, a focus on building coalitions, and the will to mobilize activism that

can help them address social-structural inequities that stand in the way of equitable educational opportunities for all students.

The information gathered in this study and my observations as a participant observer also indicate that the educational leaders in MidCity may have lacked the political will to provide the Social Justice Leadership that could have helped teachers to address the discrepancies between ELL and non-ELL students at MidCity.

*Coalitions, Political Acuity, and Activism.* Coalitions [e.g., the University of Miami's Consortium on Racial Equity, (Cambrone-McCabe, 2009, p. 47)] frequently provide forums for "courageous conversations" on topics ranging from race and cultural capital to academic disparities. In turn, such forums can provide educational leaders with avenues to conceptualize the work involved in addressing educational inequities (Cambrone-McCabe, 2009). When building coalitions, social justice leaders can also empower parents by providing them with information, encouraging activism, and empowering them to address academic disparities.

In MidCity, district leaders demonstrated limited efforts to build coalitions that would address educational issues such as disparities in academic achievement between ELL and non-ELL students. Any work done to identify or address disparities was guided by direction from outside sources such as the regulations under No Child Left Behind, independent auditors, or the ongoing involvement of State Department of Education officials in district-level planning. Despite the collaborative input from other agencies, MidCity district leaders did not actively participate in the efforts to build a coalition aimed at increasing equitable results in student achievement.

Specifically, two outside agencies strongly recommended that Mid City address the academic disparities that existed within the district. Cambridge Associates (2007)

recommended that MidCity analyze data within the district to the causes of differentiated achievement patterns delineated by race (Cambridge Associates, 2007). The Connecticut State Department of Education's Bureau on Accountability and Improvement (CSDEBAI) provided guidance on ways MidCity could address the gaps in academic achievement between subgroups of students. Despite the clear direction and prodding from independent auditors and the CSDEBAI on steps to take to address academic disparities, MidCity leaders seemed to lack the political will to face the issue directly. Instead, fragmented, bottom-up approaches that dealt only with symptoms of the problem were implemented.

For example, under the directive of the CSDEBAI representative to the District Improvement Team, a district-wide English Language Learner Committee was set up to look at the success of ELL students. The directive was given, in part, to address the limits of the existing ELL department. As it existed at the time, the ELL department was greatly understaffed, had limited resources, and even less power to make autonomous decisions that would lead to improvements in the performance of ELL students. The district-wide ELL committee satisfied the recommendations from the CSDEBAI and from Cambridge Associates to develop a committee to buttress the ELL department's efforts to address the educational needs of ELL students. As the committee's work unfolded, (a) district-level administrators were often absent from the meetings, (b) the recommendations from the committee never left the committee, and (c) the recommendations were never implemented into practices that led to large-scale, district-wide improvements for ELL students. Parents, city leaders, or Hispanic community leaders were never asked for input or support.

In my role as a participant observer on the ELL committee, I participated in a great many discussions about the current challenges for meeting the needs of ELL students due to

understaffing. Throughout these discussions there was no evidence of a political will on the part of district leaders to engage in systemic efforts to address inequities in student achievement. There were few discussions of ways to engage city leaders in the inequities that surfaced in the Cambridge Associate's audit and the district-wide data on student achievement. There was no urgency expressed at the pattern of achievement results based on race that existed in MidCity. The only major action came from a recommendation from the member of the committee who represented the CSDE. Based on CSDE requirements, an addendum that focused on the needs of ELL students was added to the district's improvement plan. Again, this action to address academic disparities was driven by the need to be compliant with state expectations—not by the political will of district educational leaders in MidCity.

There was also limited effort on the part of district leaders to engage parents or community leaders in efforts to address gaps in student achievement. Despite the number of Hispanics (20%) living in the city and plurality of Hispanics in the schools (43% of all students are Hispanic) there were no efforts to make this a city-wide issue of achieving equity, of enlisting the support of local elected officials, or of partnering with Hispanic leaders in the community. The lack of attention to mobilization of parents—the group that can have a significant effect on student achievement—suggests that district-level leaders might have lacked a political will to engage in corrective measures. Developing partnerships to address the achievement gap would have required district leaders to invest the time required to cross many cultural and linguistic barriers. Instead of investing this time and effort, from my perspective, MidCity leaders remained complacent with the existing situation and satisfied with simply responding to directions provided by the Connecticut State Department of Education.

