EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES FOR AT-RISK RURAL ELEMENTARY STUDENTS

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The purpose of this study was to understand how a rural elementary school achieved high student performance. The study was a case study of one elementary school. Data were collected through observations, interviews, and document reviews. This study provided a detailed description of one rural elementary school’s culture and instructional practices that were adopted by the staff to improve the educational program from a state ranking of Academic Watch in 2001 to Excellent in 2005. This study identified key components of two intervention programs, a professional development plan, and the change process which took place at the school as well as instructional practices in establishing and monitoring goals, using graphic organizers, engaging students in activities, and increasing instructional time.
This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, David, and our three wonderful children, Elizabeth, Joshua, and Samantha, for their support and dedication they have provided me throughout this process and for allowing me the opportunity to fulfill a personal milestone of completing this degree.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

President Lyndon Johnson declared a War on Poverty in 1964 with the development of the Economic Opportunity Act (Carleton, 2002). The purpose of this act was to combat poverty by providing programs and services along with educational and job opportunities for low-income families. A variety of programs were developed as a result of this legislation including Job Corps, work apprenticeship experiences, community action programs, and the Head Start preschool program.

The following year the Elementary and Secondary Education Act went into effect. This Act was the largest piece of educational legislation passed by the federal government for its time. Funding was provided to schools based on low-income status of families for textbooks, supplementary services, and educational practices. Over 90% of all schools in the country received some funding from the federal government, but while the majority of schools received funding it was not equitable across the regions of the country (Carleton, 2002; Weinberg, 1987).

In 1967 the President’s National Advisory Committee on Rural Poverty reported that the rural population had not kept pace with the rest of the country in areas of change in technology and environmental happenings. These delays were also present in the areas of education and training programs. Those who lived in rural areas lacked the information about educational opportunities or the training took place a far distance from the rural community.
Additional issues were present in rural schools. Decreasing enrollment within rural school districts led to smaller class size and the inability to offer specialized instruction to the students because the lack of funding for such programming (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005; Khattri, Riley, & Kane, 1997). Recruitment and retention of educators to teach these specialized classes was also difficult for rural schools. Rural schools faced shortages of high quality teachers because of the schools offered lower salary packages than urban schools.

Holloway (2002) found that it was imperative for rural schools to retain high quality teachers if the schools were to improve educationally. Beeson and Strange (2003) supported Holloway’s findings and recommended that rural schools provide professional learning opportunities and educational experiences for their teachers throughout the school year. These benefits would attract high quality teachers to rural school districts even when the salary package may not be comparable to a similar urban school district.

McLaughlin (1982) found one way to retain quality teachers was to involve the educational staff in developing a strategic plan for improvement. The teachers involved in this process had a vested interest in the school district and were more likely to remain at that district. A component of the strategic plan would be to determine what instructional strategies and interventions were necessary for the students of the district to make academic improvement.

Identifying what instructional strategies were most effective for at-risk rural students was the intention of this case study. The lack of quality research conducted in rural settings has been a stumbling block for researchers and educators alike.
The majority of research that focused on intervention strategies for at-risk students has taken place in urban settings (Arnold et al., 2005).

This case study examined an effective educational program in one school, Elizabethan Elementary School. The study explored the culture and instructional practices that were adopted by the staff at this rural elementary school that improved the educational program from a state ranking of Academic Watch in 2001 to Excellent in 2005.

Background of the Study

During 1970, one out of every four rural families and one out of eight urban families were below the poverty level (Gorham, 1992; Hansen, 1970, Khattri et al., 1997). By 1980, forty-six percent of those families that lived in rural areas lived in poverty (Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990). Across the nation the highest rural poverty rates were found in the Midwest and Southern regions. In 2002, the Midwest had seen an increase from 9.4% to 10.3% and the Southern region had a poverty rate of 13.8% (Cauthen & Fass, 2007). Lu and Koball (2003) found that for families who live in poverty, 83% of the parents lacked a high school diploma. A majority of these families were led by an unskilled male with limited schooling.

The Village of Elizabethan (not its real name) reflected some of these same characteristics during the late twentieth century. A rural community that was supported by tomato farming and a tomato processing plant drew a number of migrant workers to the village. Some of these families lived in camps and were seasonal employees and
others lived with other farming families and stayed and settled in Elizabethan. Although three other industries have remained in the village and provide employment to many of the residents, the tomato processing plant is no longer there. The village encompassed over 1900 acres of flat farm land with newer houses dispersed among the farm houses. Approximately 2300 people resided in the area and the median household income was $28,000 based on the 1990 census.

Elizabethan Local School District provided the educational program for all students in kindergarten through twelfth grade except for those that attended the one private Catholic school. One school building housed the three educational units of the Elizabethan Local School District as well as the board of education offices. The original building was built in 1966 and an addition was completed in 1970. In 2006, an auditorium, cafeteria, gymnasium and music classrooms began the first phase of a school facilities building project. These areas were shared among the elementary school, the junior high school, and the high school.

The achievement of the students at Elizabethan Local School District became public in 2001 when the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) reported the district’s performance results from 1999-2000 in the local newspaper. This report card rated each district on 27 standard indicators. Out of nine school districts in the county, Elizabethan ranked the lowest meeting only 13 of the 27 standards and receiving a rating of Academic Watch. While under Academic Watch the district was required to implement a district improvement plan and improve all deficient scores by 2.5 percent for the next report card.
As part of the district improvement plan, the district was scheduling professional development opportunities for teachers and administrators to align curriculum and enhance interventions efforts. Over the next six years the school district continued to increase the percentage of students passing the achievement tests and by 2005, the Elizabethan Local School District had improved its state performance results to the rank of Excellent, meeting 21 out of 23 of the state standard indicators.

Statement of the Problem

A thorough process was used to select Elizabethan Elementary School as the site for this case study. Multiple criteria including state ranking, socioeconomic status of the student population, and the location within a rural community were a part of the deciding factors in choosing Elizabethan Elementary School. The specific purpose of the study was to obtain an in-depth understanding of the instructional practices and learning culture present at this elementary school. This case study pursued the answers to these research questions:

1. How does a high poverty rural school achieve excellence in student achievement?
2. How did the school develop a culture of excellence for all students?
3. What evidence exists for a relationship between specific instructional strategies and student achievement?

This study is intended to reveal information about the instructional practices of an effective rural school that could be applied to other schools to assist with the intervention of their at-risk students.
Significance of the Study

Research in rural schools found that these schools have unique characteristics that affect the educational program and which differ from urban and suburban school districts (Arnold et al., 2005; Khattri et al., 1997). The intention of this case study was to provide information that may benefit other rural elementary schools. These insights will help teachers and administrators determine effective instructional strategies and practices to be used with at-risk elementary students.

Overview of Methodology

To build an in-depth picture of this elementary school’s instructional program, a qualitative case study was chosen as the research method. Gall, Gall, and Borg (2005) identify qualitative research as “an in-depth study of a phenomenon of interest” (p. 349). This study allowed the researcher to spend nine days at the school setting focusing on the participants’ perspectives and interactions within a school culture. Data were collected and triangulated using interviews, observations, and document review. Triangulation enabled the researcher to use multiple sources to provide correlating evidence on a particular theme (Creswell, 1998).

The use of purposeful sampling in this study was to select one site that offered the researcher a rich field of information (Merriam, 1998). The selection began with the districts in Ohio that had an elementary school with more than 40% low-income families and was located in a rural area. The school’s selection was also based on the school receiving an Excellent ranking on the state report card. After reviewing the criteria
needed for the site selection, only three rural elementary schools met the essential elements. All three elementary schools received an Excellent rating on the state report card for 2005-2006. The phenomenon occurring at Elizabethan Elementary School which finalized the site selection was the 100% passage rate on the Ohio Third Grade Reading Achievement Test.

I spent nine days at Elizabethan Elementary School during the 2006-2007 school year and prior to the 2007-2008 school year. For this study, the participants were interviewed and observed within the school setting. All the names of participants and places in this study are fictional to protect subject anonymity. Data were collected from these observations and written documentation received from teachers and administrators.

The transcription of interviews took place in a timely manner after completing the interviews. The coding of themes began with indicators of an effective instructional program which are listed in chapter three. The themes that were established confirmed and supported the literature review. For verification I clarified any biases or assumptions from the onset of the project (Merriam, 1998). Member checks with some of the participants and a peer review by the dissertation committee also aided in establishing credibility.
Limitations

This study is limited in its generalizability because it only involved one rural elementary school. The methodology of a case study was chosen for this reason because the focus was an in-depth study of a culture or an aspect of a culture (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2005). Although only nine days were spent at Elizabethan Elementary School the predominant themes and perspectives were evident throughout the study. Additional days at the research site could have enhanced this qualitative perspective.

The review of the literature reflected a need for additional research on effective instructional strategies with at-risk rural students. The purpose of this study was to describe strategies and methods for educators to explore and institute in their own educational settings to benefit at-risk rural students.

Definitions of Key Terms

At-risk – a label given to a student who has characteristics that might enable him or her not to be successful in school.

Rural – like the countryside, an area with a population of less than 2,500 people.

State Academic Rankings – the state report card ranks schools based on the percent of students that are proficient on the state achievement tests. Rankings range from Academic Emergency, Academic Watch, Continuous Improvement, Effective, and finally Excellent.
Summary

Schools must provide instructional strategies and interventions for all students to be successful in school. It was important to determine what strategies were most effective for a specific student. The intent of this research study was to provide rural elementary schools with specific strategies and practices that could be used with at-risk students to increase their academic performance. However, the study found that effective instructional strategies were only part of the key to success.

A case study was completed at a rural elementary school in Ohio. Elizabethan Elementary was selected as the site after the development of specific criteria and a purposeful sampling process. Elizabethan Elementary was one of three elementary schools that met the essential elements, but had the unique characteristic of having a 100% passage rate on the Ohio Third Grade Reading Achievement Test for multiple years. The information gathered from Elizabethan Elementary School could be applied to other rural schools to assist with the intervention of their at-risk students.

The review of the literature in chapter two will follow educational legislation from the late 1960s to the enactment of No Child Left Behind. An understanding of the rural community and educational practices are also reviewed in this chapter. The chapter concludes with a variety of instructional strategies that were found to be effective practices with at-risk students.

Chapter three presents the methodology and the research context for the case study. The procedures that were used to select the case study site and the instruments used in the data collection process are also explained in this chapter. Chapter four reveals the
themes and patterns that developed throughout the in-depth case study at Elizabethan Elementary School. The final chapter summarizes the findings of the qualitative research study and provides information about practices that could be applied at other rural elementary schools to assist with the intervention of their at-risk students.
CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

*Historical Policies Related to Education and Poverty*

Poverty the “economic underworld of American life” (Natriello et al., p. 2) has continued to grow as a concern for American families and children since the middle of the twentieth century. Federal programs were developed to reduce poverty across the country. Social insurance programs were first introduced during the New Deal Era in 1933. Social Security, Medicare, and unemployment insurance were social insurance programs. People received these benefits whether they were poor or not because the redistribution of benefits took place across all socioeconomic levels. Older individuals could receive social security or Medicare benefits even if they were from a higher socioeconomic level. The majority of people who benefited from social insurance programs were the elderly and disabled persons who were close to the poverty level (Burtless, 1994).

Beginning in 1949 as part of an additional welfare policy, Senator Robert Taft promised a decent house to every American family. Construction of 810,000 new low-income units was authorized over a four-year period. By 1961, only one half of these housing units were completed (Natriello et al., 1990).
In 1962, 9.3 million families or one fifth of the population had income below the $3,000 poverty line. The federal government classified a family in poverty when a family’s “total reported income during the previous calendar year fell below the established income threshold” (Danziger & Weinberg, 1994, p. 27). Forty-six percent of the families who were classified as poor were rural farm and non-farm residents (Council of Economic Advisors, 1964).

President Lyndon B. Johnson declared an “unconditional war” on poverty in 1964 when he presented the Economic Report of the President. A section of this report entitled, The War on Poverty established government policies that would reduce the poverty level to close to zero by 1980 (Cornia, 1997). Johnson presented two priorities regarding the fight against poverty. First individuals needed to build their earning power to earn a decent wage and second, all citizens would be assured decent living standards at all times.

In order for these goals to be met Johnson suggested the solution of bringing state, federal, and local programs and agencies together to address each individual community’s needs. Local community members would be responsible to develop action plans to determine the best use of these resources to assist the families in the area. An example of this programming was Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). A majority of this funding was directly given to those who were poor from a specific demographic group. Each state determined the standards that would be set for eligibility.
These early welfare policies did not include a work incentive program, which would encourage families to seek employment while continuing to receive some support and service from the governmental agencies.

For schools, the most important component of President Johnson’s *War on Poverty* was the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which directed one billion dollars of federal assistance a year to schools with a high concentration of low-income families. This Act became the largest piece of educational legislation to provide financial assistance to schools educating students from low socioeconomic families. This section of the legislation became predominantly known as Title I (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 1965).

The Council of Economic Advisors (1964) stated, “The school must play a larger role in the development of poor youngsters if they are to have in fact ‘equal opportunity’” (p. 75). Johnson’s program promoted pre-school education through the Head Start program and more intensive services for children of the poor. The funding also included Job Corps and educational opportunity grants. Training programs offered to young adults and teenagers had the greatest impact on reducing poverty (Burtless, 1994). The idea of investment in the mid-1960s was to educate the able-bodied to earn a standard of living by themselves and to provide the children of poor families with the skills and education to learn a trade or occupation, so they would not become poor adults (Burtless, 1994).

Additional educational programs that received federal funding in the early 1970s were the school lunch program and vocational education. The Secretary of Agriculture established a free lunch program for the neediest children (Levin, 1977). With the
increase in programming, educational spending by the federal government raised from 1.7 billion in 1970 to 8.9 billion as measured in 1990 dollars (Mayer, 1997).

However, the economic growth began to slow because of the increase in low paying part-time jobs, the increase in disparity among wages due to increased trade to other countries, and the improvement of technology (Boltho, 1997). Federal social programs were drastically affected in the late 1970s when the economy began to slow because of concurring recessions and an increase in government spending.

Controversy began to arise with the increase in spending by the federal government. In 1974 at a Institute for Research on Poverty conference, Levin (1977) presented an analysis showing that the existing educational programs provided by the government were not improving the achievement of the poor enough to justify the amount of money that was being spent (Glazer, 1986). Studies since have supported Levin’s research and concluded that the most beneficial educational experience for low-income students was attending a preschool program. Studies showed students who were involved in a preschool experience benefited ten years later (Barnett, 1993; Carelton, 2002; Danziger & Weinberg, 1994).

In 1975, the largest Title I study was conducted, Sustaining Effects Study of Compensatory and Elementary Education. This study concluded that the federal money spent through the Title I program had the greatest gains in the areas of reading for students in grades first through third. The greatest gain was made with first grade
students. The study also noted schools that provided experiences in the early grades were most effective, but the influence of the Title I program decreased as a student progressed through sixth grade (Glazer, 1986).

Numerous authors and researchers debated what needed to take place to assist the families in poverty. One group of researchers believed that providing education to children of poverty at an early age would help those children break free from the cycle of generational poverty and gain a better lifestyle. Other researchers believed that society was to blame because decent employment was not available to these families, so they could become employed citizens who could assist themselves and move out of poverty (Lynn, 1977).

Changes in the Social Structure of the Family

The late 1970s saw a change in the traditional family structure. Single parent families increased drastically from 7.5 million children being raised by a mother only in 1970 to 12.5 million children in 1982. These women had to become financially stable and able to survive and care for their families without a husband. The number of out of wedlock childbirths was on the rise also from 10.2 million in 1970 to 16.2 million in 1980 (Cornia, 1997). Concerns arose with children who were raised in single parent homes because they had a greater risk of moving into poverty (Cornia & Danziger, 1997; Penchef, 1971; Natriello et al., 1990).
Although the percentage of people living at the poverty level decreased from 20% of the population in 1964 to 11% in 1973, those families that were nonwhite or working families with children, especially those with a single female head did not experience this reduction in numbers (Lynn, 1977). The reduction in the poverty gap was mostly attributed to those elderly who rose above the poverty line when they received additional income from transfer programs as well as the money they collected from social insurance programs (Burtless, 1994). The Subcommittee on Fiscal Policy of the Joint Economic Committee, in 1972, reported that a single mother on welfare received more assistance through the numerous programs available to her than if she were employed (Lynn, 1977).

A large problem for families of poverty occurred when they retained employment, but were still in need of welfare support and services. A majority of those employed began with a low-wage position with no insurance benefits. Additional funding needed to be provided by the government, so that the family members could continue to be employed and receive additional skill training to move into better paying positions. It was important for continued support to be provided for families in the areas of child care assistance and insurance benefits (Harrington, 1969; Lu & Koball, 2003).

Social Programming from the late 1970s to 2000

The Carter administration fought hard to combat the economic woes of inflation and unemployment. President Carter proposed a two-track welfare system, one for those able-bodied adults who could work and one for those poor people who could not work. In this plan, those who could work would receive welfare benefits and federal help in
finding employment and those who refused to follow this plan would receive no welfare benefits except for assistance for their children. This plan faced much criticism and never successfully left the Congressional floor. Those families who depended on AFDC were most affected by the inflation during this time as the money they received from this program did not keep pace with the cost of living (Patterson, 2000).

When Ronald Reagan became President it was his intention to reduce the social programs budget by $75 billion. His objective was to improve economic growth and increase work incentives, so families would not need as much social service assistance (Bawden & Palmer, 1984). Reagan’s philosophy was that social assistance needs only to be provided to the “deserving poor” (Patterson, 2000, p. 207).

Congress enacted in 1988 the Family Support Act which required all states to participate in the Aid to Families with Dependent Children Unemployed Parent (AFDC-UP) program. The Family Support Act of 1988 revised the AFDC and emphasized work, child support, and family benefits. This law mandated states to implement the JOBS program, which provided basic skills training and job opportunities for single-parent families (Patterson, 2000).

In 1990, a report entitled *Five Million Children: A Statistical Profile of Our Poorest Young Citizens* was presented by the National Center for Children in Poverty. This report stated that one out of four children under the age of six lived in poverty. This number had steadily increased from 1986 where it was 4.8 million to 5.3 million in 1990. The poverty rate was highest in central cities and rural areas (Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990).
In 1994, President Clinton presented his plan for welfare reform. He wanted to provide more training opportunities for those on welfare, and those who remained on welfare for more than two years would be required to participate in community service. The largest question left unanswered with Clinton’s proposal was the amount of jobs that would need to be available for those who went through the job training program. Early numbers projected anywhere from 500,000 to 2 million (Patterson, 2000). In 1996, Congress passed major reforms with the abolishment of AFDC and the establishment of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). This funding was provided to states in the form of block grants.

By 2002, the proportion of families who had moved into the 100-200% below the poverty level increased and by 2003, 12 million children lived in poverty (Lu & Koball, 2003). During this time the federal government expanded its role in public education by mandating state testing, requiring uniform improvement goals, and establishing sanctions for those schools that failed to achieve these goals (Goertz, 2005).

President George W. Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act, which was a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. According to the White House news report, (Transforming, n.d.), the focus of this educational policy was to increase accountability of student performance, fund programs that were proven to be effective and researched based, empower parents by providing them information regarding the quality of the school where their children attend, and increase the quality of the teachers in schools particularly in the areas of reading, math, and science.
Payne (2003a) noted that the goal addressed in No Child Left Behind was to educate all students and develop their “intellectual capital” (Payne, 2003a, p. 3). This legislation included all children even those children in poverty. Payne noted that about 20% of individuals under the age of 18 lived in poverty and she questioned if the country could afford to leave this portion of the population behind educationally. Payne also stated that “while most studies note urban poverty, rural poverty in the United States is growing rapidly” (p. 3).

*Poverty in Rural Areas*

According to the President’s National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty in 1967, programs had not moved at a speed to make appropriate changes in regards to technological and environmental happenings for the rural population. In the 1920s, farmers were trapped in poverty if they did not have the resources to expand their farming operations. A lack of capital, education, and nonagricultural training affected many farmers in the 1930s.

The Commission assumed that the government’s economic resources and technical means could abolish rural poverty. The recommendations from this committee were to guarantee employment for all able-bodied adults and track the effects of fiscal policy on different regions. This information would ensure that there would be assistance provided for those living in rural poverty. The release of this report was timed at the exact moment
when the nation was confronted with the Vietnam War, so the availability of the information was limited to those close to the commission. The recommendations never were fully implemented for rural communities.

During 1970, 25% of rural families were at poverty level while 13% of urban families were poor (Gorham, 1992; Hansen, 1970; Khattri et al., 1997). By 1980, the poverty rate for families in central cities and suburban communities was 54% while 46% of poor families lived in rural areas, though one in twenty urban counties had high rates of poverty, whereas one in five rural counties had the same high poverty rate (Natriello et al., 1990).

Lichter and Crowley (2002) stated that “rural poverty is distinctive because it is often extreme and has persisted over decades” (p. 52). Depressed rural areas where educational levels were low and job opportunities were limited had the highest concentration of poverty (Davis, 1977; Iceland, 2003, Zill, Moore, Smith, Stief, & Coiro, 1995). Natriello et al., (1990) contended that children that were socially and economically disadvantaged are at risk of leading an academically competent life.

By 2002, the Midwest region had seen an increase in the poverty rate from 9.4% in 2001 to 10.3%. The Southern region of the country still had the highest poverty rate of 13.8%. The rate of those families living in poverty outside of metropolitan areas was 14.2% compared with those in central cities and suburbs where the rate was 11.6% (Cauthen & Fass, 2007).
Fitchen (1995) completed a ten-year anthropological study of twenty rural families. Fitchen found that the changes in society, especially the decline of agriculture and the “demise of the small rural community,” have led to the problem of rural poverty (p. 17). Fitchen also observed that most people in this study worked long hours at low-paying jobs, they learned to stretch their money to cover their expenses, and they had aspirations for their children to have a better life. Fitchen defined these families as the “working poor.” It was important for these families to be employed because that was how they measured their individual worth to the community.

Additional research by Conger and Elder (1994) supported the conclusions drawn by Fitchen. This research project studied 400 Iowa families who lived through the farm crisis during the 1980s. Farm families and those families that were displaced from their farms suffered the greatest economic stress during this study. The desire of these rural families to keep out of poverty affected the family structure. Two parent farm families where the parents and the children worked together had become two parent families where one parent drove into the city away from the house leaving the other parent to tend to any farm land that would be left. From 1830-1930, the percentage of children in one parent, non-farm families increased from 15 to 55% of the rural population, while two-parent farm families decreased (Hernandez, 1997).

O’Connor (1992) noted most programs that addressed rural poverty were centered on developments in electrical and telephone systems instead of investments in educational opportunities. Rural communities were aided during the 1970s by newer roads and better communication systems along with an increased demand for agricultural and mining
goods. However, the 1980s brought an increase in real estate interest rates along with a higher value for increased imports, which led to plant closings that left many small towns destitute. Farmlands were being divided and sold off to allow the family an increase in income (Gorham, 1992; Subcommittee on Agricultural and Transportation of the Joint Economic Committee, 1986).

Additional problems affected the rural poor. Education and training programs often did not reach this population and low paying occupations lacked health insurance. Families also experienced additional costs in providing child care while they worked which left the family with less income (Weinberg, 1987).

In 1904 Robert Hunter wrote a book titled *Poverty*, in which he stated that there are those who are poor that will always be with us by their own making, but the poor who should not have to be there are those involved in unjust social conditions. Families in poverty who live in rural areas experience unjust social conditions. Rural poverty is not as apparent as urban poverty because the lack of violence involved or the public disgrace that is represented across the media. Those who live in urban or suburban areas tend not to be aware of issues facing families in rural areas. The disengagement between urban communities and rural communities and an inadequate social structure of neighborhoods makes it difficult for rural families to relate to a distant larger community or to build relationships with people from urban areas (Fitchen, 1995). Although poverty in rural areas is not as visible to the public as that in urban areas, there are common characteristics that families who live in poverty share.
Characteristics of Families Who Live in Poverty

Whether the family lives in an urban or in a rural community there are certain characteristics present for families who are 100-200% below the poverty level. These characteristics have lasting effects on the children who live in these families. In 1991, one out of four children under the age of six lived in poverty (Ashworth, Hill, & Walker, 1994; Lu & Koball, 2003). Research clearly demonstrated that children who experience poverty are more likely to experience multiple spells of poverty throughout their lives.

One common characteristic of poor families is the low level of education of the parents (National Commission on Rural Poverty, 1967; Payne, 2005). Lu and Koball (2003) found that for families who lived in poverty, 83 percent of the parents lacked a high school diploma. A majority of these were likely unskilled males who were 25 years old or younger and had limited schooling (Natriello et al., 1990; Penchef, 1971). These families tend to be not only economically disadvantaged, but also educationally disadvantaged. By 2005 nearly 13 million children lived below the poverty level of $20,000 a year for a family of four. The number of children increased 11% from 2000 (Cauthen & Fass, 2007).

Another common characteristic of families in poverty is to be led by a single mother (Dubow & Ippolito, 1994; Iceland, 2003; Moynihan, 1986; Payne, 2005). In 1993, 47% of all families headed by single mothers were in poverty. This number decreased to 32.5% in 2000 after the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation
Act of 1996 was enacted (Lichter & Crowley, 2002). A major goal of this welfare reform was to provide job opportunities for single mothers because the link between single mother households and children living in poverty was strong.

From 1994—2000, the number of single mothers who worked rose 12% and in 1999 there were 75% of all poor single mothers earning some wage from a job opportunity; however, many of these families continued to be poor because the wages the mothers were earning were poverty-level wages (Lichter & Crowley, 2002). The number of low-income children living in single parent families has remained rather consistent around 50% from 2000 —2005 (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2006).

Along with the education of the parents and being raised in a single parent household, racial composition of the family affects children in poverty. Information from the *Five Million Children Update* (National Center for Children in Poverty, 1993) revealed in 1991, 14% of White children under the age of six lived in poverty compared to 51% of Black children and 44% of Latino children. In 2001, 44% of poor White families lived below 200 percent of the poverty level, compared to 24% of poor Black families, and 27% of poor Latino families (Lu & Koball, 2003). The poverty rate increased for children from Black, Latino, and American Indian families from 2000 – 2005 (Cauthen & Fass, 2007).

Poverty touched all races; however, it also reached across geographic areas. In 1991, the percent of children in poverty was 33% in urban areas and 26% in rural areas. By 2005, the percent of children in poverty was almost identical with 49% of children living in urban areas and 47% living in rural areas (National Center for Children in Poverty,
2006). The information regarding families of poverty dispelled arguments that one specific group of people needed assistance to be moved out of poverty; in reality, poverty is an infection that could reach any family in America (Ashworth, Hill, & Walker, 1994; Zill et al., 1994).

*Education of Children of Poverty*

Children of poverty also experience difficulties in achieving success at school. In the National Health Interview Survey (Zill et al., 1995), researchers found that 60% of children from welfare dependent homes ranked in the bottom half of their classes in comparison to 41% of children from economically advantaged homes. Children whose families received welfare for more than three years showed a significantly lower achievement level on a norm-referenced test than those children whose families received assistance for a short period of time (Zill et al., 1995). Children from low-economic rural areas, where resources were limited, were not exposed to the same educational opportunities as children in urban or suburban areas. From 1980 – 1990 the number of rural children decreased from 11.5 million to 11 million, but the number of poor rural children increased from 2.14 million to 2.19 million (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1994).

While the number of poor rural children increased in schools, the educational opportunities for these students did not increase. By 1993, 59% of the rural schools in the nation were serving students from the mid to high poverty range (Khattri et al., 1997).
Educational policy and instructional strategies that benefited children in poverty needed to be extended to the children of rural schools as the number of students in these schools who were disadvantaged increased (Iceland, 2003).

*Education in Rural Schools*

Research has found that rural schools have unique characteristics that affect the educational program provided for students. Rural schools face logistical difficulties not present in most urban and suburban schools. Due to the smaller populations of students, rural schools often are not able to have as many specialized classes as urban schools (Arnold et al., 2005; Khattri et al., 1997). A majority of rural communities struggle with having the fiscal capability to raise money to fund an appropriate education because of a lower tax base (Fan & Chen, 1999; Nachtigal, 1982). Learning resources, such as accelerated classes or the use of technological devices, have an impact on the students’ educational experience, but may be unobtainable to students at rural schools (Fan & Chen, 1999).

Recruitment and retention of highly-qualified teachers pose another issue for rural schools. Holloway (2002) researched the need for quality teachers in rural schools. She found that for rural schools to improve a priority must be to recruit and retain teachers with professional expertise (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1994). Noncompetitive salaries were an issue for rural schools when wanting to retain a high quality teacher. Holloway (2002) and Beeson and Strange (2003) found that if rural schools were going to retain high quality teachers they needed to provide professional learning opportunities
through mentor programs, pre-service training, and additional educational experiences throughout the school year. These benefits would attract quality teachers to these rural schools.

Determining what instructional interventions or teaching practices work best with rural students has been difficult according to Arnold et al., (2005) because the “lack of high quality research conducted in rural settings” (p. 20). Research that focused on at-risk students and what strategies worked for them usually took place in an urban setting. These studies determined the types of educational strategies and instruction that would assist the students to make the greatest academic gains.

This chapter focused on the policies that have taken place that have impacted children in poverty and public education. The war on poverty was declared in 1964 by President Lyndon B. Johnson and a variety of social programming was developed to aid families in poverty. A component of President Johnson’s policy was the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which directed one billion dollars of federal assistance to schools with a high concentration of low-income families. Although changes in social programming have taken place throughout the years, the federal assistance program has continued for public schools.

Further information was provided in this chapter regarding poverty in rural areas and how the education in rural schools may differ from that taking place in urban or suburban areas. Since the intent of this case study was to determine what instructional strategies were present in a high achieving rural elementary school, the remainder of this chapter focuses on effective instructional strategies that prevailed in the review of the literature.
Instructional Strategies

A number of instructional practices became evident throughout the research. One common characteristic of elementary schools whose students made the greatest academic gain was the quality of the teaching staff. Teachers who had the expertise and knowledge to work with students of poverty were of utmost importance when improving student achievement (Haberman, 1995; Holloway, 2002). Additional information from a Department of Education summary report stated that classrooms must be managed by effective teachers who connect learning to the students’ background and culture (U.S. Department of Education, 1992).

In a study of twenty-one high performing, high poverty schools, master teachers were a strong component of what made these schools successful (Carter, 2000). These teachers were used as mentors and professional development instructors to improve the teaching of the schools’ educational staff.

A study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education (1994) in collaboration with Johns Hopkins University studied six urban programs and six suburban/rural programs. The twelve school programs in this study were chosen based on their low socioeconomic status and having a Title I program at the school. The study of these schools was conducted for three years. The research found that teachers who focused on challenging the students with frequent questioning, exposed them to greater amounts of academic content, and actively engaged them in the material, were more successful with disadvantaged students than teachers who did not use these instructional strategies with students.
Sherman and Theobald (2001) concurred with the U.S. Department of Education’s Summary Report (1992) that curricular and instructional strategies used with students must relate to their culture. Rural schools need to “serve as a catalyst to generate affection for the countryside” and ensure that rural students receive an education that consists of high standards along with an understanding of rural life (Sherman & Theobald, 2001, p. 84).

A common characteristic of teachers who were effective in the classroom was the efficient use of instructional time. The increase of time on-task for students was found to improve the academic achievement for disadvantaged students. Learning opportunities increased for students when time on-task in the classroom was at 70-90% of the school day (Ybarra & Hollingsworth, 2001). Herman and Stringfield (1997) looked at three instructional models that improved student achievement for disadvantaged students. Increasing the instructional time for students was a component of all three programs. Wood (2005) stated that the instruction should include academic activities that demand the students’ attention.

Findings from a summary report from the U.S. Department of Education (1992) found that students of poverty should be exposed to the same academically challenging work as other students. Statistically significant gains were made for students who were exposed to instructional practices that required the mastery of advanced skills in reading and mathematics. The Paideia Program developed by Mortimer Adler focused on high academic achievement for all students (Herman & Stringfield, 1997). Slavin (2002) found that if at-risk students were engaged in instructional practices that included
modeling and empowering, and were instructed in a technology-enriched environment the students began to show greater leadership and improvement in academic skills.

Several researchers studied the Paideia Program as well as two other programs which were successful with disadvantaged students (Herman & Stringfield, 1997; Slavin, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 1994). The Paideia Program included three instructional approaches. Teachers used these approaches throughout the day across content areas. Didactic instruction was when the teacher provided information to the students in a lecture format. Coaching instruction took place when the teacher met one-on-one with a student or the student participated in peer tutoring or a computer assisted instructional time. The last type of instruction took place as a small group seminar where the teacher facilitated the discussion using the Socratic method of questioning.

Another successful approach found in schools was the Comer Model. The Comer Model emphasized school-based mental health services with family and teacher involvement in the intervention process. This program looked at the social, affective, and cognitive needs of students who had become troubled learners. The school’s leadership team would design a master plan of implementation to meet the needs of these students (Herman & Stringfield, 1997).

The final program was Success for All originating at Johns Hopkins University with a reading emphasis. The scripted program involved a 90-minute a day reading block. Tutoring, by a literacy specialist, was provided daily for those students experiencing difficulty in reading. For these types of philosophical approaches to be successful at a
school there needed to be district commitment to staff development and on-going training as well as a whole school commitment to the reform method (Herman & Stringfield, 1997). Although there were no conclusive data regarding any of these programs because success was dependent upon administrative support and teacher commitment, Success for All had data that showed an increase in student achievement for students who were a part of a fully implemented program (Herman & Stringfield, 1997).

A Framework for Understanding Poverty

An additional model for school improvement was developed by Payne (2005). Schools would participate in three trainings during the first year of initiative. During the first training the staff would be provided the framework for understanding poverty and the impact it had on the students’ education. The second session focused on cognitive strategies to be used with students in the classroom. Payne (2003b) insisted that intellectual capital must be established in students of poverty. She defined this as “the development of minds that can operate/manipulate/use the abstract representational language, symbols, and systems of knowledge” (p. 2). Payne noted that for students to be successful in society, whether from urban or rural areas, they would need to have their intellectual capital developed in school.

Payne (2003b) shared a learning structure for educators to use in the classroom, so students would be successful at school. The teachers needed an understanding of the basic infrastructure of the brain. Payne stated that the teaching staff should provide a framework for the input of data and information for the students. This system needed to
be consistent for each content area that the student was exposed to during the day, so that the student had a basic framework of the underlying principles of that content.

The teachers also needed an understanding of how students process information. Feuerstein (1980) identified three levels of educational strategies that were essential for students of poverty to build their cognitive abilities. The first level was input strategies. These strategies assisted the students with planning the quality and quantity of data. Teachers should establish goal-setting processes and task completion strategies in their classrooms. Students should be taught strategies for systematically reviewing information and monitoring their progress.

Elaboration strategies were the second level needed to build cognitive processing. These strategies taught the students how to use the information they received. Teaching the students relevant and key vocabulary was essential at this stage for the students to use the information accurately. The final strategies were the output strategies. During this stage the students communicated the information through a precise use of language or visual presentation.

Feuerstein (1980) found that students who were experiencing difficulty in mastering the material had a teacher who began instruction at the elaboration stage. Feuerstein identified the need for teachers to assist students in developing their cognitive strategies by providing mediation. Feuerstein stated that mediation needed to take place between the identification of the stimulus and the identification of a strategy.
When working with students of poverty, it was important to spend time teaching the input strategies because students were lacking in this area of cognitive understanding. These students only understood about 50% of what was on a page and had difficulty completing tasks in a systematic way. Teachers should assist students in learning how to process and organize information and develop a structure for retrieving and storing information. Payne (2005) agreed that teachers focused instruction on the skill and processing of content information, but did not develop cognitive strategies in the students.

The final training session in the Payne School Model was to instruct the teachers in ways to monitor instruction and address accountability. Teachers would learn how to identify students by quartile, align instruction, measure student growth, and develop monitoring strategies. Further research supported Payne’s Model that schools could improve achievement for disadvantaged students by developing personal relationships and creating a school environment that established high expectations, set clear goals, and constantly monitored progress (U.S. Department of Education, 1994; Waxman, Gray, & Padron, 2002).

Payne (2005) established additional interventions that teachers could use in the classroom to improve the cognitive strategies of students. Payne stated ten strategies in her book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*. After reviewing the research, it has been determined that the ten strategies presented in Payne’s book could be condensed and combined into five interventions for this study.
These interventions will be explained in more detail in the next section of this chapter. The first two instructional interventions presented in Payne’s book were the use of graphic organizers and developing a systematic approach to learning new information. The third intervention was to teach the conceptual frameworks as part of the academic content. These three interventions will be referred to during this study as the use of graphic organizers. These organizational aids must be used within the content and should connect information with past experiences.

The second instructional strategy for this study combined goal-setting in the classroom and the use of rubrics to monitor performance. These two interventions were linked together because the process of setting goals is ineffective unless there is monitoring taking place.

The third strategy was the use of a kinesthetic approach to teaching in the classroom. This intervention helps build students’ mental capabilities by having them involved in active, physical movement to learn academic concepts (Grant, 1985). The fourth strategy for this study combined using mental models to teach the structure of language and understanding the differences between relevant and irrelevant information.

Teaching students to use drawings, stories, or plays to create a mental model of an abstract concept was necessary for students to have a strong understanding of the structure of language and an ability to sort relevant and irrelevant information in text. Payne (2005) noted that the final strategy involved teaching the students to make
questions regarding a text. Students should be taught how to begin with question stems and then develop their own questions. Students should also prepare appropriate answers for their questions.

Research conducted over the last forty years on what educational practices are successful for students of poverty in rural areas is inconclusive. The discrepancies about the definition of rural poverty and the public’s lack of interest about the rural poor have made it difficult for researchers to determine specific strategies that are deemed appropriate for rural students.

The purpose of this research is to determine what instructional practices are being used in an effective elementary rural school with a large poverty population. The next section will provide additional research support for the instructional practices that will be used to establish early themes for this study. The five instructional interventions; the use of graphic organizers, establishing and monitoring goals, the use of kinesthetic teaching methods, creating mental models, and teaching students to make questions were the interventions from Payne’s (2005) research. These five were selected because of the research support from the review of the literature.

The Use of Graphic Organizers

Graphic organizers are the descendent of the advanced organizer, which was developed by Ausbel in the 1960s (Robinson & Kiewra, 1995). The main purpose of this structured overview was to “use a spatial format to convey concept relations” (p. 455). The advanced organizer was designed to be used prior to a reading assignment to connect
prior knowledge with the new information, whereas the graphic organizer is used before or after the reading of the text. Graphic organizers or visual tools are defined as something that aids in constructing representations of knowledge (Hyerle, 1996).

A study completed by Robinson, Corliss, Bush, Bera, & Tomberlin (2003) looked at how college students benefited from using a graphic organizer when they read a chapter length text with multiple themes. One hundred and ten college students participated in this study and the results supported the prediction of the researchers that the students who used the graphic organizer with the text were able to make better connections to the information after a delayed testing period.

Robinson (1998) found most research to be inconclusive about the benefits of graphic organizers as compared to reading the text only, especially when lengthy text passages were being used. Sixteen of the studies Robinson reviewed found that students did better on factual tests if they used a graphic organizer because the organizer presented a scaffold for the students to envision and they were able to recall the new information at a later session.

Alvermann (2001) completed a study with tenth grade students and found a significant difference in the learning for the low-achieving students when an organizer was used with text, but there was no significant difference for the at-level or high achieving student. Townsend and Clarihew (1989) found that students who made prior knowledge connections were more successful completing their reading tasks than those students who had a weak prior knowledge base. When pictures were added to the graphic organizer there was a significantly higher level of comprehension even for the students
with a weak prior knowledge level. Cunningham and Allington (2003) also found that graphic organizers helped students visually understand and summarize information.