*Social-Structural Inequality Paradigm.* As noted in the research outlined in the discussion of Figure 1, issues related to achievement gaps can be placed in a broader context of social-structural inequalities. In their work Lewis et al. (2008) describe a "Social-Structural Inequality Paradigm" which outlines how inequities arise from and are maintained by discriminatory philosophies, policies, and practices toward less-privileged children. They also describe how this paradigm manifests itself in districts that lack equity in resources allocated to all students (p. 136). Lewis et al. also links the lack of equity in educational resources to broader inequities in other institutions (e.g., government) where socially privileged groups often benefit at the expense of less privileged groups.

As described in the curriculum implementation process that took place in MidCity, many of the district's existing policies and practices worked to exacerbate the inequities in educational programming for ELL students by (a) limiting the use of appropriate Spanish language-based reading materials, and (b) not addressing the specific need for providing professional learning opportunities for teachers of ELL students. The lack of resources aimed at addressing the needs of the ELL students in MidCity during the transition to the new program provided an example of the Social-Structural Paradigm elements, such as the absence of resource equity, which appeared to exist in MidCity.

Further, as described by Lewis et al. (2008), evidence of the Social-Structural Inequality Paradigm elements appeared to surface in the manner in which MidCity district leaders imposed forced mobility on an under-privileged population for the benefit of the majority-population. Simply bussing the ELL students to the outermost, least diverse schools satisfied the quota for minority children in these schools. The decision may have been made,

in part, in an attempt to protect students and families of more protected status groups in society from being redistricted into other MidCity schools (Lewis et al., p. 138).

*Equitable Educational Opportunities.* As noted in the literature outlined in the discussion of Figure 1, academic disparities can become normalized, or accepted complacently, as the status quo within a school system (Noguera & Wing, 2006). This normalization of failure can lead to differentiated expectations for underperforming students.

In MidCity, the apparent normalization of failure for ELL students was compounded by the district's tendency not to examine indicators of success. A review of the assessment tools used in MidCity over the last four years suggested that the instrumentation used does little to assess students' language development. For example, the assessments used in MidCity (e.g., the Connecticut Mastery Test, District Assessments, and the Developmental Reading Assessment) are all administered only in English. Data reviewed for this study indicate that the third through fifth grade ELL students in the district scored in the basic and below basic levels on each of these assessments (District Achievement Data, 2009; CT Achievement Data, 2009). Despite the suggestion from independent auditors to use macro-level data to examine "why subgroups are underperforming" (Cambridge Report, 2007, p. 4), leaders looked at only a few sources of data to make decisions about actions to fix the disparities. Aside from the Language Assessment Scale (LAS) link, which is rarely used to make daily instructional decisions in classrooms, MidCity does not effectively examine the areas of students' academic needs, nor does it provide educational opportunities aimed at addressing academic disparities once they are identified. District leaders have been advised by the CSDE on strategies aimed at addressing the gaps, however, they appear to have lacked the political will to act on these

suggestions. From my perspective, it seems that the normalization of failure of the ELL students continues to influence practices within the district.

An equity audit performed for this study provided other examples of disparate opportunities for ELL students. Equity audit data show that ELL students had limited opportunities for extracurricular activities aimed at extending enrichment learning and socialization with non-ELL students. In an analysis of afterschool clubs in the district schools that serve ELL students, data show that ELL students did not participate in these clubs. Conversations with students and parents of ELL students reflect a feeling of limited access to these clubs due to transportation issues, the distance that the schools are from the homes of the ELL students, and the lack of familiarity the parents had with these programs. District imposed mobility from school to school, and the placement of the BEP in the schools furthest from the homes of the ELL students may contribute to the feeling of "disconnectedness" these parents described.