For the graphic organizer to be used effectively in the classroom the students must be instructed and trained on its uses (Dunston, 1992). Robinson et al., (2003) found that when the visual organizer was presented with the verbal or written text, the organizers were used more effectively and the students were able to remember the information for a delayed testing period. Tileston (2004) determined that a graphic organizer supported the nonlinguistic learning that took place in the brain and was most effective if presented to the students before the lesson to develop connections between the text and prior knowledge.

Marzano (2004) and McEwan (2004) researched the use of graphic organizers with elementary school students because “organizing is a critical cognitive strategy” that is essential for learning and remembering (McEwan, 2004, p. 128). In Marzano’s (1998) theory-based meta-analysis of research on instruction, it was determined that within the information processing category the use of graphic organizers had the greatest effect size on student learning when compared to a variety of strategies that he analyzed.

Although there was some conflicting research on the benefits of completing graphic organizers especially for those students who were reading at or above grade level, there was enough evidence that supported the use of graphic organizers concurrently with a text selection to develop a prior knowledge base and to aid students in remembering information for a delayed testing situation.
Establishing and Monitoring Goals

White, Hohn, and Tollefson (1997) determined that students who set realistic goals and monitored their progress performed better on tasks than those students who did not establish goals or monitor their progress. The researchers had begun with a hypothesis that the younger aged students would not be able to set realistic goals. When the study began there were 136 second through fifth grade students involved in this research project. It was found that students as young as second and third grade were able to assess their ability to complete a task and establish a realistic goal in the area of spelling. It was noted that direct instruction about goal setting needed to be provided to the students from the teacher at the elementary level for the students to show success at establishing realistic goals.

Marzano (2003) and Schmoker (2001) found that there was an increase in achievement in reading even for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds when they set clear goals and monitored their progress in a timely manner. It was important that students were involved in the actual development and monitoring of their progress (Lane & Beebe-Frankenberger, 2004; Marzano, 2003).

A study completed by Sweeney, Ring, Malanga, and Lambert (2003) found daily goal setting to be an “important component of the treatment package which was responsible for the reading improvements” (p. 6). This study included students who were involved in a five week tutoring program where they established daily fluency goals based on their previous scores. After the five weeks of tutoring, the students increased their oral fluency.
Although the daily goal setting could not be determined as the sole factor of the improvement of the students, it was a vital component. Waxman, Gray, and Padron (2002) and Carter (2000) also found that if schools created a set of shared goals and the students monitored their progress the students made a greater improvement in the area of reading than those schools that did not monitor the students’ progress.

*Kinesthetic Approach*

The third instructional intervention was the use of kinesthetic methods when teaching. Hannaford (1995) stated that “movement activates the neural wiring throughout the body, making the whole body an instrument of learning” (p. 13). She found that the development of knowledge should go with the development of motor skills to express that knowledge. Students should be allowed to write, draw, sing, play music, or dance to communicate their understanding of information in the classroom. She remarked that “the active muscular expression of learning is an important ingredient of that learning” (p. 87).

Standing (1967) spoke of Montessori and her instruction presented in her handbook where movements should be taught with precise actions and few words. Students needed to extend their “spirit of inquiry” through physical activities that developed their mental capabilities (p. 27). Movements should anchor students’ thoughts and make connections for their learning. Thinking was a skill that was dependent on the integrated use of the mind and body system working together. Gardner developed the bodily-kinesthetic intelligence to explain to teachers how they should bring movement together with verbal and written expression to increase student learning (as cited in Hannaford, 1995).
Grant (1985) studied ninety students; twenty-two students were in the experimental group and sixty-eight in the control group. The experimental group received instruction through the kinesthetic approach in the areas of reading, writing, and spelling while the control group was taught using conventional methods. The experimental group improved their scores in reading and spelling over a three-year period and the students developed a strong learning base and better retention skills. The students who had received instruction through a kinesthetic approach in first grade had surpassed the control group in fourth grade in the word meaning, spelling, and word study categories. Grant noted that kinesthetic teaching occurred when students were involved in active, physical participation to discover their educational and individual capabilities.

Wood (2005) stated that students who were kinesthetic learners preferred stories with lots of action and usually expressed themselves physically by jumping, pushing, or pounding. Teachers must provide opportunities for a direct, physical environment within the classroom. In the areas of reading and writing, Fernald (1988) recommended teachers use kinesthetic movements with students when they are learning letters or reading words. Fernald suggested that students trace new words with their fingers until they could copy the word to a paper without looking at the word. When writing, students should be given real objects to touch and look at when they write. Sight words could be taught using sign language.

After analyzing the kinesthetic research, Dennison and Dennison (1994) developed a short simple routine of mind-body exercises called Brain Gym. These activities were used by Hannaford (1996) with students with learning disabilities and she noticed after a few
weeks that the students became more attentive to their studies and their grades had improved. Research stated that vision, movement, and learning were interrelated and a student who made connections through his muscles and eyes to the brain stimulated learning faster than a student who was passively listening to information (Dennison & Dennison, 1994).

Creating a Mental Model to Sort Relevant and Irrelevant Information

Sorting information by creating a mental picture in the mind was another intervention suggested by Payne (2005). Marzano (2005) defined mental models as nonlinguistic representation. Pressley’s (1995) research supported Marzano and found that there were two modes involved in information storage. Pressley concluded that it was necessary for instruction to include both the linguistic form and an imagery form. In 1973, Levin found in his study of reading comprehension with fourth grade students that the group that received information strictly through pictures did not make significant gains over the group of students that had the information presented orally. Levin determined that additional information would be necessary to conclude the effectiveness of pictures alone on reading comprehension. Changes in the way students learn and how teachers should teach has led to additional research in the area of mental models.

Mayer and Sims (1994) found in their research study of 97 college students that the students learned better when the text and illustrations were presented jointly. When students were asked to retain and transfer knowledge, they connected verbal representations with visual representation to make a referential connection. Mayer and
Sims found that even the inexperienced students were better able to transfer knowledge when information was presented with a visual and a verbal explanation at the same time, compared to those students who just received a verbal explanation.

Payne (2002) recognized that students who come from an environment where they had few experiences using language in the formal register had a much more difficult time understanding abstract concepts that were taught in school. She recommended that teachers use mental models such as stories, pictures, or drawings to communicate the information symbolically to the students. She found if teachers presented information using mental models to the students they were more prepared in the skills needed to achieve at school. These stories and pictures were used to teach the abstract concepts of space, time, and directions. Understanding the language used at school and in the workplace was an additional skill that could be taught using mental models and is essential for students when completing their reading and writing.

*Teaching Students to Make Questions*

A final effective intervention strategy was teaching students to make questions. Accessing students’ prior knowledge is critical to student learning (Marzano, 2005). One way to address this issue was for the teacher to assist the students in developing questioning skills. Payne (2005) recommended that students should be taught to create their own questions and prepare answer choices as well. In the report of the National Reading Panel (2000), questioning was one of seven comprehension strategies that had a
solid scientific basis for improving instruction. The Panel determined that question answering and question generation were effective strategies to use with students to improve comprehension instruction.

The U.S. Department of Education (1994) found in its study of urban, suburban, and rural schools that schools made the greatest achievement gains when the students were involved in frequent questioning throughout the academic lesson. Analytical questioning required the students to analyze the information presented to them. This type of questioning at a higher level produced a deeper learning and understanding for the students (Marzano, 2005).

The Research Proposal

D’Agostino, Borman, Hedges, and Wong (1998) completed a longitudinal study of high poverty schools and Title One programs. While they found that rural students entered first and second grade at a higher reading level than urban students, the rural students ended the study at lower achievement levels than urban students at the end of second grade. They found that additional research needed to be completed to determine effective strategies for high poverty rural students.

The intent of this study was to use a qualitative approach and conduct a case study of one elementary school in Ohio. This school was chosen based on its low socioeconomic status as identified by the percentage of economically disadvantaged students and by its academic rating of effective or excellent on the state report card. The
emphasis of the study was to determine if the strategies that have been presented in the literature were the strategies that were being effectively taught in the classroom and used with disadvantaged students.
CHAPTER III

Methodology

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this case study was to determine how a rural school in a low economic area achieved an Excellent rating on the district report card and increased achievement for all students. The information gathered from this case study of one school’s instructional program could be useful for rural elementary schools as they determine a process for improving student achievement by providing the school with indicators and strategies that have been successful with students.

A qualitative research procedure using a case study tradition of inquiry was chosen because the “researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting” (Creswell, 1998, p. 15). To collect data for this study I interviewed and observed teachers, instructional aides and the building administrator at Elizabethan Elementary School. The case study methodology allowed me to obtain an in-depth picture of the learning culture of one elementary school. Merriam (1998) described case study research “as different from other types of qualitative research in that case studies are intensive descriptions and analysis of a single unit such as an individual program, event, group intervention, or community” (p. 19).
This case study explored specific research questions:

- How does a high poverty rural school achieve excellence in student achievement?
- How did the school develop a culture of excellence for all students?
- What evidence exists for a relationship between specific instructional strategies and student achievement?

The review of the literature identified indicators of an effective instructional program, which are listed below, and which served as reminders of strategies to look for as data were collected. As the case study unfolded, additional categories of strategies and indicators began to develop.

- The use of graphic organizers
- Instructional time on task
- Building background knowledge for the students
- Establishing and monitoring goals
- The use of kinesthetic teaching methods
- Teaching through mental models
- Developing a school improvement plan
- Connecting learning to students’ background and culture
- Using master teachers
- Activities that engage students
The Research Perspective

*Case Study*

Merriam (1998) identified five characteristics of qualitative research. The first characteristic stated that the researcher should make an effort to understand the experiences of the subjects from their points of view. The researcher should “reveal how all the parts work together to form a whole” (p. 6). A case study design was chosen, so I could spend an extended amount of time with the participants interviewing and gathering information to determine what is necessary to improve the success of at-risk rural students.

The second characteristic provided by Merriam was that the researcher is the instrument, not a survey or questionnaire. The researcher has the ability to determine emerging themes and seek additional information as the study evolves. The competency of the researcher and the accuracy of information gathered are of utmost importance in maintaining the validity of the study. A third characteristic was observational fieldwork, which refers to spending time in a natural setting. Fieldwork in this study afforded opportunities not only to observe interaction between the subjects in the study, but also classroom designs and instructional documents.

Fourth, qualitative research utilizes an inductive research strategy (Merriam, 1998). The research identified themes, categories, and theories that were inductively obtained from the data. The final characteristic was a rich description. This description was
created through the collection of “multiple sources of information” and it was the responsibility of the researcher to convey the story through words and pictures (Cresswell, 1998, p. 63).

These characteristics assisted in determining the design method to be used regarding this study. This methodology allowed for the study to evolve and take shape as it progressed. Although this study was limited on generalizability because only one rural elementary school was researched, I contend the information gathered could benefit other rural elementary schools when determining instructional strategies and programs that are beneficial for at-risk students.

A case study was chosen as the research perspective so that I could use a natural setting of a rural elementary school, complete an intensive study, and determine what patterns were present. Gall, Gall, and Borg (2005) stated that a qualitative researcher’s mission is “to reflect light on phenomena that members of a culture overlook because they are taken for granted” (p. 349). The case study method allowed me to focus on the participants’ perspectives and draw conclusions as to why the school was successful in improving the academic success of at-risk students. By completing an in-depth study of a rural elementary school, I was able to investigate a culture that I am familiar with, but look at it from a different perspective as an outside observer.

The research completed during this study was to determine the instructional practices used at Elizabethan Elementary School to achieve 100% passage rate of their students in third grade on the Ohio Reading Achievement Test over the past three years. I wanted to discover what instructional strategies and cultural aspects were present at a high poverty
rural elementary school that had achieved excellence for all students. The objective of this study was not to analyze a hypothesis, but to collect information that would tell the story of this elementary school and the academic success of the students.

The case study design allowed the researcher to collect data from interviews, observations, and document analysis to develop themes and provide a rich description of the culture of the rural elementary school and the instructional strategies used by the teaching staff. Wolcott (1994) provided three elements of qualitative writing. First, the researcher writes a thorough description of the setting that tells what is taking place at the research location. Second, the researcher analyzes the data and determines patterns and themes to evaluate the information. Last, the researcher interprets the data and draws conclusions or inferences that can be related to the researcher’s own experiences or the review of literature on the topic. The characteristics of data collection and analysis present in this study were best identified with a case study.

**Strengths and Limitations of Case Studies**

Merriam (1998) stated that a case study “offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon” (p. 41). Thus, a case study allowed the researcher to delve into the culture of the rural elementary school and make inquiries into the instructional strategies used by the teaching staff for academically at-risk students.
By using a qualitative research method, I was able to personally visit with participants and spend extensive time in the field obtaining information and documentation. It is of utmost importance when completing a qualitative research inquiry that data collection and analysis are competently accumulated to ensure the validity and reliability of the study.

Creswell (1998) stated that qualitative researchers must spend extensive time in the field and use multiple types of data to support the interpretations of the research findings. Creswell suggested a number of verification methods for qualitative researchers. These methods included triangulation of information, peer review, persistent observation, clarifying research bias, rich thick description, member checks, and external audits. As themes emerged and the methodology evolved, I adhered to triangulation, writing a detailed description, member checks, and peer review provided by the dissertation committee as the procedures used to validate and verify the information.

Maykut and Morehouse (1995) stated that the qualitative researcher is a participant observer and an in-depth interviewer, but also reflects on the information gathered and develops meanings and themes. The integrity of the research and the information gathered are subject to criticism and review based on this limitation. Techniques such as peer review, clarification of biases, and member checking are the means used to counter this limitation.
Generalization was a further concern in regard to this study as only one elementary school from a rural area was involved in the research. The information gathered represented what took place at only one school, nevertheless, it is the intent of this study to describe strategies and methods for educators to explore and institute in their own educational settings to benefit at-risk rural students.

The Research Context

Because one purpose of the research was to verify the instructional strategies that were most effective for at-risk students, it was imperative that the researcher gather in-depth information from a group of teachers at a rural school rather than to solicit more limited information from a larger, more statistically significant sample. Patton (1987) explained a number of strategies for using purposeful sampling. The strategy that I chose was critical case sampling. This strategy was chosen because the importance of choosing a particular school that met the criteria of having a rural population with a moderate to high number of low-socioeconomic students along with the state academic ranking of Excellent.

I began my site selection by reviewing the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) Web site for schools that have achieved the designation as a School of Promise. The selection criteria for a School of Promise is based on a school that served 40 percent or more economically disadvantaged students, met adequate yearly progress, and had at least 75 percent of all students passing the Ohio Reading Achievement Test and 65
percent of all students passing the Ohio Mathematics Achievement Test. Out of the schools that were selected for this award in 2005-2006, 83 of them were public elementary schools.

Afterwards, I reviewed the schools that received the No Child Left Behind Blue Ribbon Award. This program is a national recognition program honoring schools that make significant progress in closing the achievement gaps between students. I focused on the selection criteria for high poverty, high performing schools. For a school to qualify for this award, the school must not be in school improvement status or be considered to be “persistently dangerous” as identified by the state of Ohio.

The school must have met adequate yearly progress and have at least 40 percent of the students listed as economically disadvantaged as reported in the Education Management Information System (EMIS). There were six schools that were both School of Promise Schools in 2005-2006 and Blue Ribbon Awardees in 2006 or 2007. It was important for the case study that the school had at least 40 percent of economically disadvantaged students as part of the population. All six of the schools had over 40 percent of economically disadvantaged students, but only three were rural elementary schools. All three elementary schools received an Excellent rating on the state report card for 2005-2006.
The phenomenon occurring at Elizabethan Elementary School, which finalized my site selection was the 100% passage rate on the Ohio Achievement Reading and Mathematics tests. During the 2005-2006 school year Elizabethan Elementary School had an enrollment of 278 students where 54 percent of these students were economically disadvantaged.

The racial breakdown of the population was 48% White, 36% Hispanic, and 15% multi-racial. In the elementary school 6% of the students were limited English proficiency and 19% of the students had a disability. The school district spent an average $7,285 per pupil and had an average teacher salary of $35,671. This average compared to other districts in the county, which scored Effective and spent $6,533 per pupil and had an average teacher salary of $38,373 (Ohio Department of Education, 2008).

The Village of Elizabethan blended a rural countryside with three major steel and plastic manufacturers. The thriving manufacturing industry and farm production had attracted migrant workers over the years. The tomato harvesting season in fall drew the migrant workers to Elizabethan. Most families were transient during the harvesting seasons. Recently families had moved into the county and had settled in Elizabethan because the concentrated Hispanic population gave them a sense of security.

Elizabethan School District was among nine school districts in a county in western Ohio. The other school districts that surrounded the village of Elizabethan served a population which consisted of mostly Caucasian, middle to high income families. During the 2001 school year, the State Report Card implemented by ODE ranked Elizabethan
School District lowest in the county meeting only 13 out of 27 state academic indicators. This ranking placed the school district into Academic Watch for the 2001-2002 school year.

Research Procedures

Setting and Participants

As I entered the Village of Elizabethan on the interstate, I was surprised that the road wound directly through a huge cemetery passing a large American flag surrounded by mausoleums and tombstones. The streets were like a bingo board labeled with a letter and a number and crisscrossed constantly by three major railways that were used for shipping products from two large factories. A small downtown area with a number of empty shops lined the street before the school.

The school building, which housed kindergarten through twelfth grade, was nestled in a quaint neighborhood. The one private Catholic school was directly across the street, and students from that school walked over each day to the auditorium for lunch. The school building was built in 1966 and additional space was constructed in 1970. The elementary school was initially designed with the open classroom setting, but now walls were created from lockers, paneling, and moveable bookcases. There was only one classroom with an actual door, and that was the classroom for the multi-handicapped students. Despite the openness of the classrooms the noise level between rooms was quite limited.
As I entered the elementary school portion of the building complex, I was greeted by a large showcase displaying the Blue Ribbon Award and the School of Promise plaques from 2004 and 2005. Pictures of the staff and principal receiving the awards also appeared in the showcase. The school vision and mission statements hung on large white banner paper outside the front office window. The walls were lined with student art work and displays. One hallway led to the majority of classrooms for the kindergarten through fourth grade students. These classrooms were located on two floors of the building. The other hallway past the office led to the fifth and sixth grade classrooms, which were located next to the middle school classrooms and into the high school. All of the students within the district shared the music and art rooms, the auditorium, the cafeteria, and the gymnasiums, so scheduling was completed at the district level.

To construct an in-depth understanding of Elizabethan Elementary School’s process for determining effective instructional strategies, I collected and analyzed data from multiple sources. Seidman (2006) noted that the way a researcher can investigate an organization or process is through interviewing the individuals who carry out the process. Permission to conduct the study was provided through Ashland University’s Human Subject Review Board. The application outlined the procedures for the study and the expected benefits of the study. Permission was gained from each of the participants at Elizabethan Elementary School through a written permission form. Participants were asked to sign the permission form that overviewed the objectives of the study and explained that their participation was voluntary (See Appendix A).
I contacted the building principal first by a letter explaining my dissertation and my reasoning for choosing his school, and then I spoke with him by telephone to establish the first visit time. Due to the traveling distance from my home to the school I chose to stay for two consecutive days each visit. I spent seven days conducting interviews and observations during the 2006-2007 school year with the principal, six classroom teachers, an intervention specialist, an instructional aide, and the HOSTS tutor coordinator. Observations were made during two additional days prior to the 2007-2008 school year where I attended the staff professional development days in August.

Purposeful sampling was used in the design of the study to determine the participants to be interviewed. The principal presented my research proposal to the teaching staff prior to my arrival, so they were aware of my intentions. During my first visit the principal spent time introducing me to the staff and made recommendations of those he felt would be appropriate participants. All the persons but one agreed to the interview procedures and allowed me to observe in their classroom as well as during grade level meetings.