Further analysis of district documents suggested that although recommendations existed to address inequities in educational opportunities, district leaders may have lacked the political will to follow up on the recommendations created. An example of this is the review of the 2008-2011 District Improvement Plan. In this plan, a recommendation was made to study attendance patterns in the elementary level beginning September 2008. This recommendation would serve as an attempt to analyze disparate attendance and potentially improve access to instruction for students. As a participant observer, informal data collected and observations made at Intermediate Elementary School over the last ten years suggest that (a) ELL students are absent more frequently than non-ELL students and (b) ELL students tend to miss more school than non-ELL students when weather conditions are poor. As noted above, 100% of the

ELL students in the Bilingual Education Program (BEP) are bussed to Intermediate School. Conversations with parents in my role as participant observer indicated that factors such as bus delays, unsafe bus stops, and an inability for parents to walk their children to the school contributed to absenteeism. As of the start of the 2010-2011 school year, the third and final year of the plan, the development of the attendance analysis as described in the District Improvement Plan had not yet begun.

These patterns of complacency with inequities in academic and extracurricular engagement appeared to foster perceptual, intrinsic, and institutional predetermination (Muhammad, 2009). Expectations for ELL students became dependent and supported by the experiences educators had with underperforming ELL students. In turn, students themselves often developed an intrinsic predetermination and accepted the academic tier that placed White students at a higher level of achievement than themselves. Ultimately, the institutional predetermination resulted in bussing patterns for ELL students that prevented them from engaging in extracurricular activities or taking advantage of before and after school tutorial support. It created barriers that placed equitable educational opportunities out of the reach for these students. These three types of pervasive predetermination (Muhammad, 2009) in MidCity were met with complacency.

This lack of action on this important issue may indicate that district leaders lacked the political will to do the work involved to address inequities such as differential attendance patterns that may contribute to the educational inequities that existed in MidCity.

Developing the political will to provide social justice leadership requires the willingness on the part of educational leaders to confront difficult issues in a way that may result in conflicts and, in the process, disrupt the complacency of the status quo. Developing

the political will to enact SJL may also require educational leaders to seek the adaptive changes (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997) required to shift the beliefs and culture of a district that has accepted academic disparities as a norm. SJL also requires that educational leaders develop the political will to prioritize the work of addressing inequalities in education (Marshall & Oliva, 1999; Hirota & Jacobs, 2003, Gorey, 2009).

In the concluding section of this paper, I will outline several recommendations that educational leaders in situations similar to MidCity might consider as they work to reduce the achievement gap between ELL and non-ELL students. These recommendations will include a focus on ways educational leaders can sharply focus their political will to be Social Justice Leaders who ensure that all students' needs are addressed.

## Moving Forward in MidCity

The following recommendations reflect a purposeful attempt to systemically increase political will in these four areas as outlined in Figure 1 as opposed to recent educational trends that give autonomy to individual schools that are successful addressing achievement disparities. This increases the likelihood that all students in an urban district called MidCity would benefit from attending schools where they participate in quality educational programs. In turn, participation in these quality programs would have the potential to increase these students' chances of being successful in school (Barber & Mourshed, 2007; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). The following section presents recommendations for MidCity.

The first recommendation to sharply focus political on addressing disparities in academic achievement relates to the manner in which professional development is administered. To do this effectively, a new plan for professional development could be proposed. As noted in Figure 1, the new plan for professional learning could be a greater

priority in the district and more closely aligned to the literature on adult learning (Sheckley, 2003; Clark & Elen, 2006; Gully et al., 2002). The schedule for teachers and students could be changed in order to make regularly scheduled opportunities for teachers and administrators to learn collaboratively (Saylor & Kehrhahn, 2001). This plan may call for an early release of students one day per week. Teachers and instructional leaders would then organize learning opportunities around district, school, and student needs.

In Figure 1, in the innermost right circle labeled, *Instructional Leadership*, and the outermost circle, *Social Justice Leadership*, there are topics and theories that could be considered when developing the political will to establish a professional development program that is responsive to the needs of students. Topics for the professional learning process could be reformatted so that teachers and administrators could engage in ongoing inquiry into how specific areas of research could be translated into effective practices in a way that addressed the achievement gaps. Inquiry projects might be guided by research in areas such as: coalition building (Oliva & Marshall, 2009), effective teaching strategies for all students including children of diverse linguistic backgrounds and children of poverty (Richard-Amato, 1996, Lightbown & Spada, 1999), professional learning groups (Saylor & Kehrhahn, 2001), culturally relevant instruction (Ladson-Billings, 1995), and creating partnerships (building bridges) with parents and the community (Oliva & Marshall, 2009). The professional development would likely be ongoing (Saylor & Kehrhahn, 2001) and learners would have opportunities to engage in each of these topics regularly while planning experiences that implement elements of their new learning (Sheckley, 2003; Ertmer & Newby, 1996).

The second recommendation to sharply focus educational leaders' political will on addressing disparities in academic achievement is to develop a Success Task Force (STF).

This recommendation supports the need to establish political will through Social Justice Leadership from Central Office. In Figure 1, the circle *Social Justice Leadership* has within it the topic, *Equitable Educational Opportunities*. The second recommendation—to develop a Success Task Force—would serve as an avenue for political will to create equitable educational opportunities for all students.

The Success Task Force could be made up of various community members and education representatives. Interview data from the research conducted and documents reviewed, particularly the Cambridge Review Audit, support the need for input from various stakeholders and coalition building to solve problems (Marshall & Oliva, 2009). Led by the Superintendent of Schools, the task force could consist of elected city council members, board of education members, and members of organizations interested in social justice such as the local chapter of the NAACP, parents of students in marginalized subgroups, teachers, and school leaders. The STF could have four major goals a) to study various ethnic, gender, and socio-economic status achievement and success disparities; (b) to improve partnerships with community agencies and parents in an effort to provide sustainable advocacy skills to parents of under-achieving students (Marshall & Oliva, 2009); (c) to identify alternative arrangements for achieving racial balance in all of the schools; (d) to develop recommendations that promote equitable educational opportunities and access for students that MidCity Board of Education will consider. The recommendations presented to the MidCity BOE could include a plan of action to combat the factors that lead to academic disparities and change the culture of the district that allows for these problems to exist unchallenged (Marshall & Oliva, 2009).

Quantitative achievement data which show patterns of deficiencies delineated by subgroups could guide the recommendations. Qualitative data from students, parents, and

district staff who work with students could also be included. Counterstorytelling, a type of storytelling that "can be used to reveal contradictions in the dominant cultural ideology," could be used to bring out the gaps that exist in the perceptions between the marginalized group and the dominant cultural group in MidCity (Williams, 2004; Solorzano & Delgado- Bernal, 2001).

The third recommendation for sharply focusing educational leaders' political will on addressing disparities in academic achievement is to set forth a rigorous agenda of policy review for the MidCity Policy Subcommittee, part of the MidCity Board of Education. In this policy review, similar to the equity audit (Skrla, 2009), the first task should be to examine policies from a Social Justice Leadership (SJL) lens (Marshall & Oliva, 2009). This would require professional development and learning on SJL. The second task would be to identify policies that promote inequities in education. The Policy Subcommittee may then develop and recommend more equitable policies to the governing Board of Education. This third recommendation is driven by the emergence of *Transformation of Intentions* and *Street Level Bureaucracy*, as listed in Figure 1, under *Policy Implementation*, and the need for policies to support *Social Justice Leadership* (Figure 1, outermost circle).

The three recommendations represent an aggressive effort to sharply focus educational leaders' political will on addressing achievement disparities throughout the district. In each of these recommendations, it is expected that a team of individuals, guided by the leadership of the Superintendent of Schools, contribute to the process. Doing so increases the likelihood that it becomes an intrinsic and authentic effort (Gully et al., 2002; Cress & Hesse, 2006, Rosenholtz, 1985). As learned through my experience as the principal of an elementary school, the more engaged members of the school community are in changing the complacency, the better chances there are for improvement to take place (Gully et al., 2002; Cress & Hesse, 2006;

Saylor & Kehrhahn, 2001). The degree to which the outcomes of the recommendations would be authentic and sustainable depends on the ability for the efforts to be collaborative and inclusive of parents, teachers, and school leaders (Cresse & Hess, 2006).