*Mr. Joshua, elementary principal.*

Mr. Joshua, the building principal, had been in education for 30 years, most of it in Elizabethan. He was a small man in stature, with the build of a lightweight wrestler. He was very direct when he spoke to his staff and students usually providing some solution to their problem. He was well respected by his teaching staff and the families of the school and as I listened to conversations he had with students and staff, he had a sincere
interest in doing what was best for them. He was a junior high teacher before becoming an elementary school principal and has been the administrator at this building for twenty-two years.

_Mrs. Consuela, English as a second language tutor._

Mrs. Consuela was the English as a Second Language (ESL) tutor. She had been at the school for 27 years. She was a short lady with long black hair. She had a distinct accent of Hispanic dissent. She began working with the schools as a migrant aide and taught summer school with the county’s migrant program during the summer. She continued to work with those families as the students entered school for six to eight weeks during harvesting season. She had an endearing personality and the Hispanic families leaned on her for advice and support for the educational program of their children.

_Mrs. Lee, fifth and sixth grade reading teacher._

Mrs. Lee was a fifth and sixth grade reading teacher who was skeptical about my observing in her classroom. She did not want to be judged on the behavior or performance of her students this year, as she felt they were a challenging group. She was a veteran teacher who had taught junior high students and sixth grade math and science before teaming with the fifth and sixth grade teachers.
Mrs. Moore, fourth grade teacher.

Mrs. Moore was not one of teachers chosen at first, but she spoke with the principal about her special education experience and thought I would be interested in hearing what she did in the classroom. The students in her class were expected to sit and do their work. She provided assistance to them if they came up to her desk, but most of the time the students worked individually. When I observed, the students were completing worksheets or pages from one of their test prep books. She had the students come to her desk when they were finished with the pages and she would review the work with them. This was her first year teaching fourth grade. Prior to this year she had been a special education teacher and seemed to be moved from grade to grade depending on the number of students. She seemed bothered by the fact that she had to move from grade to grade and was glad to have a regular classroom of children.

Mrs. Hoover, HOSTS reading intervention teacher.

The HOSTS (Helping One Student to Succeed) program was a nationally recognized mentoring program that paired a student who needed help in reading with a community member or high school student. Mrs. Hoover was the coordinator of this program for the school. She began her career in 1978 as a fourth grade teacher and then taught Reading Recovery for a couple of years. She took time off to have a family, but was able to return to Elizabethan as a Title One reading teacher. Eight years ago she felt like she was just maintaining students and not closing the achievement gap. She began to look at new
programs for at-risk readers. The county office received grant funding and began to support the training and operational costs for the HOSTS program. Mrs. Hoover worked with an instructional aide to coordinate the program and then she tutored students throughout the day along with the other volunteers. She was knowledgeable about what the students needed and was well respected by the entire staff in regard to providing information for them to use in the classroom with the low-achieving readers.

*Mr. Scott, third grade math teacher.*

Mr. Scott was one of three male classroom teachers at the elementary school. There were two third grade teachers at the building and Mr. Scott taught the math curriculum to both classes. Mr. Scott had taught third grade for 18 years and had always been at Elizabethan Elementary. He tended to joke around with the students in the classroom, but when he meant business the students knew it. He was involved in the athletics that took place at the school district and the décor in his room corresponded to the different athletic sports.

*Miss Wilcox, second grade language arts teacher.*

Miss Wilcox was a spunky teacher who greeted the students in the morning with a boisterous hello. She had been at Elizabethan Elementary for 23 years. She taught third grade for eight years and the rest had been in second. Her classroom was colorful and student-centered. She was the lead teacher for the new Shurley English program that was
just instituted at the elementary school. She grew up in a town next to Elizabethan, so she was able to share with me some of the background about the perceptions of the school district and the migrant population.

*Mrs. Andrew, special needs intervention specialist.*

There were two intervention specialists at the elementary school and Mrs. Andrew was the one that worked with fourth and fifth grade students. She began her career at the high school working with seventh through twelve grade special needs students. At that time she taught the math, reading, and language for all of those students. After seven years, she moved down to the elementary and has taught third grade through sixth grade. She was a soft spoken lady with great insight into the field of special education.

*Mrs. Smead, first grade language arts teacher.*

Mrs. Smead was the newest teacher on staff. This school year was her first full year of teaching. Last year, she taught kindergarten for half of a day. She had a sweet voice that she used with her students, but was direct with them. Because the first grade class was greater in numbers than the kindergarten class, Mrs. Smead would be moving up with the students and teaching second grade next school year. The first grade teachers departmentalized and Mrs. Smead was responsible for teaching the language arts curriculum. She also was a graduate of Elizabethan School District.
Mrs. Smith, kindergarten and transitional first grade teacher.

Mrs. Smith taught kindergarten and transitional first and would have an all-day transitional first classroom next year. She had taught for thirteen years at Elizabethan. She began her career teaching high school special education and some physical education and then she became a kindergarten teacher and now the transitional first teacher. She had kindergarten students and the transitional students in the morning and then the transitional students stayed with her for the afternoon. Her class size was smaller than the other first grade classes, but she had a number of demanding students.

Mr. Peaks, former superintendent of Elizabethan Local School District.

I was only with Mr. Peaks for one afternoon, but I felt like I knew his passion and dedication towards Elizabethan. He was the superintendent for Elizabethan Local School District from 1994 – 2005. He was an older gentleman who had a quiet demeanor in the way he spoke and how he presented himself. Throughout our conversation he would interject personal information about his dealings with the community, which gave me a more thorough understanding of the area. During lunch I noticed that he had developed a sincere friendship and professional admiration for Mrs. Rinehart, the curriculum director. They were both easy to talk with and Mr. Peaks had a wonderful sense of humor.
Mrs. Rinehart, curriculum director from the county office.

The two days I spent with Mrs. Rinehart led me to believe that she was good at what she did and she knew curriculum. She articulated the changes in curriculum that took place in the district and was knowledgeable about federal grants and programs. She was humble when we spoke about the role she played in the academic improvement made at Elizabethan, however throughout our conversations I could see the impact she made when she became involved in the improvement process at Elizabethan. She was responsible for securing grant funding for the district and implementing the Baldrige Quality Improvement Model. She was well respected by all of the participants I interviewed and an important member of the improvement team.

Data Collection

Throughout the research design, I collected several types of data including observations, field notes, interviews, and documents. Creswell (1998) and Merriam (1998) suggested that the researcher perform data analysis at the same time as data collection, adjusting and revising the kinds of information being gathered. After each day of observations and interviews I would review the data and determine what additional information I would want to collect the following day. Table 1 provides a synopsis of the data I collected.

Seidman (2006) recommended a three-interview series for those researchers conducting a qualitative study. I found this method difficult to accomplish during my visits due to the lack of a concentrated time the teachers had to dedicate to an interview.
I found it more effective to become a part of their daily discussions and collaboration times for this case study because the importance in familiarizing myself with the participants and developing a thorough knowledge of the instructional strategies used at the school. The documented quotes provided throughout this study were from interviews and conversations that took place during the nine days of visits during March of 2006 through August of 2007. Each participant was involved in a formal interview and daily conversations with me.

Prior to the interview process, I developed an interview guide, which consisted of a few open-ended questions. The interview guide provided a framework to ensure the basic outline of information was obtained from the participants. I developed questions based on the indicators for effective instruction that were determined from the literature review (See Appendix B).

Beginning with questions regarding their personal background, I conducted one interview with each participant that included open-ended questions, which allowed me to explore information based on the answers provided by the participant. I included questions about their teaching experience and educational background. I sought information regarding their philosophy behind their teaching methods as well as their professional knowledge of research based practices.
Table 1

*Data Collection Matrix*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information Source</th>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Observation</th>
<th>Documents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Joshua, principal</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Consuela, ESL tutor</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Lee, fifth grade teacher</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Moore, fourth grade teacher</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Hoover, HOSTS coordinator</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Scott, third grade teacher</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Wilcox, second grade teacher</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Andrew, intervention specialist</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Smead, first grade teacher</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mrs. Smith, kindergarten teacher</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr. Peaks, former superintendent</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Rinehart, curriculum specialist</td>
<td>X</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Details regarding their involvement in the school improvement process were also discussed during these interviews. Interviews were tape recorded to provide the documentation needed for transcription and a method for preserving the original
information. Each participant was interviewed at the school during the school day or after school, based on the individual’s preference.

These interviews took place in March, April, and May of 2007. Interviews were conducted with the administration during the summer months. In August, I met again with the teachers prior to the start of school. The interview questions for the teachers were shared with the building principal prior to the first interviews. I reviewed the purpose of the study and the topics for discussion with each participant at the beginning of the interviews, but the participants did not receive a copy of the interview guide.

Documents including primary sources of the school’s state report card, achievement test results, curriculum maps, and instructional plans were reviewed by the researcher. I had the opportunity to visit two local libraries and review newspaper articles and yearbooks. The review of documentation was valuable to the study because the descriptive information that was gathered and the support that it provided to help verify an understanding of effective instructional strategies (Creswell, 1998).

In addition to interviews and reviewing documentation, I conducted observations in order to perceive the instructional strategies being used in the classroom with the students. I spent time in the classroom with all but two of the participants. Because I had not spoken with any parents about interviewing their child I did not feel comfortable sitting in Mrs. Consuela’s small classroom when she was working with a student one-on-one. I did observe her when she came into Mrs. Moore’s classroom to help a student, but she was only there for a brief time. I was unable to observe Mrs. Andrew in
her classroom because during the first four visits she had a student teacher who was teaching in the classroom. During two other visits she was not at school during that time and the last visit she was on a field trip with the fourth grade students.

When observing a teacher I would review the daily schedule that was provided to me by the building secretary and schedule times when I would be able to view academic content in reading, writing, or mathematics taking place in the classroom. Each classroom was observed between three to five times during the research time period. I was also able to observe teachers during grade level meetings, staff meetings, and during planning time.

Merriam (1998) directed the researcher to structure observations around specific areas of the environmental setting, the participants and the action taking place, what was being said both verbally and nonverbally, and any personal participation on behalf of the researcher. Patton (1990) stated that observational data allows the researcher to describe the setting and the activities taking place in this setting. The field notes included descriptions, quotes, and observer notes of what took place during the observation. Merriam (1998) affirmed that “interviewing and observing are two data collection strategies designed to gather data that specifically addresses the research questions” (p. 112).
Data Analysis

Merriam (1998) stated that “data analysis is not a linear, step-by-step process. Data collection and analysis is a simultaneous activity in qualitative research” (p. 151). I began organizing the data with the first interview and observation into emerging themes. I had the indicators of success that were the preconceived categories at the beginning of the study, but these evolved as I reviewed the data and conducted additional interviews and observations.

Glatthorn and Joyner (2005) recommended reducing the amount of data by transcribing the interviews and then determining categories in which the researcher would apply a coding system. I began my analysis by coding the information into the categories from the literature review, and then grouped additional information into other categories. The transcriptions of the interviews were compared with the observations and documentation by using the constant comparative method of data analysis. Glaser and Strauss (1967) stated that the researcher must compare information gathered from interviews, field notes, observations, and documentations to determine tentative categories. The initial categories listed at the beginning of this chapter were constantly evolving as interviews and observations were completed.

Issues of Validity and Reliability

Creswell (1998) established eight verification procedures, which could assist the researcher in confirming the results from the study and substantiate the research findings. He recommended that a researcher engage in at least two of these procedures to confirm
standards of quality and validity of the study. One procedure is that the researcher should have prolonged and persistent observations in the field to build the trust of the participants and develop an understanding of the culture.

Although the days that I visited were limited to nine, I was able to establish trust with the majority of the participants after a couple of days. There was initial hesitation from two of the participants in regards to my purpose of being there. Mr. Joshua explained that a few of the teachers were concerned that I was from the Ohio Department of Education and there to critique them. I was astonished about their insecurities because Mr. Joshua had commented that teachers from other school districts had come through the building prior to my visit. There were additional questions and categories that arose after I began to review all the data which could have been investigated if there were additional time to interview the participants.

Creswell (1998) and Patton (1987) recommended that the qualitative researcher use triangulation to strengthen the validity of the study. Triangulation is the building of “checks and balances into a design through multiple data collection strategies” (p. 60). I used observations, interviews, and document reviews as multiple sources of data throughout the study. Member checks and peer evaluations occurred with some of the participants to monitor my interpretations and findings of the data. To enhance the credibility of the study, I provided the reader with a rich, thick description of the setting and participants involved in the study.
A third technique that I used was to clarify my own biases (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998). The literature review for this study began after I studied the framework for understanding poverty developed by Payne. I read a number of her books and participated in some initial training of her model and classroom strategies. Prior to beginning this study, the staff at the elementary school where I served as principal began implementing some of the cognitive strategies referenced in chapter two. In addition to my interest in the Payne School Model, I had a strong desire to improve the education of our students. My administrative position aided in the understanding of a school culture and the development of curriculum, but it was important that I completed my observations and interviews with an open mind and not make judgments based on my own experience.

Merriam (1998) noted that “reliability is problematic in the social sciences simply because human behavior is never static” (p. 205). For this reason, Lincoln and Guba (1985) created terms such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to establish the credibility or reliability of qualitative research. The intention of the research study was to reveal information about effective schools that rural educators might use and apply to assist their at-risk students.

Summary of the Methodology

This chapter explained the methods used in this case study that explored effective instruction in a successful rural elementary school. Site selection was based on the desire to study a low-income rural elementary school that received an Excellent rating on the
state academic report card. I collected data through interviews, observations, and documentation review. This process assisted in obtaining answers to the research questions and increased the information available to teachers in rural school settings.

By completing a qualitative research study, I hoped to offer an in-depth understanding of the effective instructional strategies used at Elizabethan Elementary School. The case study method allowed me to describe and interpret the culture of the elementary school and the teaching that took place there. Although I observed for only nine days Elizabethan Elementary School, I was able to focus on the culture by immersing myself in the natural setting of the Village of Elizabethan. I attended a school board meeting, an art show, a music program, and open house while I was there. By staying in a local Bed and Breakfast I was able to learn about the local area from talking and listening to the stories from the innkeeper and her other guests.

Other characteristics of qualitative research is making the familiar strange and writing a thick description of the field setting. I researched a culture that I was familiar with in regards to the site being a rural elementary school with a significant population of economically disadvantaged students, but I was able to look at the culture from another perspective. I have included a description of the Village of Elizabethan and the various participants that is intended to “bring the culture alive” (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2005, p. 349).
To insure the standards of quality and verification of the study, a triangulation of interviews, observations, and document reviews was conducted. A rich, thick description of the setting and participants also supported the findings in this study. Member checks with some of the participants, clarification of researcher bias, and peer review by my dissertation committee were additional methods that contributed to the credibility of the study.
CHAPTER IV

Overview of the Chapter

As stated in Chapter I, the purpose of this study was to reveal information about the instructional practices of an effective rural school that could be applied to other schools to assist with the intervention of their at-risk students. This chapter focuses on the analysis and interpretation of data collected from the series of interviews, document analysis, and observations that took place during this case study of Elizabethan Elementary School. This chapter is organized with consideration towards the three specific research questions posed in Chapter I:

- How does a high poverty rural school achieve excellence in student achievement?
- How did the school develop a culture of excellence for all students?
- What evidence exists for a relationship between specific instructional strategies and student achievement?

The chapter begins describing the school district and the community and the process that took place from 1999 – 2006 to bring the Elizabethan Local School District from Academic Watch to a standard of Excellence. The chapter then examines the themes that emerged of improving the school culture and the instructional strategies used with at-risk students.
Elizabethan Local School District

Elizabethan Local School District was a small, rural school district of a little over 600 students in grades kindergarten through twelfth grade. The school district consisted of one school building, which housed all of the students and the board of education offices. During the 2006-07 school year 58% of the students were Caucasian, 28% Hispanic, and 14% Multi-racial. The economically disadvantaged population was 42%, and 18% of the students were those with disabilities. The district also consisted of 5% of the students with limited English and 6% of the students were from migrant families (Ohio Department of Education, 2008).

The Village of Elizabethan was a small town surrounded by four affluent predominately white communities. The entrance to the town wound through a large cemetery and into the downtown area. Many of the store fronts were empty within the downtown area and a small IGA grocery store sat on the corner before reaching the school.

The school building itself rested in a small neighborhood a block from the downtown area. Across the street from the school was the only parochial school in the town. The two schools worked cooperatively since the Catholic school needed to use the physical space of the public school. Students from the private school walked over to Elizabethan for lunch and some additional classes.
The community in general was largely of the Catholic descent. A number of the teaching staff attended the Catholic Church and discussed the happenings of the church at school. The owner of the Bed and Breakfast where I stayed commented on the community that new churches were finally being established because “folks who were not Catholic didn’t attend church because there was no place to go.”

Three main-line railways crossed throughout the town and delivered materials to a steel plant, a plastic manufacturing plant, and a pet food distribution warehouse. The streets outside of the downtown area were like a bingo board labeled with letters and numbers. Extensive farmland surrounded the downtown neighborhoods. Interspersed among the farmhouses were newer, larger homes.

The community had a large agricultural plant and migrant workers would move to Elizabethan to harvest tomatoes. Some of the farmers would allow the migrant workers to live in tents or small houses on the farmland. As the economy changed some farmers chose to adapt their crops, which diminished the migrant population needed to harvest the tomatoes.

The Migrant Population

Mrs. Consuela who had been an English as a Second Language (ESL) tutor for twenty-five years spoke of how the migrant program in the county had a recruiter that went through the camps to register children and get them ready for school. Mrs. Consuela worked with the high school Spanish teacher who was in charge of the ESL program for the district to register children.
She told of the summer migrant program in the county where the students attended summer school while the parents worked. She said that during the summer “we do tests to see what level they are in how limited of English they are and things like that. So by the time when I get them in the fall I already know them.” She remarked that the migrant population traveled to different locations to work in agriculture, so the students would attend Elizabethan School in the fall for six to eight weeks and then return in the spring. “Some families we would see year after year,” she said.

When a migrant family chose to settle in Elizabethan, the family was considered migrant for another three years and still received services from the county migrant program. She felt the reason these families chose to live in Elizabethan was the familiarity and how comfortable they felt with the school. Rueda, Monzo, and Higareda (2004) described the benefit for a school that had a bilingual paraeducator. They remarked that the paraeducator was an “important source of expertise critical for students of diverse backgrounds” (p. 54).

Mrs. Consuela agreed,

when they come to the school or make a phone call, the secretary will look for one of us who speaks Spanish. They are encouraged to write notes in Spanish because I know that would be difficult for some of our parents and I think that is a part why they feel comfortable because they know someone cares about their child and how they can be involved.
She commented that her schedule for the first eight weeks of school focused on the migrant children and when they left the school she would work with any student in the English as a Second Language (ESL) program. August and Hakuta (1997) define an ESL program as one where “students receive specified periods of instruction aimed at the development of English-language skills, with a primary focus on grammar, vocabulary, and communication” (p. 19). This statement was true of the program at Elizabethan Local School District. She said that the majority of her time was spent tutoring students who were behind. She provided periods of instruction in her own room and would spend time in the regular education classroom translating information for the students. She noted, “I help in whatever they are behind in, whatever the teacher says they need help in that is what I do.”

She remarked that the school population had consisted of Hispanic families for a long time, so the staff was familiar with these families. “We have a lot of Hispanic children that it is a normal thing and it doesn’t stand out.” When I spoke with Mrs. Rinehart, the curriculum director, she agreed with Mrs. Consuela’s statement. She said that the teachers thought of Elizabethan like any other school in the state. “It is just who they are,” she said. She remarked that the Hispanic population was part of the school. “The teachers did not treat any of the students different based on their race or language,” she added.

A major role for Mrs. Consuela was to provide the students with a “sociocultural scaffolding” approach to their education (Rueda, Monzo, & Higareda, 2004, p. 56). This term described her ability to use her cultural and community knowledge about the
students and their families to enhance the education of the students within the regular classroom. She told of the collaboration that took place between her and the classroom teachers. Because of her involvement with the students during the summer she was able to share valuable information with the classroom teachers about the students and their academic progress.

Mrs. Consuela felt the success of the Hispanic students was in part due to the parents’ level of comfort at the school. “I think because there are aides here who can help the children with their language they can see the children progressing.” She added, “I help parents if they have a question for a teacher. I go with them and I am right there with them so they are more comfortable.” Although the school personnel did not view their student population as unique, within the state of Ohio the migrant population was a distinctive characteristic of this rural elementary school.

Elizabethan Elementary School

The school structure, which housed students from kindergarten through twelfth grade was first constructed in 1966 with an addition of open classrooms built in 1970. The elementary school was located in the older section of the school building, which had two stories. A large showcase greeted visitors to the building. Inside the showcase were photographs and plaques from the school’s numerous awards from the Ohio Department of Education. In the front hallway by the office hung posters of the school’s vision and mission statement as well as certificates of achievement for each year the school was ranked Excellent by the Ohio Department of Education.
Next to the office was a small room used for conferences and staff meetings. Within this room was a popcorn machine and pretzel warmer, which Mr. Joshua had purchased for school celebrations. Mr. Joshua was known for providing the students with opportunities to celebrate their success. Mr. Peaks, the former superintendent, commented that Mr. Joshua was really good about supporting his staff and there was “no one [who] had greater pride and no one who believed in helping kids more than Mr. Joshua.”

Past the office on the first floor was the HOSTS tutoring room, the two kindergarten classes, the transitional first class, two fourth grade classes, one intervention class, and the multi-handicapped class. The stairs across the hallway from the office led to the second floor. The computer lab and library were located at the top of the stairs and down the hall two second grade classes, two third grade classes, three first grade classes, and one intervention room finished the second story.

Each classroom had one or two actual walls while lockers, cabinets, and moveable paneling made up the majority of the wall space for the classrooms. All of the classrooms and the hallway were carpeted and while most of the rooms did not have full floor to ceiling walls, the classrooms were relatively quiet when school was in session.

Walking past the office to the right, the elementary school connected with the middle and high school in a long hallway. At one end of the hallway were the fifth and sixth grade classrooms were located across from the seventh and eighth grade classrooms. The 2006-2007 school year was the first year that the intermediate classrooms were located with the middle school. The arrangement of the classrooms was intentional by the
administration for teaming purposes, but Mrs. Lee, the fifth grade teacher, was not positive this was the best location for the students. She said that the teachers were not accustomed to the traffic of the junior high and that “the students just picked up on so many things from the junior high students.”

The school district received partial funding from the Ohio Schools Facility Commission to construct a new cafeteria, auditorium, and high school gymnasium that opened in 2005. This project was the beginning section of a new K-12 building, which was being completed in phases.

At lunch time all of the elementary students left to go to lunch and to recess within ten minutes. The students proceeded down the long hallway into the newly built cafeteria and auditorium. Mr. Joshua stated that teachers participated in collaboration lunches if there was an issue to solve. The team of teachers would meet to make a decision during this time. I had noticed a couple of times that teachers met with him during this time to discuss problems or concerns.

One meeting was with the kindergarten teachers to determine what students would be placed in the transitional first classroom for the following year. An additional time, teachers were meeting regarding a union contract issue, as the district was having trouble settling a contract at the end of the 2006-07 school year. A majority of the time I observed teachers eating together for the first part of the lunch time and then returning to their room to work with students who needed additional assistance or who had to stay inside from recess due to some disciplinary action.
The classrooms overall were small and crowded and a majority of the time the students were at their desks completing work individually or with a partner. The walls of the classrooms were covered with commercially made posters about subject matter and vocabulary. Each teacher decorated the room in a theme of his or her choice. Mrs. Moore’s room had a large number of frog materials from nametags to posters on the walls to giant frogs on bulletin boards while Mr. Scott’s room had some Cougar symbols and athletic sayings posted around the room to support the school’s football and basketball teams.

The primary grades had a small reading area and a computer work station which consisted of three computers in each classroom. These computers were rarely used during any of my visits except in the second and third grade classrooms where students were testing themselves on reading selections using Accelerated Reader or entering data for Star Math. The only other time I saw students on the computer was when the library aide had some sixth grade students in the lab finishing a research project.

The overall structure of the building was a late 1970s model of an open classroom school. Although cabinets and lockers became makeshift walls, the configuration of the rooms allowed for noise and sounds to carry from room to room. The rooms although crowded and small were neatly decorated and offered a friendly environment for the students.
The Change Process

Whereas the educational design and structure of the classroom was not out of the ordinary for an elementary school, the openness of the staff towards each other and the willingness to share ideas was unique. Peterson and Deal (2002) stated that “the most profound values and relationships come into being as staff members face crises” (p. 49).
The crisis the staff at Elizabethan Local School District experienced in 2001 when it was ranked in Academic Watch shaped the cultural change that took place during the years following. The public humiliation that they felt when the local newspaper printed that the district was failing sparked this change. The shift in the teachers’ philosophy towards their students and each other began to create a different culture at the school.

Until the publication of the state report card in 2001, the community of Elizabethan was supportive of the school system, but did not hold high expectations for the students attending there. The attitude of low expectations was present not only in the community, but in the elementary school as well. Mr. Peaks, former superintendent, remembered when he was interviewing for the superintendent’s position and visited to meet local community businesses. He stopped by a small gas station and the girl gave him incorrect change and then said to him “What do you expect, I go to Elizabethan. I can’t do math.”

Miss Wilcox, the second grade teacher, remarked that Elizabethan always had some stigma to it as far as the Spanish people and gangs, and that it was considered a rough school. She did not find that perception to be true when she actually began to teach there, but there was not an attitude of high expectations for the students. She told of the atmosphere prior to 2001, “we all had reasons why our kids couldn’t do it, they came
from low income, they didn’t have the support; we always had excuses.” Mrs. Rinehart, the curriculum coordinator, agreed, “The teachers always worked hard, but had reasons and excuses why the students did not perform well.”

In February 2001, the Elizabethan Local School District received a rating of Academic Watch meeting only 13 out of the 27 state standards. This ranking put the school district at the bottom of the seven county school districts. Mr. Peaks stated that the reporting of the district’s failure in the local newspaper was “the biggest blessing we had, even though it was the hardest.” He commented that the information affected those who directed programs, those who worked in programs, and those who taught in the classrooms. He stated that not only the teaching staff went through a learning process, but also the building administrators.

The district administrators met monthly with the superintendent and Mrs. Rinehart. He said they had to work through the “blame phase.” Both administrators were strong leaders and had their own ideas of what could be done and what couldn’t be done to improve the school district. He added that both building administrators had to go through a learning process to allow Mrs. Rinehart to work with the teaching staff. He mentioned that “the hard part for Mrs. Rinehart in directing the administration was the feeling of resentment towards her at the beginning because the county office was coming in here and telling us what to do,” but he felt the district benefited when the county office assigned Mrs. Rinehart to the district.
He commented,

We had a reason for her to be in the district and a process for her to work through with the administrators. I don’t know when Mrs. Rinehart earned her stripes for working with the administrators, but it got to the point that they were talking to her so much that I was the last one to know. That is when I noticed a transition from when I was the only one talking to Mrs. Rinehart, and I seemed to force feed what happened in the buildings, to all of a sudden they were talking to Mrs. Rinehart, and then they were feeding what was happening back to me. That was when I knew we had transitioned.

A number of the teachers I interviewed commented on the important role Mrs. Rinehart had in contributing to the success of the school district. Mrs. Lee asked me when I was talking to her if I had met Mrs. Rinehart yet. She said, “Mrs. Rinehart pretty much helped us map out our indicators to make sure that every benchmark and indicator was covered and then reviewed the next year.” Mrs. Andrew also remarked about the positive influence Mrs. Rinehart had on the staff, “The county office staff came in with in-service training and helped us get our mindset and everything in line with the standards.”

Mrs. Smith, the kindergarten teacher, remembered the day it was in the local paper about the schools failing. She said she still had the paper at home, “That year our teacher work day was spent with the county office coming in and you just felt terrible.” Mrs. Hoover, the HOSTS (Help One Student Succeed) coordinator, agreed with that sentiment. She stated that “the real eye opener was when we did so poorly because you took it as a
reflection on yourself; you just took it so personally.” Mrs. Rinehart added, “A lot of the teachers lived in Elizabethan and they were embarrassed about the publication in the newspaper. All of a sudden it just hit. They recognized the need to change what they were teaching.”

During the 2001-2002 school year, a change in attitude and belief took place among the staff members at Elizabethan Elementary School. The publication of the district’s failing report card was the motivational spark, which ignited a new mind-set at the school among the teachers. Mr. Joshua stated that “failure was not an option.”

Mrs. Rinehart described the teacher work day before school started. She said part of the training was a video about a school in Florida which was a lot like Elizabethan. She told the teachers that the school in Florida was always ranked as the lowest in the county, but after implementing the Baldrige Quality Improvement Model the school even with their disadvantaged student population was able to achieve excellence. A core group of teachers from Elizabethan spoke with Mrs. Rinehart and said, “If the school in Florida can do it then why can’t we?” With the assistance of the curriculum director and the principal, a core group of teachers was able to visit the school in Florida and speak with the teachers about their school change.

Mrs. Rinehart remembered that after the teachers and the principals returned from Florida they just would not be quiet about how good the program was and how it could make a difference with their students. Additional groups of teachers were flown down to Florida to receive training and the teachers and students from Florida came to Elizabethan and worked with the rest of the teaching staff on the use of the Baldrige
Quality Improvement Process to improve overall student achievement. Mrs. Rinehart said that “this process showed the teachers that if the students learned to track their own progress and establish goals it would make them better students.”

Mr. Joshua commented that the tone of the building changed at that time because people were not going to live with a failed report card. He stated that people began to learn what was being taught at the different grade levels; “it wasn’t just a third grade or a fourth grade world anymore.” The staff began to interact with each other and discuss content and curriculum alignment.

Mrs. Andrew, the intervention specialist added, “we were in it for the same idea and we just helped each other out and found time to work together to help the students.” She added that “it wasn’t just the material we taught that we had to change, but how we taught it and how we trained the students to learn had to be different also.”

The openness of the staff towards each other and their willingness to share information within their grade level team and across grade levels was a component of the school’s culture. Mrs. Rinehart stated that the conversations changed. “The staff just quit talking about how low the students were, they just quit talking about it, not all at once, but over time.” She said instead they started talking at grade level meetings because the teachers hadn’t really talked with each other before about curriculum. She stated that “the culture became a family culture where they talked to each other about anything.” The change in attitudes of the teachers was supported by the research of Maehr and Fyans (1989). They noted that people tend to work out ways of getting along among different groups when they are in an organization with a changing culture.
This atmosphere was evident from the first time I sat down with a grade level team. I met with the first grade team and they discussed the uniqueness of the staff as people who were comfortable talking with teachers at other grade levels. Mrs. Smead shared about the time they talked with the second grade teachers to find out what was most important for the kids to know in mathematics and now they have taken that information and were focusing their instruction more in that area this year. She said, “I don’t know what I would do if someone on staff would not talk with me about an idea or answer a question.” She stated even as a new teacher she felt really comfortable going to anybody and asking them a question. “Our staff has a really strong bond and we can just talk to anybody about anything basically, so it would be nothing to go to another teacher if I had a problem or question or concern.”

Mrs. Lee, the fifth grade teacher, concurred by saying the staff is unique and I don’t know what really pulls people together here. They are close and are very willing to help each other out. They will go out of their way for each other and I think the students see that. It is encouraged to ask questions of others. I think people feel vested in the community here, a lot of the teachers are local people.

Mrs. Andrew also agreed when she discussed the staff wearing their Blue Ribbon School shirts on Wednesdays, “I think the camaraderie we have – I mean just wearing the sweatshirts on the same day says we are in it together. We just help each other out.”
As this chapter unfolds the state report card results will be presented along with observations regarding the change process, which took place at the school, the professional development plan the teaching staff participated in, and the instructional strategies that were predominately used in the classrooms to improve student achievement.

Presentation of the Results

*Elizabethan Local School District’s Report Card*

In August 1997, the Ohio General Assembly required the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) to issue report cards about the academic progress of every school district in Ohio. The first unofficial report card in 1999 began to rank school districts with a performance accountability rating. Statewide rankings were based on meeting the 18 performance standards. For a school district to receive credit for meeting a standard, at least 75% of the students had to pass the content area test in fourth, sixth, and ninth grade.

Additional standards at the high school level required that 85% of tenth graders had to pass the ninth grade proficiency test and 60% of the twelfth graders had to pass their test. The school district was then assigned a state ranking based on the number of indicators the district met that year. Statewide rankings began at the lowest level with Academic Emergency and moved up to Academic Watch, Continuous Improvement, Effective, and the highest ranking of Excellent (Ohio Department of Education, 2008).
Table 2 identifies the percentage of students who passed the reading, writing, and mathematics test in the Elizabethan Local School District beginning with the 2000 report card.

Beginning with the 2000 report card ODE began to rank school districts officially on 27 performance results and assign a district rating. Elizabethan Local School District received a ranking of Continuous Improvement, meeting 17 of the 27 indicators. Most of the indicators that the district met were at the high school level with the ninth grade proficiency test and the twelfth grade proficiency test. There were only three indicators met at the elementary level. The students passed only the fourth and sixth grade citizenship tests and the sixth grade writing test. For the purpose of this study, the indicators for attendance and graduation rates were not compared from year-to-year.

Because the focus of this case study dealt with Elizabethan Elementary School, only the indicators for reading, writing, and mathematics were used in the comparison data beginning with the fourth grade proficiency tests. The ninth grade proficiency test scores show the percentage of students that passed the test in the ninth grade and the percentage of students that passed the test in tenth grade.
Table 2


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<td>State Ranking</td>
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<td>Effective</td>
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<td>63.4%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>60.0%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th Grade Writing</td>
<td>93.3%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>75.8%</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>9th Grade Reading</td>
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<td>98.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>97.2% (10th)</td>
<td>93.3% (10th)</td>
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<td>9th Grade Writing</td>
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<td>12th Grade Writing</td>
<td>81.5%</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
<td>95.3%</td>
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Professional Development Plan

When the district received the ranking of Academic Watch, the school district was directed by the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) to develop a district improvement plan and acquire the services of a school improvement specialist. Mrs. Rinehart had assisted the district in writing the 21st Century grant, so she was assigned as the district improvement coordinator.

Mr. Peaks, the former superintendent stated that they were “deeply concerned and were working diligently to improve the deficiencies.” Community members along with staff members, administrators, and a representative from ODE established five goals and action steps assigned to each goal. One of the goals focused on improving student success by providing quality professional development in the areas of aligning curriculum and the use of test taking strategies. In addition the goals focused on providing additional remediation programs for at-risk students.

Mr. Peaks explained that the implementation of this plan was strictly monitored by ODE because the district’s Academic Watch ranking. The district’s professional development component was structured around identifying best practices in the area of teaching techniques and improving the test taking strategies for the students throughout the curriculum.

As part of the district’s improvement plan, the district leadership with the assistance of Mrs. Rinehart wrote and received a CSRD (Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration) grant in the spring of 2001. The U.S. Department of Education (2007) defined a CSRD model as one that was based on scientific research and employed
methods for student learning, teaching, and school management. The purpose of the grant was to improve student achievement for low-performing, high poverty schools.

The Baldrige Quality Improvement Model was chosen by district leaders as the educational reform model. Miss Wilcox, a second grade teacher, was a member of the initial group of teachers who visited Florida and received the Baldrige training. She believed that the change in culture was directly related to the implementation of setting goals and establishing expectations for the students.

She remembered about the visit to Florida. She said that the school, although demographically the same as Elizabethan, differed from the culture and attitudes at Elizabethan. She said that the staff at Elizabethan did not have very high expectations for the students. She said “we all had reasons why our kids couldn’t do it. It was like wearing black on test day, we always had excuses.” Even though the school in Florida had a disadvantaged population, the teachers had higher expectations for all students.

Despite the impact on the teachers from the training on the Baldrige Quality Improvement Model there were few rooms that had documentation of the use of quality tools with students. Throughout my observations during the classroom visits, only two classrooms had any public display of graphs or progress monitoring charts within the room.

Miss Wilcox told of the goal setting that took place weekly with the second grade students to read books and pass at least two accelerated reader tests on the computer. Students who met this goal each grading period could read additional material and received extra credit points. The fifth grade team of teachers had implemented rubrics for
any assignments that the students were responsible for which reinforced the expectations, but the students did not monitor their educational progress, only their behavior on a merit scale developed by the teachers.

At the administration meeting I attended in the summer of 2007, the principals discussed the need to review quality tools and the goal setting process. They shared information about the number of staff members who changed positions during the last five years and the need to establish the use of quality tools in the classroom as a priority for the district. Although both Mr. Peaks and Mr. Joshua stated that the use of quality tools in the classroom was a main reason for the district improvement, most of the classrooms did not display progress monitoring charts for the students to view.

I concluded that in 2001 when the district was focused on implementing the Baldrige framework there was a greater emphasis on the use of graphs, progress monitoring, and student data collection. Over the years though that emphasis dwindled and only the few teachers who truly understood the benefit of using the quality tools in the classroom continued. The professional development on the subject of high expectations for all students and student progress monitoring likely led to the attitude of finding what works for all students to be successful and a greater emphasis on working together as a teaching staff across grade levels to improve student achievement.

In addition to the professional development in the area of increasing student expectations and goal setting, the teachers received training in curriculum alignment, instructional mapping, and test preparation.
Transformation of Curriculum and Instruction

Additional funds were available to the district when it was awarded a federal 21st Century grant. This grant was written by the county educational service center to implement a school improvement initiative, increase professional development for the teaching staff, and establish an after school program. The grant was awarded in the spring of 2001 when concurrently the school district was identified as an Academic Watch district by the Ohio Department of Education.

The 21st Century grant was a federal grant program for at-risk, low income urban and rural school districts to provide academic and enrichment programs to meet the needs of the students before or after school or during the summer. The funding from this grant was used to provide needed services to students struggling in reading and mathematics (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Mr. Peaks remarked that the 21st Century grant money allowed the district to provide professional development out-of-state and to pay teachers and staff members to attend meetings. He noted that had the funding not been awarded the professional development would not have been as extensive.

Mrs. Rinehart stated prior to 2001, the teachers taught straight from the textbooks and thought they were doing what they could with the population of students they had at the school. She added that “no matter what test was given, out of the seven county school districts, Elizabethan Schools and State Schools (another county school district) were always fighting for the bottom of the barrel.” Mr. Peaks said jokingly, “the district was pretty good athletically so that made up for it.”
Mrs. Andrew remembered the attitudes of the teachers regarding the at-risk students, "I think we didn’t have the same expectations for the students, especially those that didn’t have to take the achievement tests. Then later we realized we had to change the way we taught these students because now they had to take the test.” Mrs. Rinehart commented on the teaching staff at Elizabethan prior to the development of a consistent curriculum development plan,

the teachers were working hard, they just weren’t working hard in the way they needed to. We had a lot of people who were helping individual kids, the poverty kids, on their own, but in some way had different expectations for them which was sort of unfortunate. There was not a common goal. She became involved with Elizabethan School District because she had been a part of the team from the county office that had written the 21st Century grant for two of the county school districts. When the districts were awarded the grants, a curriculum specialist was assigned to the district to oversee the development of the grant program. She was assigned to Elizabethan School District and then continued to work with the district as the school improvement coordinator when the district was placed in Academic Watch.

She remembered when the change began, “it started with a core group of teachers wanting to make a difference, then they quit talking about how bad everything was and wanted to do something different.” Mr. Peaks added that the district encouraged this core group of teachers to meet with their grade level colleagues and talk about the curriculum
and what standards needed to be taught at each grade level. The teachers had not gotten together prior to this time to actually look at accomplishments of the students and the state indicators. These meetings focused on what the teachers should do for the kids to make a change instead of the old attitude of “What do you expect? Look at the kids we have.”