*Moving forward: First Steps:* The implementation of these recommendations aimed at addressing the normalization of failure, or perceptual predetermination, must first build the understanding that change is needed. Through the use of student data (Muhammad, 2009), coaching strategies that support teacher growth (Rosenholtz et al., 1986), and efforts to align values and goals (Lee & Smith, 1996), leaders can challenge the toxic fundamentalist views that serve as resistance to change (Muhammad, 2009, p. 86).

The implementation of the recommendations could be enhanced if district leaders were able to address the specific nature of organizational resistance. As the four stages for addressing fundamentalism outlined by Muhammad (2009) suggest, this implementation could be accomplished by (a) providing clear purpose for change, (b) creating a district-wide culture of trust and competence, (c) properly preparing the teachers and school leaders to implement the changes needed to provide equal educational opportunities for all students, and (d) increasing the monitoring and supervision to increase compliance with new standards while isolating the influence of resistors (p. 96).

## Implementation Considerations

In order to effectively implement the recommendations listed above, several considerations should be taken. Sharply focusing educational leaders' political will on addressing academic disparities in MidCity might require a commitment to change the culture of the district as a precursor to improving student achievement.

Considerations for the changes in professional learning opportunities for teachers could require contract negotiation; involve scheduling changes, and a have a financial impact. In order to effectively implement any recommended changes to the professional development plan, additional time for teachers to pursue professional learning opportunities might be needed. This time could be in addition to the regularly scheduled time teachers are in school. Perhaps the teacher and administrator bargaining unit would want to change language or request additional compensation for the added time and work to plan and deliver professional development.

Renegotiating established contracts could create a financial burden on MidCity, a district that may not be able to afford it. Scheduling changes that result in professional learning opportunities during school hours could also affect student arrival or dismissal times. This may have an effect on parents and daycare providers. If students leave school early to allow teachers to have collaborative professional learning time, parents would have to make arrangements to receive their children earlier. Possible parent resistance could come from having to make additional childcare arrangements to the potential reduction of student hours per year. Lastly, the more frequent the professional learning opportunities, the more likely there would be higher costs to provide it. The coordination and potential additional compensation for in-district presenters and materials would likely increase with frequency of professional learning opportunities.

Similar to the professional learning, there may be a financial impact when implementing any district-wide initiatives such as a Success Task Force. The implementation of the comprehensive study into this problem of disparate achievement may require the support of consultants. Experts such as university researchers and students would assist in the

gathering of qualitative data, quantitative data, and counterstorytelling narratives. Hiring consultants as well as outreach workers whose jobs would be to gather data and work with families of underperforming students could result in costs for the City and Board of Education (BOE). Redistricting may also create financial burdens due to changes in bus routes, the need for more busses, and the potential for a redistribution of the bilingual education staff. If Bilingual Education Program (BEP) students were to be dispersed to their neighborhood schools, language development services would have to be redistributed. This may also create the need for more support service personnel.

The increase in partnerships with community agencies and families would require an increase in afternoon and evening work for teachers. This may result in a change of work hours for current personnel or the creation of a position for outreach and community partnership, or bridge-building (Marshall & Oliva, 2009). Each of these financial implications should be considered if meaningful change is expected.

Meaningful change in achievement disparities would require political will to alter the current structural inequities which allow disparities in educational outcomes to exist (Lewis, James, Hancock, Hill-Jackson, 2008; Marshall & Oliva, 2009). To successfully implement the Success Task Force, it would take a commitment of financial resources, time, and political will.

A consideration for the implementation of the policy review would be the time commitment. The process of reviewing policies with a social justice lens would require the willingness of BOE members to systematically evaluate their current governing policies and the assumption that they all are committed to Social Justice Leadership. There may need to be ongoing support for the BOE members, and training for new members who transition into these

positions. Constant guidance and consultation would be needed to maintain the level of fidelity during this tedious process.

The potential costs associated with the policy review would only be realized after the policies are analyzed and recommendations are made. Some policy recommendations could have more of a substantial financial impact than others. The policy review recommendation, much like the other two, may require a significant contribution of financial resources if specific policies are changed.

It requires political will to change the problematic achievement patterns in MidCity, and an underlying passion for educational outcomes that are equitable for all of the students.

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