**The Use of Test Preparation Materials**

When the teachers began to meet in grade levels teams they discovered that the students were lacking in the knowledge of how to take the achievement tests. They determined that additional professional development in how to prepare students for the achievement tests would be beneficial. Mr. Joshua remarked that the teachers purchased materials to use at least one full month before the state achievement tests to provide students with exposure to many different types of questions. These test preparation lessons were evident as I observed classrooms in the spring of 2007. In every third, fourth, and fifth grade classroom that I observed the teachers were using purchased testing materials or questions from previous state tests that were downloaded from the ODE website.

The fourth grade teacher, Mrs. Moore, was proud of how quickly her students completed two of the three test preparation books that were purchased. She felt that it was important to review each question with the students. She knew it took a lot of instructional time, but felt the students did better by reviewing it together instead of her just grading it. During the three days I observed in her room, the students were working
on some type of test question. Two students were asked about their preparation for the achievement test and they thought all of the test preparation books and the writing practice helped them get ready.

Mrs. Consuela, the ESL tutor, remarked on the test preparation that took place in the classrooms. She said, “I think the teachers realize what the need is and they focus on it. I see them trying really hard like now preparing for the test they will do the practice and a lot of review.”

Fifth grade teacher, Mrs. Lee, was using the test preparation materials when I observed in her classroom. She felt torn between these materials and traditional reading literature that she wanted to expose the students to during the year. She stated that Mr. Joshua was fine with any materials the teachers chose to use as long as the teacher was asking questions in the same way the students would be asked on the achievement tests. “The students need to be exposed to different levels of questions, not just retelling and summarizing,” she stated. Although test preparation was not evident in the literature review as an effective instructional strategy, it was predominantly used in the classrooms beginning in third grade during the month or two before the state achievement tests.

Along with professional development for the teachers, the implementation of two intervention programs was part of the requirement for the funding of the 21st Century grant. The two programs initiated at the elementary school were an after school tutoring program for students in grades first through sixth and the HOSTS (Help One Student to Succeed) program.
A number of teachers that were interviewed stated that the additional intervention programs like the HOSTS program and the after school tutoring were making a difference in the success of the students. Mrs. Smead, a first grade teacher, felt the after school program provided the additional support for students who were struggling. The third grade teachers also agreed that the after school program made a difference for those students who were struggling academically.

After School Tutoring Program

Elementary students were invited by teacher request to participate in the program. Prior to the 2006-2007 school year, any student that the teachers wanted to attend the program was invited, but due to a loss in grant funding the numbers of students invited were limited to the most at risk. Thirty first through third grade students met on Mondays and Tuesdays and thirty students in fourth through sixth grade attended on Wednesday and Thursday for one and a half hours each day.

The first half hour the after school coordinator provided a snack and took attendance then the students went outside or to the gymnasium to play. The teachers then met with the students for an hour and assisted them with their homework for half of the time and then provided a reinforcement lesson in preparation for the achievement tests for the rest of the time.
Mr. Peaks noted that when the program began

We got some people to stay after school and they not only helped kids, but they realized where their instruction wasn’t hitting the point, and they realized what they were doing in the classroom the kids weren’t getting. And once that happened it didn’t take long for the message to be shared. I think three years before, that the message would have been shared and it would have been the kids’ fault, but now they were asking what their responsibility was for not getting the target across? You can’t teach that to anyone or give that to anyone; they had to experience it.

Although the after school program coordinator did not have any valid documentation regarding the success of the program and student achievement; it was noted that the year the school did not have an after school program, Mrs. Rinehart heard from many of the teachers “what a difference they saw in the students because they were not receiving the extra help.”

HOSTS (Help One Student to Succeed)

In addition to the after school tutoring program the HOSTS (Help One Student to Succeed) program, which began in 2000 was a major component of student success at the elementary school. The salaries for Mrs. Hoover, the program director, along with a paraprofessional instructional aide were paid for from 21st Century grant. The HOSTS
program offered individual or small group tutoring for students that were at-risk in the
area of reading. This program utilized community volunteers from a variety of companies
as well as high school student mentors to assist students who needed additional help with
learning to read.

Mrs. Hoover who was a traditional Title One teacher prior to becoming the HOSTS
coordinator found this program at a nearby school and thought it was a nice fit for
Elizabethan. She stated that the daily tutoring moved the students along and accelerated
them as quickly as possible. She felt prior to the development of this program she was
“just maintaining students and keeping them at the same pace, but not accelerating them.”

The students were assessed at the beginning of the year using the Dynamic Indicators
of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS). This assessment was completed by Mrs.
Hoover with all students in grades first, second, and third, and any referrals from the
fourth and fifth grade teachers. This assessment provided an oral reading fluency
benchmark for the student and allowed Mrs. Hoover to rank the students based on need.

After the students were ranked Mrs. Hoover scheduled the students into half-hour
time slots. Each student received tutoring four days a week and had a variety of mentor
tutors. The tutoring time was a structured academic mentoring program with activities
that were individually developed by Mrs. Hoover to meet the needs of the student. Each
day the student received instruction in language, vocabulary development, and literacy.
The activities reinforced the instruction that took place in the regular classroom.
Mr. Joshua, the principal, found an additional benefit of the program was the personal relationships that developed between the students and their tutors. Mrs. Hoover agreed that the strength of the program was the intense one-on-one instruction that the students received as well as the praise and support provided by the tutor. She stated, “It develops self esteem and confidence that the student hopefully took with them to complete independent assessments and the achievement tests.”

Mr. Peaks, the former superintendent, stated that the HOSTS program allowed businesses to be involved in the schools. He felt Mrs. Hoover, who was an Elizabethan graduate, was able to talk with the businesses and promote the mentoring program. She stated, “A lot of business leaders did not live in the community because they hadn’t heard good things about our school so they went to other places where they heard good things.” He added that the “talking about helping the kids in the community and how well the kids were doing because they were helping, led to an attitude change with the community leaders and their businesses.”

Additional Intervention for Intermediate Students

While the HOSTS program focused on reading intervention with the primary students, beginning in fourth grade the classroom teachers earmarked twenty to forty minutes a day as reinforcement time. During this time, students met with specific grade level teachers to ask questions about assignments or to review material or receive additional instruction. Mrs. Lee, the fifth grade teacher, remarked that the teachers would work with groups of four to five students during reinforcement time. The intervention
specialist, Mrs. Andrew, assisted during the reinforcement time also. She helped in the regular class or took a group to her room to receive assistance. Mrs. Lee stated that some years most of the one-to-one tutoring took place during lunch when the rest of the class was at recess because of the need to assist a lot of students.

Longitudinal data regarding students’ reading levels was not available from Mrs. Hoover. She kept information on students’ progress while they were in the HOSTS program, but there was not any follow-up after they exited the program. Review of the state report cards from the 2003-2006 school years showed a steady increase in the number of students who passed the reading achievement tests at the fourth, fifth, and sixth grade level. These students would have been involved in the HOSTS program during their primary years. With over 85% of the students passing the reading achievement test each year and most years the passage rate was over 90%, the HOSTS program has proven to be successful component in the educational system for those at-risk readers.

Mrs. Hoover commented that each intervention program was part of the whole academic success of Elizabethan Elementary School. These three intervention programs, the after school tutoring, the HOSTS program, and the reinforcement time for students in grades four through six complemented the academic instruction in the classroom and provided additional assistance to the at-risk population.
Instructional Strategies

Through the literature review, I had identified a number of instructional strategies that when used with at-risk students proved successful. The initial intent of the case study was to explore the extent to which these strategies had on improving student achievement. Although I discovered that the culture and the change in attitudes of the teaching staff played a larger role than expected, there were some effective instructional strategies present at Elizabethan Elementary School that when used with at-risk students seemed to make a difference in their academic achievement. Four instructional strategies that were evident throughout the elementary school are described below.

Establishing and Monitoring Goals

Developing and monitoring goals was first implemented after the school district received training in the Baldrige Quality Improvement Model. Through the professional development training the teachers were shown a number of quality tools that could be used with students in the classroom. White, Hohn, and Tollefson (1997) found that students who set goals and monitored their progress achieved at a higher level than those students who did not establish goals and monitor their progress.

The second grade students in Miss Wilcox’s room established goals for reading and writing. She stated that “making the kids more aware by setting goals and having the students determine what level they could reach made them more responsible. It has made a huge difference.” She found academic benefit for her elementary students to receive
direct instruction in goal setting and monitoring. This instruction was supported by Marzano’s (2003) research on goal setting. He noted that for this process to have a positive effect on student achievement the students must have an understanding of how to establish realistic goals and then be involved in maintaining their own individual goals.

In Mr. Scott’s third grade math class the students worked on a computer program to monitor their math progress. Each student had a folder which contained a chart. As they completed skill tests they entered the data in the computer and were provided with a score. This score was transcribed onto their chart and the students could visually notice their improvement. He found this program to be a good incentive and review for the students. He was able to share the charts with the parents at conference time, which provided the parents with information about the students’ progress.

The fifth grade and sixth grade students established content area goals with each teacher. The teachers had rubrics for every project or large assignment so the students were aware of the expectations. Each student had a folder that listed a record of their scores and the goal that was established for that nine week period.

Although the goal setting was evident in the classrooms it was not as prevalent as it was in the past. Through the review of documentation provided by Mr. Joshua and the teachers, there was evidence that goal setting and monitoring had been used in previous years, but had declined over the past three years. Mr. Joshua gave me a copy of a student data folder that the classroom teachers adopted when they began the Baldrige process in 2001.
These folders had evolved over the past five years and had become more of a portfolio or assessment notebook. The indicator checklist was the only piece of the original data folder that I viewed in the student’s assessment notebook. Mr. Joshua contended that the use of quality tools was one of the main reasons the school has had such improvement. He commented later that there was a need to revisit the use of these tools because he was not seeing them used as much as they had been in previous years.

**Instructional Time on Task**

The direct use of instructional time was evident from the moment I entered the building. There was nothing exceptional about the design of the rooms or the teaching environment; however, the intentional use of instructional time was fascinating. Students began changing classes at the first grade level and although there was noise when the classes moved from room to room, once instruction began it was hard to notice the open classrooms. Mrs. Smead, the first grade teacher, commented that teaching time was important, and they tried to keep the instruction from being interrupted before lunch.

In another first grade classroom I noticed that the morning routine began immediately after the bell rang with a short literature lesson by the teacher. After the instruction, the students completed a written practice page while the teacher took attendance and lunch count. When the majority of the students completed the written assignment they would move towards a reading area and surround the teacher who was seated in a large rocking chair. At this time the teacher read a printed announcement sheet provided by the principal and began her language lesson of the day. Students who
received tutoring through the HOSTS program left the classrooms and proceeded directly to the area where they were tutored without interrupting the learning taking place in the classroom.

In a study completed by Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Linver, and Hofferth (2003) schools that had students engaged in core academic subjects for at least 65% of the day were able to provide a well-rounded school day for the students by providing enrichment and recess activities. Lee, Kelly, and Nyre (1999) supported this research in their study by stating that students showed a better completion rate of their work if the students were engaged more than 55% of the time. Although some students in the study did not improve, the students who did stay on task more than 55% of the time were successful in their school work. For three days, while I completed observations, each hour I charted the amount of time the students spent engaged in core academic subjects and on the average the students at Elizabethan Elementary were on task for 74% of their school day.

Use of Graphic Organizers

Hyerle (1996) defined the graphic organizer as a visual tool that aids in constructing representations of knowledge. These visual tools were present in the classrooms as posters on the walls and as attachments for writing prompts. The use of these tools was modeled by the classroom teacher in the primary grades and beginning with second grade the students were required to complete some organizers as part of a daily reading journal (See Appendix C).
Miss Wilcox, the second grade teacher, stated that they were using more organizers after talking with the third grade teachers. They found that the students needed more preparation in organizing their thoughts, when writing on their own. She said, “We thought about what we were doing and we passed out the paper and gave them ten different ways on how to do the page instead of letting them think for themselves.” The visual organizers gave the students a framework for organizing the information they were reading to use later on to answer questions.

Tileston (2004) supported the use of graphic organizers in this way. She found that the graphic organizer was most effective when it was presented to the students before the lesson, so that the students could develop connections between the text and their prior knowledge. Marzano (2004) and McEwan (2004) also supported the use of graphic organizers at the elementary level to develop critical cognitive learning.

The third, fourth, and fifth grade classrooms that I observed used graphic organizers as part of the test preparation lessons. The teachers at these grade levels knew the students would be exposed to these methods when they took the achievement tests so they instructed the students about the use of diagrams and charts when completing reports or organizing thoughts. Mrs. Moore, the fourth grade teacher, had the students completing a Venn diagram about information they wanted to include in a social studies report. This was a major instructional strategy that was prevalent in the literature review; however, it was infrequently used in the classrooms at Elizabethan. A majority of the classrooms used graphic organizers when teaching the students to prepare for the reading and writing achievement tests.
Activities that Engage Students

Throughout the literature review evidence was found to support the kinesthetic approach towards instruction. Hannaford (1995) remarked “movement activates the neural wiring throughout the body making the whole body the instrument of learning” (p. 13). Furthermore, she stated that “thinking itself is actually a skill dependent upon the whole, integrated mind and body system” (p. 87). The most predominant activities that were observed at Elizabethan Elementary where students were involved in kinesthetic instruction were conducted during the Shurley English program, the HOSTS program, and the after school program.

Observations of students in the HOSTS program found students competing in games with their tutor, moving letter tiles around on a desk, and working with sound puzzle pieces to make words. In both the first and second grade classes where Shurley English was taught, the students were moving their arms to the rhythm of the songs and making movements. The students learned songs that went with vowel patterns and sentence structure. Miss Wilcox stated that she felt the group of students she had in second grade had better sentence structure than previous years, which should make them better writers as they move through the grades.

Mr. Scott, the third grade math teacher, had the students involved in some kinesthetic activity every week. One activity the students were completing was the use of Wrap-ups to practice their multiplication facts. These math tools have the students physically move a string from one side of the board to the other to match up the fact with the answer. He also provided the students with numerous times throughout the class period to move
around the room and complete activities. The students could work with a partner on flashcards or choose a skills test on Star Math. Other tactile objects and materials were located throughout the room for students to use during instruction.

The after school program provided a number of kinesthetic experiences for the students. Teachers for this program looked for different ways to teach the material and content to the students. One activity found first grade students spelling words in shaving cream on their desks. Another activity allowed third grade students to act out a story to determine the character’s emotions and feelings in the story. A group of fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students were participating in a math game to reinforce information needed for the achievement tests, which required them to move around the room.

The evidence of the effectiveness of the four instructional strategies was complemented by the aptitude of the teachers. Holloway (2002) found throughout the research that teacher expertise was of utmost importance to improving student achievement. She concluded that schools in rural areas experienced difficulty in having teachers who were trained and certified in particular positions. Elizabethan did not seem to encounter a shortage of qualified teachers. Out of the fifteen classroom teachers at Elizabethan Elementary School only one of them had less than five years experience at the school and she already had her master’s degree in education. The other teachers that were interviewed range from 13 to 30 years, experience. From the teachers that were interviewed, six of the eight had their master’s degree in education.
The unique aspect of the teaching staff was the longevity of their tenure at Elizabethan and their familiarity with the community. A majority of the staff resided in a surrounding community or grew up in the Elizabethan area. Mrs. Smead, the newest teacher on staff, stated that being acquainted with Elizabethan was reassuring to her as a new staff member. She stated, “I guess I felt really comfortable because some of the people I was working with I also had as teachers and that was comforting to know that I wasn’t going into a strange atmosphere.” Mrs. Hoover commented that the staff at Elizabethan was pretty consistent. She said, “Unless you retire you just don’t have openings here.”

Mrs. Lee remarked about the strong collaborative community,

I don’t know what really pulls the people together here. We lost a staff member a couple of years ago and that was probably the hardest year I have had in teaching because we knew that she was going to lose her fight against cancer and it was just a really tough year, but the staff is close and they are very willing to help each other out.

Stringfield and Teddlie (1991) found in their qualitative research on rural schools that the schools that showed the most improvement in student progress had quality teachers that worked collaboratively and focused their instruction on academically challenging all students.

The departmentalization that took place beginning in first grade supported this practice of working collaboratively. This method of providing instruction was chosen to effectively utilize the professional skills and knowledge of the teachers in one or two
content areas. Fifth grade teacher, Mrs. Lee, felt that the departmentalization was one reason why the students performed well on the state achievement tests. She stated, “I will say we are able to know our test area pretty much inside and out and we really have been able to focus on our area compared to four or five.”

Miss Wilcox, the second grade teacher, also thought the departmentalization was a good idea. She was unsure if first grade students should be switching classes because she felt younger students benefited from one teacher, but the consistency of instruction that the students were receiving was a strength of the departmentalization. Mrs. Smead, the first grade teacher, said she appreciated the departmentalization because she only had to familiarize herself with the language arts standards. She felt the students enjoyed switching teachers because they got a “change in scenery.” She stated that “there is not much lag time in between switching. We can get it done in three minutes and get started again, so it is not like we are losing a lot of class time.”

Transformation of the Culture of Elizabethan Elementary School

After I had completed four of my visits, I came to a conclusion that the information I was gathering did not fit my expectations regarding specific instructional strategies being used by the teachers to increase student achievement. I began to look for an alternative explanation in the area of school culture. I completed additional reviews of the literature in the area of developing a school culture and the process of change within the school environment.
Clark (1972) provided three conditions in which a new culture emerges within an organization. He stated that a culture is developed when a new organization is launched or a new culture will emerge when an organization is open to a revolution or there is a crisis in the organization. The condition of experiencing a crisis was present at Elizabethan Elementary in 2001 when the school was placed in Academic Watch.

Mr. Peaks, the former superintendent, reminisced about when he was hired at Elizabethan in the 1990s. He stated that the board of education was looking for a superintendent and “academics were not on their schedule because they were doing fine.” He mentioned that the community thought the schools were doing fine enough for Elizabethan. Some community members even had different expectations among cultural groups. Mrs. Rinehart added that “until the standards came out everybody was teaching what they wanted to and no one was holding anybody’s feet to the fire.”

This lenient perspective changed in 2001 with the headlines of the Elizabethan Weekly Paper reporting “Elizabethan Schools Flunking, State Report Card Claims.” Every staff member I talked with mentioned this as the turning point for the district. Mrs. Smith, the transitional first grade teacher, stated how hard it was when the staff heard the news from the county office and Elizabethan was compared with all the other schools in the county. She was angry when she heard community members comparing school districts in the county. Mrs. Smith said, “Other schools in the county had a slight edge because they had more parents working with their kids and they had educational experiences prior to entering public school.”
Mrs. Andrews, the intervention teacher, remarked that the mindset of the staff had to change. She commented on how the diversity in the population at Elizabethan was different than any of the other county schools.

I always said we teach the world. We have different ethnic backgrounds, different family situations, and we just teach them all. We had to realize that our students could pass, and for us to figure out what to do and not allow them to think they couldn’t pass.

Mrs. Rinehart confirmed my observations by stating, “All of a sudden it just hit them. They recognized the need to change what they were teaching.”

The change in expectations and attitudes of the teaching staff began to redefine the academic culture at Elizabethan Elementary School. Peterson and Deal (2002) defined culture as an organization’s

unwritten rules and traditions, norms, and expectations: the way people act, how they dress, what they talk about or avoid talking about, whether they seek out colleagues for help or don’t, and how teachers feel about their work and their students. (p. 2)

Additional research conducted by Fullan (2001) noted a positive culture change was found in schools where teachers possessed the knowledge and skills to teach the content and the school created professional learning communities for the teachers to share ideas and discuss curriculum. These schools also focused on program coherence across the grade levels, provided technical resources, and had quality leadership.
Professional learning communities began to foster with the assistance of the building administrator and the focus from the district to increase professional development time for the teachers. For a number of years at Elizabethan Elementary, the staff members were isolated in their own classroom or as a grade level. Mr. Peaks, the former superintendent, added that the teachers were all working hard, but not in the same direction. He stated, “There were people helping individual kids on their own in some way, but there was no common goal.” He stated that the teachers “chitchatted with each other, but never really talked.”

In 2001, the professional learning communities were established at Elizabethan where teachers were provided time to meet in grade levels and discuss curriculum alignment. Information was then shared across grade levels. Mr. Peaks remembered, “Now they were comparing accomplishments and getting kids ready to move from one grade level to the next.” Mrs. Rinehart remarked that the “culture became a family culture, they talked with each other.” Mrs. Andrew added that “we all had the same goal and we worked together to have the school pass the tests because even though my personal class was not taking the test, we were all part of how Elizabethan did.” In addition to the learning communities, quality leadership was a factor in Fullan’s research on cultural change.
Instructional Leadership Provided by Mr. Joshua

Through the interviews with the teachers it became evident that they were grateful for the supportive leadership Mr. Joshua provided. Mr. Joshua encouraged his teachers to meet together and share ideas. He commented how he allowed the teachers to investigate different strategies and methods and present them to the entire staff and if there was enough interest, then further investigation took place. Mrs. Albert, the current superintendent, supported the teaching staff working as teams to learn new methods of instruction for the students. She provided learning community time during professional development days for teams to meet and share new ideas. She stated that “we’ll never know if we don’t try some of these things to see if they are good for kids.”

Mr. Peaks and Mrs. Rinehart described the growth they had seen from Mr. Joshua throughout this improvement process. Mr. Peaks remarked that “as an educational leader you have to decide not to fight every battle, but you have to decide what battles you are going to fight. Mr. Joshua made growth in this area.” Mr. Peaks continued that no one would ever question Mr. Joshua’s integrity or his pride for the school and his students, but sometimes he was criticized for trying to smooth out conflicts with the teachers so everyone was happy.

Mr. Peaks felt Mr. Joshua grew as a leader in making decisions and choosing the direction for the building. He also thought that he grew as an instructional leader with the teachers during all of the professional development that took place during this process. He said, “Mr. Joshua knew the training that needed to take place in the curriculum and he allowed Mrs. Rinehart to take the lead in this area because this was not his expertise.”
The current superintendent solidified the information about Mr. Joshua’s leadership style. She agreed that Mr. Joshua was student-centered, organized, and tried to do what was best for the students. She stated he was a good manager and he had allowed the curriculum specialist to lead the building in the instructional practices and training that was needed.

I found from talking with staff members that Mr. Joshua had allowed the staff to investigate new approaches a number of times over the past six years. Mrs. Andrew, the intervention specialist, told about a time two years before when the math teachers were having trouble with the students passing the math achievement test. These teachers found a school in the county that had students passing the math test all the time, and they went to that school to find out what they were doing, so they could bring it back. The staff looked at other schools that were making academic progress to identify what materials and strategies those schools were using with students.

When the teachers were researching new instructional methods to use with students, Mr. Joshua encouraged the teachers to find materials that would work for them. Mrs. Lee, the fifth grade teacher, said that Mr. Joshua “was very open to if this wasn’t working let’s try something else.” Mrs. Smith, the transitional first teacher, agreed with Mrs. Lee about the leadership style of Mr. Joshua. She stated that he was a nice man who would try and get the teachers anything they needed to prepare for the achievement tests. Mrs. Andrew also felt that Mr. Joshua’s leadership had impacted the culture of the school. “Mr. Joshua was wonderful and he backed us up so much in what we wanted to do with the students.”
Other programs that were observed in other districts and had been implemented at Elizabethan Elementary involved the Baldrige Quality Improvement Model, the HOSTS tutoring program, and the Shurley English Method. These programs were researched by a pilot group of teachers and then presented to the staff.

Implementation of Shurley English Program

The Shurley English method was the newest instructional program implemented at Elizabethan. It was a grammar and writing program that the teachers viewed in a large urban school in the spring of 2006. The teachers were impressed with how the students identified parts of speech and understood sentence structure. Professional development and training was provided to the language arts teachers in June of 2006 and the program was implemented the following school year in grades first, second, and third.

This program was a scripted method to teach parts of speech and sentence structure. It began with a number of chants and songs that the students learned about parts of speech. Then the students went through a series of example sentences that reinforced the skill that was taught at the beginning of the week and then completed a writing activity. The intermediate teachers heard such positive remarks from the primary teachers that they were going to begin to implement the basic chants next year with their students and then expand as the students moved through the level books in the primary grades.

The intention of this study was to determine what effective instructional strategies were used in the classroom to improve the academic achievement of at-risk students; however an uncovering of a transformation in the school culture became a primary
explanation for the success of the students at this school. The development of professional learning communities among the teachers, a strong emphasis on curriculum alignment and instructional practices to improve student achievement, along with supportive leadership combined to create a positive and productive school culture.

The improvement process began at the district level when the school district received the CSRD grant and the 21st Century Grant, but the actual instructional change began when teachers were involved in the Baldrige Quality Improvement Model and curriculum alignment. The direction provided by Mr. Peaks, Mr. Joshua, and Mrs. Rinehart was important in focusing the teaching staff towards improving instruction to increase academic achievement of the students.

My conclusions regarding Mrs. Rinehart’s impact on the district’s improvement process and her involvement in creating a culture of collaboration, high expectations, and curriculum alignment were confirmed. Her leadership in this area complemented the leadership qualities of Mr. Joshua, the elementary principal, and her involvement had a direct correlation with the success of the educational program at the elementary school.

The Local Report Card Changes

Elizabethan along with other school districts in the state evolved to align with federal mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act. The state assessment program changed with the number of indicators and the grade levels at which students were being assessed. The twelfth grade test was eliminated beginning with the 2003 report card. During that same year, the third grade reading achievement test was added and the following year testing
began in fifth, seventh, and eighth grade. The ninth grade test was replaced in 2004 with the tenth grade Ohio Graduation Test.

The Elizabethan Local School District remained at an Effective rating on the 2003-2004 school year report card with the third grade students meeting 100% passage rate on the reading achievement test. The following year the district achieved an Excellent rating meeting 21 out of 23 standards and again meeting 100% passage rate on the third grade reading achievement test.

The 2005-2006 report card designated the school district as Excellent and the third grade students met 100% on both the reading and math achievement tests. Table 3 provides the achievement test results for the school district from 2003–2005 in the areas of reading, writing, and mathematics. For the 2004 results the high school students began taking the Ohio Graduation Test in tenth grade and in 2005 the sixth grade students were assessed in reading and mathematics only.

The report card from the 2006-2007 school year had ranked Elizabethan Elementary School again at the Excellent level meeting 11 out of 12 state indicators. The third grade class had 96.7% of the students pass the reading test and 100% pass the math test. The only indicator that had less than 75% of the students pass was in the area of science at the fifth grade level and this was the first year this test was given.
### Table 3


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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Excellent</td>
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<tr>
<td>3rd Grade Reading</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th Grade Reading</td>
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</tr>
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<td>4th Grade Writing</td>
<td>83.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>96.6%</td>
</tr>
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<td>4th Grade Math</td>
<td>72.3%</td>
<td>97.1%</td>
<td>96.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th Grade Reading</td>
<td>68.2%</td>
<td>97.7%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th Grade Writing</td>
<td>90.9%</td>
<td>95.5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th Grade Math</td>
<td>68.2%</td>
<td>97.7%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th Grade Reading</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>98.5% (10th grade test)</td>
<td>93.1% (10th grade test) (100.0% of 11th graders)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th Grade Writing</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>89.6% (10th grade test)</td>
<td>91.7% (10th grade test) (96.7% of 11th graders)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th Grade Math</td>
<td>93.3%</td>
<td>92.5% (10th grade test)</td>
<td>90.3% (10th grade test) (98.3% of 11th graders)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I asked the third grade teachers about the reading score and they joked about the score and how it was lower because one student did not pass the test. They seemed disappointed that the class had not achieved a 100% passage rate. The expectation had been set that all students would pass the test and the staff was not settling for anything less.

Summary of the Results

The intent of this case study was to determine what instructional practices were used with at-risk students in a high poverty rural elementary school to increase their academic achievement. Four instructional strategies from the literature review were prevalent at the elementary school. Three additional themes of teacher longevity and familiarity with the community, a change in the school culture, and the implementation of intervention programs arose as factors for the school’s success.

Within the academic environment of the school, four instructional strategies appeared to be used effectively with at-risk students. Establishing goals and monitoring progress was a strategy that was introduced when the school district received a school reform model grant and received professional development training in the Baldrige Quality Improvement Model. White, Hohn, and Tollefson (1997) supported goal setting by stating that students who set realistic goals performed better on tasks than students who did not establish goals or monitor their progress.
Using graphic organizers and a kinesthetic approach to learning were both strategies that were observed in the classroom and during the after school tutoring program. Feurenstein’s (1980) research on cognitive strategies supported these processes in the classroom. He stated that students who were struggling academically needed to be taught strategies for systematically reviewing information and putting the information into an organized structure.

Graphic organizers were an element of the new Shurley English program. The students had organizational charts in notebooks that explained the different parts of a sentence and the parts of speech. Within the classroom graphic organizers were used as part of the lessons for test preparation. Observations of the after school program found both the first grade and the third grade teachers reviewing skills with the students using kinesthetic activities. Chants and jingles with motions were used in the first and second grade classrooms as part of the Shurley English program.

The final instructional strategy represented at the elementary school was the use of time on task. The importance of instructional time was evident from the moment I entered the school building. The attention to detail of the master schedule to provide optimal time for teaching along with the procedures in place when the students changed classes demonstrated the importance of instructional time. Announcements were provided in writing for the teachers to read to the class as a transition activity. Lunch times for each grade were within a five minute time period, so that learning was not interrupted by the noise of moving classes.
The instructional strategies that emerged through this qualitative study of the elementary school’s high rate of academic success were intertwined with a change in the school culture and the longevity of the teaching staff and the collaborative model of departmentalization to create a climate of success at Elizabethan. It was difficult to look at any of these areas in isolation because each concept by itself could not provide the significant and meaningful change that was brought about at Elizabethan. Peterson and Deal (2002) stated that the “key to successful performance is the heart and spirit infused into relationships among people” and these relationships come into being more when staff members face a crisis together (p. 7).

A number of staff members along with the curriculum director and previous superintendent commented on the change in attitude that took place during 2001. I believed that the event when the school was ranked in Academic Watch to have been the catalyst for change in the building. That year when the local newspaper compared Elizabethan Local School District with the other schools in the county was a “real eye opener,” stated Mrs. Hoover. She added, “That the big thing with ranking each one of the county schools and when we were down at the bottom, it was a personal reflection on each of us.”

The tone and perception of the teachers changed when the local report card was listed in the newspaper. The public humiliation they felt as a teaching staff compelled them to make a change in their mindset about the students and the expectations they had for their achievement. Mrs. Rinehart remembered the day she showed a video about an elementary school that was a lot like Elizabethan demographically.
She said, “That school had gone from the lowest in the county to the highest, academically. Some teachers came up to me and said if they can do it, so can we.” Mrs. Andrew added, “We have learned how to think and teach differently.”

Along with a change in the culture, the collaboration that took place among the teachers has become customary at the elementary school. Beginning in first grade the teachers concentrate on one or two content areas. These content specialists collaborated with the other teachers in the grade levels to align the curriculum.

Mrs. Smith, the kindergarten teacher, spoke on the benefit of centering the attention on a specific content area.

We did a lot of curriculum mapping and found that certain grade levels did not need to spend time on items in the curriculum because it was being covered thoroughly by another grade level. Our school is fortunate to have dynamic people that can teach a certain content area.

Mrs. Lee also supported the concept of departmentalizing. “It really seems to help to have one person doing a subject. We really specialize [–] major and I think it has been to the students’ advantage.”

Maehr and Fyans (1989) reported in a review of effective school literature that academically effective schools have a culture with “clear goals and a structure that promotes maximum opportunities for students to learn” (p. 4). The learning environment at Elizabethan Elementary School exemplified this culture. The vision and mission
statements of the school were displayed on purple and white banners at the entrance of the school building and the variety of activities for students from the HOSTS program to the after school tutoring program were listed on a brightly colored bulletin board next to the office. The school was an effective school with a positive academic culture.
CHAPTER V

Summary and Discussion

In this final chapter on identifying effective instructional strategies for at-risk elementary students, I have restated the research questions and reviewed the qualitative method used in this study. The later sections of the chapter reveal the results, my interpretations, and recommendations for educators. The chapter concludes with suggestions for additional research for further inquiry.

Purpose of the Problem

As stated in Chapter 1, the purpose of the study was to obtain an in-depth understanding of the instructional practices and learning culture present at a rural, economically disadvantaged elementary school. This study was intended to identify instructional strategies that were being used in the classroom with at-risk students to improve the students’ academic achievement. I completed a review of governmental policies that have impacted children in poverty and public education and decided to focus specifically on rural poverty and rural elementary schools. After researching Fitchen’s *Poverty in Rural America* (1995), which was a 10-year anthropological study of twenty families in rural New York, I became interested in completing a case study.

The intention of the case study was to use the knowledge obtained through the literature review to determine what instructional strategies were present in the research and establish how those were used in a rural elementary school. In order to accomplish
this purpose, I prepared research questions that enabled me to explore what instructional practices were present at a high poverty rural school that achieved academic excellence. The lessons learned from this case study of one rural elementary school’s instructional practices and educational culture provides insight for myself and others about how to increase achievement for disadvantaged students.

Review of the Methodology

A thorough process was used to select Elizabethan Elementary School as the site for this case study. Multiple criteria including state ranking, socioeconomic status of the student population, and the location within a rural community were a part of the deciding factors in choosing Elizabethan Elementary School. In order to learn the most about effective instructional strategies used with economically disadvantaged students, specific criteria were used in determining the location of this case study.

The selection was based on the following essential components:

- The elementary school served an economically disadvantaged population of at least 40% of the total school population,
- The district was located in a rural area of Ohio,
- The elementary school had achieved an excellent rating for more than two consecutive years, and
- All of the third grade students were proficient on the reading achievement test.
After the initial selection of schools I narrowed the sites by reviewing the Ohio Department of Education’s Web site for Schools of Promise and schools that had received the No Child Left Behind Blue Ribbon Award. Schools that received these recognitions are high poverty, high performing schools. Only six schools matched both sets of criteria and only three were rural elementary schools. The phenomenon that occurred at Elizabethan Elementary School which finalized my site selection was the 100% passage rate on the Ohio Third Grade Reading Achievement Test. The intent of the study was to reveal information about the instructional practices of an effective rural school that could be applied to other schools to assist with the intervention of the at-risk students.

During the 2005-2006 school year Elizabethan Elementary School had an enrollment of 278 students with an economically disadvantaged population of 54 percent. The racial breakdown of the elementary school consisted of 48% White, 35% Hispanic, and 15% multi-racial. Six percent of the students were limited English proficient with Spanish being their native language. Elizabethan School District was among nine school districts in a county in western Ohio. The other school districts that surrounded Elizabethan served a population of mostly Caucasian, middle to high income families.

A case study was chosen as the qualitative research perspective. I collected data from observations, field notes, interviews, and document analysis. A total of nine days was spent by the researcher in the natural setting of this rural elementary school to complete an intensive study of the school culture and the instructional practices being used by the teachers. Although the limited amount of days spent at Elizabethan Elementary School
could have an effect on general conclusions drawn by the researcher; predominant themes were evident throughout the study to provide the researcher with reliable and valid results. During observations, I attempted to be unobtrusive during classroom instruction and observe the interactions of the teachers and students while I took notes.

I spent nine days with the participants interviewing and gathering information in the natural setting. The in-depth study completed at Elizabethan Elementary School provided me with information and documentation to describe the transformation of the culture and instructional practices at the school.

Interviews were completed with twelve district employees including the previous superintendent, the curriculum director, the building administrator, and several teachers and the English as a Second Language (ESL) tutor. It was my intent to follow a three-interview series as described by Siedman (2006); however, the limited time that the teachers had available to spend with the researcher made this interview technique impossible.

I chose to conduct more informal conversations with the participants to allow for flexibility within teachers’ schedules. A review of important documents was conducted to support and validate the research results. Documents included achievement test data, newspaper articles, curriculum materials, and teacher lesson plans. The data were triangulated to determine coordinating themes and perspectives (Creswell, 1998). To protect subject anonymity, all of the names of people and places are fictional throughout the entire case study.
Documents that were reviewed included state report cards, teacher lesson plans, student portfolios, and information provided by the building administrator. I reviewed newspaper articles from the local newspaper and the county newspaper. These documents helped me develop a better understanding of the emerging themes. The documents, observations, and interviews were triangulated to identify themes. Creswell (1998) stated that triangulation of multiple sources provides evidence to correlate a particular theme. Member checks and peer evaluations occurred with some of the participants to monitor my interpretations of the data. For verification, I clarified my own bias from the onset of the inquiry (Merriam, 1998). This study is limited in its generalizability because the case study involves only one rural elementary school in Ohio.

Summary of Results

Elizabethan Local School District was able to raise student achievement scores and bring the district from a state ranking of Academic Watch in 2001 to a ranking of Excellent in 2004. The elementary school had 100% of its students pass the Ohio Third Grade Reading Achievement Test beginning in 2003 for three years consecutively. Four instructional strategies stated in the literature were observed in the classrooms at Elizabethan Elementary School. Additional themes of intervention programs, a change in school culture, and the longevity of the school staff surfaced during this case study. A brief history of events that took place at the school from 2001–2005 is presented and followed by the documentation gathered to support the three research questions.
The History of Elizabethan Elementary School

The Village of Elizabethan was a small low-income, multi-cultural town surrounded by four affluent predominately white communities. The community of Elizabethan was supportive of the school system, but did not hold high expectations for the students. The attitude of low expectations was not only in the community, but in the elementary school as well. Miss Wilcox, a second grade teacher, remarked that the staff continually had low expectations of the students and reasons why the students were not successful. The community was mostly agricultural and industrial and migrant workers would move into the community during harvesting and planting seasons. Over the years the migrant population had diminished because of the limited amount of tomato farmers in the area. Economic hardships had affected the agricultural and manufacturing industries within the community.

Mrs. Consuela, the English as a Second Language (ESL) tutor, spoke of the summer school program that took place for six weeks for the children of the migrant workers. The migrant office provided English instruction for the children while their parents worked. By the time school began in the fall, Mrs. Consuela was familiar with the students and their level of English proficiency. She felt that a majority of the migrant families who had settled in Elizabethan did so because they knew that the school had an ESL tutor, and they were comfortable knowing that someone at the school spoke in Spanish.

In February of 2001, the district received a rating of Academic Watch from the state of Ohio meeting only 13 out of 27 state standards. Mrs. Rinehart, the curriculum director, stated that for a number of years the staff at Elizabethan proceeded through the school
year teaching the content they thought was important and trying to prepare students for
the upcoming year. She added, “Teachers were working hard, but no one was on the same
page.” When the announcement came in the paper that the school district was failing the
teachers were so embarrassed and “all of a sudden it just hit.”

I think the reaction of the staff members at Elizabethan Elementary School was like
that of other schools around the state when the ODE presented the state report card to the
public. The mandated accountability system that was initiated by the No Child Left
Behind Act forced a majority of the schools within the state of Ohio to make changes and
address the needs of all students. The evidence collected through interviews and
observations supported the conclusion that the motivational event which initiated the
change in attitudes and beliefs of the teachers was the publication of the schools’
academic failure and the legislative mandates associated with the No Child Left Behind
Act. When the information regarding the school’s academic achievement and the state
requirements for schools in Academic Watch were presented to the teaching staff, the
teachers began to recognize the need for change. Mrs. Rinehart stated that the change
began with a core group of teachers. After viewing a video about a school in Florida
much like Elizabethan, the teachers saw this school had made academic improvements
and wanted to participate in the Baldrige Quality Improvement Model training.

Miss Wilcox, a second grade teacher, was a member of the initial group of teachers
who visited Florida and received the Baldrige training. She believed that the change in
culture was directly related to the implementation of setting goals and establishing
expectations for the students. She remembered about the visit to Florida. She said that the
school, although demographically the same as Elizabethan, differed in its expectations for students. The school in Florida had a disadvantaged population also, but the expectations for the students were at a higher level. She remembered speaking with Mrs. Rinehart and saying, “If this school can do it, then why can’t we?” Mrs. Rinehart said, “We spent one week in Florida, the core teachers and myself, and when Mr. Peaks flew down those teachers would not be quiet about how good this was and how this could make a difference.”

The district was fortunate enough to have received a 21st Century Grant from the Federal Department of Education during this time period. This grant provided additional funds for staff development and funds to establish an after school program and a tutoring program. As part of the overall improvement process, the after school program and the HOSTS (Help One Student to Succeed) program were observed to be two important elements in the academic success of the students. Professional development in the areas of curriculum alignment and setting goals and expectations for the students were additional components that led to the success of the elementary school.

The remainder of this chapter will address each of the three research questions and explain the conclusions and results discovered during this in-depth case study of one rural elementary school.
How does a High Poverty Rural Elementary School Achieve Excellence?

Research from the literature review found that rural schools had unique characteristics that affected the educational program. Specialized classes, technical devices, and additional learning resources were often limited in rural schools because of the small population of students and the limited amount of funding created for schools because of a lower tax base (Fan & Chen, 1999; Nachtigal, 1982). Recruitment and retention of highly-qualified teachers posed another issue for rural schools (Holloway, 2002).

Although Elizabethan Local School District experienced some of these characteristics, the school was able to access additional grant funding because of the significant economically disadvantaged population and the retention of teachers was not an issue for this school district as longevity of service is an attribute of the teaching staff that will be discussed later in the chapter. The additional grant funding allowed the teachers in the district the opportunity to participate in professional development training and learning experiences that prior to the district being ranked in Academic Watch would not have been able to take place because of limited resources.

Prior to 2001, the staff members at Elizabethan Local School District proceeded through the school year teaching the content they thought was important and trying to prepare students for the upcoming year. Communication between staff members was minimal and parental involvement was limited. Mr. Peaks, the former superintendent,
commented that the community thought the school district was doing fine. He said, “I think that the community had a lot of pride in their school, but did not have a tier of accomplishment that they expected academically.”

In 2001, the district found itself at the bottom of the county schools listed on the state academic ranking system. Mrs. Rinehart, the curriculum director, remembered the meeting where the staff members were told the district was in academic watch. She said, “You could have heard a pin drop.” The publication of the local report card information began the change process for the teachers. Mr. Joshua, the elementary principal, remarked on how the staff had to learn to work together and communicate across grade levels. He stated that “this wasn’t just a fourth grade world anymore.”

Professional Development

A component of the academic success of Elizabethan Elementary School was the professional development opportunities afforded to the teaching staff in the areas of curriculum alignment, goal setting, and raising expectations for students. A Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) federal grant was obtained by the district in 2001 to support professional development training at the school district.

Mr. Peaks, the former superintendent, commented that the district was able to offer a more extensive professional development program from 2001 – 2005 because additional grant funding was available. “The trips to Florida would not have happened and the after school program would not have happened to the extent that it did”, he said. The extensive amount of professional development provided to the teachers was instrumental in
improving the instruction that was presented to the students in the classroom. Mrs. Rinehart remarked, “They recognized the need to change what they were teaching and so we gave them the opportunities to learn how to do that.”

The first professional development opportunity began when the district leadership team chose the Baldrige Quality Improvement Model as the educational reform model for the district. This model focused on establishing high academic expectations for the students and defining goals and action steps to reach these expectations. Teachers learned how to create goals with their students and how to direct the students to monitor their progress. Miss Wilcox, the second grade teacher, credited the increased awareness and responsibility her students had towards their academic progress to the instruction she received on using the Baldrige Quality Improvement Model with her students.

A core group of teachers flew to Florida to receive training at a low-income elementary school, which has achieved academic excellence. An additional group of teachers went to Florida during the fall of 2001. After this training teachers and students from the school in Florida came to Elizabethan to provide additional instruction in the Baldrige Quality Improvement Model.

One of the most effective educational trainings the teachers participated in during 2001 was directed by Mrs. Rinehart, the curriculum director. This training consisted of reviewing the state content standards and aligning the curriculum across the grade levels. The use of curriculum mapping and the alignment of content standards to instruction were evident throughout the collection of data.
Calendars with standard indicators posted on them were present in classrooms, as well as indicators listed in lesson plans that were reviewed by the building principal. Mrs. Rinehart felt the teachers became enlightened when they reviewed the standards as an entire staff because they realized that some standards were being taught in multiple grade levels while others were not covered at all. Mr. Peaks commented that prior to this experience instruction was chosen “by what the teachers liked to teach instead of looking at what the curriculum stated should be taught at their grade level.”

By obtaining the funding from the 21st Century Grant, the district was able to provide numerous professional development opportunities for the teachers. Along with the professional development, funding was used to develop two intervention programs at the elementary school. These two programs were the HOSTS program and an after school program for students in first through sixth grade.

**Intervention Programs**

The HOSTS program began in 2000 with funding from the 21st Century Grant. The program offered individual or small group instruction to students who were at-risk in the area of reading. Community volunteers and high school students assisted students in learning how to read. These students received 30 minutes of instruction from a reading mentor four days a week. This instruction was individually designed by the program coordinator to meet the needs of each student. She stated that the daily tutoring had accelerated their progress quicker than traditional teaching. She mentioned that prior to instituting this program she was a traditional reading teacher, and although her students
maintained their reading progress she could not accelerate them to the next level. The HOSTS program that offered more individualized instruction to the students had been able to accelerate the students, so that a number of the students read at grade level after one year.

The other intervention program was the after school program that was provided to students in grades first through sixth. Students were selected by the classroom teachers to attend this program for two days a week and stay after school for 90 minutes. In 2006, the number of students involved in the program was 60, 30 students from first through third grade and 30 from fourth through sixth grade. Prior to this year, any student that was nominated by their teacher to attend was offered a space in the program, but due to a decrease in funding the program participants were limited to 30 for each group. The agenda for the daily program consisted of a nutritious snack, some recreation time, homework assistance, and achievement test reinforcement.

All of the staff members interviewed except two mentioned the importance of the after school program. Mrs. Smead, a first grade teacher, felt the program provided the additional assistance needed for her struggling learners especially those who did not have adult help at home. Like the HOSTS mentor program, the after school program provided additional individual assistance for the students and supported the classroom instruction with the use of varied educational activities.

In attempting to understand the phenomenon that took place at Elizabethan Elementary School where 100% of the third grade students passed the reading achievement test for three consecutive years, I found a combination of high expectations
of the students and intentional intervention programs brought this school from Academic
Watch to a level of Excellence. A change in the attitudes and beliefs of the school
personnel along with specific instructional strategies were also important factors in
having the students succeed academically.

How Does a School Develop a Culture of Excellence for All Students?

Until the publication of the county schools state ranking in the local newspaper in
2001, the teaching staff at Elizabethan Elementary School thought their instruction was
good enough for their students. The teachers taught what they were used to teaching or
what they liked to teach, but there was no structure in place to make sure that all students
received the same instruction. Mr. Peaks, the former superintendent, commented on the
instruction saying, “It was not that the teachers weren’t working hard, the teachers were
working hard; they just weren’t working hard in the way they needed to.”

The district was usually at the bottom of any list ranking the county schools
academically. The teachers knew this was true, but resigned themselves to this fact
because of the population of children they served in the district. Several participants
remarked on the population of the students. Comments were made about children having
no one at home to help them, the reputation of the school being a rough school, and the
diversity of the students at Elizabethan that wasn’t at the other county schools.
Though the teachers mentioned the diversity of the student population, Mrs. Consuela, the ESL tutor, remarked that the population at Elizabethan had consisted of Hispanic families for a long time so it was normal for teachers to have students with limited English in their classrooms. I found through my interview with Mrs. Consuela and my observations of two meetings between Spanish-speaking families and the teaching staff that there was a genuine respect for the different cultures. Miss Dukes, a second grade teacher, told of a student in her room that during conference time read everything he had done in English to his parents in Spanish so they knew what he was working on. She stated, “I make a point to tell the kids that understanding both languages will be really good for them when they are looking for a job.”

Both Mrs. Consuela and Mrs. Rinehart, the curriculum director, spoke about the teaching staff and the Hispanic culture. Mrs. Rinehart mentioned that having Spanish-speaking students at Elizabethan was not a unique experience for those that worked there because it was “just who they were.” Mrs. Consuela agreed, “I have not seen other schools, but we have a lot of Hispanic children that it is a normal thing; it doesn’t stand out. I even wonder if other students came in if they would stand out either.”

When I observed in the classroom I was unaware of any language differences among the students until I noticed Mrs. Consuela walk over to a student and work with that student on an assignment. Most students were able to communicate with the classroom teachers during class or saved their questions for when Mrs. Consuela was in the room. I found it interesting that only one teacher, a third grade teacher who used to be an ESL tutor, spoke any Spanish. Three teachers mentioned that they would like to learn some
Spanish and the ESL tutor had an interest in teaching some classes, but at the publication of this study this instruction had not taken place.

Mr. Joshua, the principal, spoke a little Spanish to greet the parents during the two meetings I observed, but most of the communication took place through the use of an interpreter. My observations along with the interviews supported the conclusion that having a bilingual student population was part of the school culture in Elizabethan and while the demographics were distinctive in the state of Ohio, the teachers and families within the school felt it was just who they were. Mrs. Consuela concluded her interview by stating, “The migrant recruiter promotes our school with the families. She tells them that we are here for them and we do a lot of little extra things to help them with their children here.”

Mrs. Rinehart and Mrs. Consuela agreed that the ESL program and migrant program have been consistent and have not changed over the years, but instruction in the classroom has changed for all students, not just the Spanish-speaking population. Mrs. Consuela said, “The teachers realized what the need was and they focused on it.” She added, “I help the teacher in whatever way is needed for the student to be successful.”

In 2001 when Elizabethan Local School District received the rating of Academic Watch meeting only 13 out of 27 state standards, the tone of the teachers changed. Peterson and Deal (2002) discussed the changes that take place at a school when staff members face a crisis. The crisis the staff at Elizabethan faced was the publication of the failure of the school. This announcement personally convicted those who taught at Elizabethan because a majority of them lived within the community and were
embarrassed by the newspaper articles. Mrs. Rinehart asserted that the meeting where the results of the state report card were shared was so quiet “you could have heard a pin drop”. She commented that a portion of the training that day was viewing a video tape of an elementary school in Florida that was high poverty, yet high achieving. After that video a group of teachers approached Mrs. Rinehart and wanted to learn what they could do to be like that school in Florida.

After professional development opportunities occurred for the teachers in the areas of the Baldrige Quality Improvement Model and curriculum alignment, the tone of the building changed. Mr. Joshua, the principal, stated that the teachers were not going to live with a failed report card. The teachers began to interact with each other and discuss content and curriculum alignment. The openness of the staff towards each other and their willingness to share information within their grade level team and across grade levels was a component of the school’s culture. Mrs. Rinehart stated that the conversations changed. “The staff just quit talking about how low the students were, they just quit talking about it, not all at once, but over time.”

The purpose of this study was to determine what instructional strategies were used with at-risk students to improve their achievement. While the intention of the researcher was to investigate practices taking place in the classroom, I found that the attitudes and beliefs of the teachers were perhaps more important for the success of the students. The final research question addresses the four instructional strategies that were predominate in the educational setting at Elizabethan Elementary School.
What Specific Instructional Strategies were Evident at Elizabethan?

I had begun this study to explore what effective instructional strategies were employed with at-risk students to make academic gains on the Ohio Third Grade Reading Achievement Test. Four instructional strategies were predominant in the classroom and complemented the coordination of intervention services taking place during school and after school.

Establishing and monitoring goals was an instructional strategy that occurred at the elementary school. This strategy was implemented when the district received grant funding for professional development training of a school reform model. The district had chosen to train the staff in the use of the Baldrige Quality Improvement Model. Marzano (2003) found that it was important for students to be involved in the actual development and monitoring of their progress and even students from low socioeconomic backgrounds made gains in reading when they set clear goals and followed their progress. While goal setting was evident in the classrooms it was not as prevalent as it had been in the past. During the administrative meeting in June of 2007, the building principals addressed the need to revisit the subject of students’ setting goals as it had been a number of years since the staff participated in professional development in this area. Through the review of documentation I found evidence that goal setting and monitoring had been used in previous years, but had declined over the past three years. Documentation of prior students’ data folders with graphs and charts were available from the elementary principal and materials from the quality tools workshop were located in each classroom.
Instructional Time on Task

Other instructional practices that were predominant at Elizabethan Elementary School were the use of graphic organizers, activities that engaged students, and increased instructional time on task. Throughout my observations of the classrooms, students were continually engaged in activities. The instructional time on-task was one of the first observations I noted when I arrived at the school. From the moment the students entered the classroom, they were directed to their seats to begin learning. The teachers began teaching immediately and while the students were working on an activity the teacher would take attendance, collect notes, and complete those daily management tasks. Even when the students rotated classes the loss of instructional time was minimal. Mrs. Smead, the first grade teacher, remarked that even the first grade students switched classes quickly. “We can get it done in three minutes and get started again so it is not like we are losing a lot of class time.”

The research of Lee, Kelly, and Nyre (1999) supported the observations I made at Elizabethan. Their research found that students who were on task more than 55% of the time showed a better completion rate and were more successful in their school work. Roth, Brooks-Gunn, and Linver (2003) also completed a study of students’ engagement in the core academic subjects. Though their study was limited they did find students more successful when they spent between 65-68% of their day engaged in core academic subjects.
Activities that Engage Students

The instructional time spent in the classroom and after school included kinesthetic activities. Throughout the literature review there was evidence to support this approach to instruction. Observations of students in the HOSTS program found students competing in games with their tutor, moving letter tiles around on a desk, and working with sound puzzle pieces to make words. In both the first and second grade classes where Shurley English was taught, the students were moving their arms to the rhythm of the songs and making movements. The students learned songs that went with vowel patterns and sentence structure.

Third grade students participated in a kinesthetic activity at least once a week in math class. One activity the students completed was using Wrap-ups to practice their multiplication facts. These math tools have the students physically move a string from one side of the board to the other to match up the fact with the answer. The students were provided with numerous times throughout the class period to move around the room and complete activities. The students also worked with a partner on flashcards or chose to take a skills test on Star Math.

The after school program provided a number of kinesthetic experiences for the students. Teachers for this program looked for different ways to teach the material and content to the students. One activity found first grade students spelling words in shaving cream on their desks. Another activity allowed third grade students to act out a story to determine the character’s emotions and feelings in the story. A group of fourth, fifth, and
sixth grade students were participating in a math game to reinforce information needed for the achievement tests, which required them to move around the room.

The final instructional strategy that was observed in the classrooms was the use of graphic organizers. This strategy was mentioned throughout the literature and was present in most classrooms, but used primarily in regard to test preparation lessons.

Use of Graphic Organizers

These visual tools were primarily present in the classrooms as posters on the walls and as attachments for writing prompts. The use of these tools was modeled by the classroom teacher in the primary grades and beginning with second grade the students were required to complete some organizers as part of a daily reading journal.

Miss Wilcox, the second grade teacher, stated that they were using more organizers after talking with the third grade teachers. They found that the students needed more preparation in organizing their thoughts, when writing on their own. She said, “We thought about what we were doing and we passed out the paper and gave them ten different ways on how to do the page instead of letting them think for themselves.” The visual organizers gave the students a framework for organizing the information they were reading to use later on to answer questions.

The third, fourth, and fifth grade classrooms that I observed used graphic organizers as part of the test preparation lessons. The teachers at these grade levels knew the students would be exposed to these methods when they took the achievement tests so they instructed the students about the use of diagrams and charts when completing reports.
or organizing thoughts. A majority of the intermediate classrooms used graphic organizers when teaching the students to prepare for the reading and writing achievement tests.

Discussion of Results

Interpretation of the Findings

While no single case study can provide the exact instructional components to increase student achievement, this study would suggest some key elements that were present at this high achieving elementary school. As I summarize the data from the past year, I reflect on the significant change in culture that took place at Elizabethan Elementary School and the dedication I perceived when I spent time in the classrooms.

This change in attitude and culture took place after the school district was ranked in Academic Watch by the Ohio Department of Education in 2001. I could personally relate to the transformation that took place among the teachers during this time. As a building administrator, I observe the apprehension of the teachers every year when the state rankings appear in the newspaper. My teachers assume the responsibility for the students’ scores personally and so I can entirely understand how the teaching staff at Elizabethan must have felt in 2001. Though the public reporting of school district’s academic achievement affected all schools within the state of Ohio, I found the improvement process that took place at Elizabethan to be noteworthy. The change process that took
place from 2001—2005 began as a mandated process for schools in Academic Watch, but as teachers participated in quality professional development and witnessed the academic progress the students were making because of an aligned curriculum, higher expectations, and intentional intervention programs; their attitudes and beliefs began to change.

The presentation of the district’s dismal academic results was the hardest time for the staff at Elizabethan, but they were not going to resign themselves to a failed state report card. The leadership team of Mr. Joshua, the building principal, and Mrs. Rinehart, the curriculum director, provided the focus and guidance necessary to begin the change process in 2001 towards higher expectations of the students and an aligned curriculum based on the content standards.

As the educational staff participated in professional development in the use of quality tools and curriculum mapping, additional leaders emerged from the teaching staff. Miss Dukes, the second grade teacher, became part of the core team that received training in the Baldrige Quality Improvement Model. Mrs. Hoover, a reading specialist, developed the HOSTS mentor program and established the four-day a week reading intervention program, which after six years included over sixty reading mentors from the community and high school. Other teachers became involved in the after school tutoring program and have learned different strategies to use with the students to assist them in learning the content material. These programs along with the training in curriculum alignment and mapping were fundamental components of the academic improvement at Elizabethan Elementary School.
Explanation of Unanticipated Findings

Whereas none of these components were strictly unique to this elementary school, a few unanticipated findings were present during the study. The amount of paper and pencil lessons completed by the students during this study was unexpected. The time the students spent at their desk completing writing activities was expected for the time frame in which I observed in the building because of the focus on preparation for the achievement tests; nevertheless, I noted that in every class beginning with third grade, test preparation materials were used with the students as the primary instructional tool.

Mr. Joshua, the building principal, had shared with me at the beginning of the study that beginning a month before the state assessment, test preparation would take place to provide the students with as many different types of questions as possible before the test day. This aspect was especially evident the week prior to the state assessment when I observed in each third through sixth grade classroom students feverishly completing practice test materials and preparation worksheets.

Another finding was the significant role Mrs. Rinehart had on the improvement process at the school. A number of teachers I interviewed commented on the important task Mrs. Rinehart had in leading the district to improve the curriculum and the instruction that took place in the classroom. After my interviews with the teachers and Mr. Peaks I confirmed by notion that Mrs. Rinehart’s involvement was essential to the success at Elizabethan. Her direction and support throughout the Baldrige Quality Improvement Process as well as her knowledge of curriculum alignment and teacher collaboration provided the instructional leadership the building needed.
Her leadership qualities complemented Mr. Joshua, the principal, and her involvement had a direct correlation with the success of the educational program at the elementary school.

A final unanticipated finding revolved around the migrant population of students at the school. Selecting a school with a culturally diverse population of students was not a requirement for this study, but became a unique opportunity for me as the researcher to observe a different culture than my own.

When I interviewed Mrs. Consuela, the ESL tutor, I was fascinated with the information regarding the migrant program and how she worked with the students during the summer. Throughout the interviews with the teachers information was provided that they had students in their room that spoke Spanish or needed extra instructional services by Mrs. Consuela, but the students were discussed like any English speaking student. The comment by Mrs. Consuela that “the teachers did not treat any of the students different based on their race or language” was evident during all of the classroom observations. It was difficult for me to distinguish any difference among the students besides the variety of skin colors. I would contend that the teaching staff although they were receptive to the students and had an understanding of the Hispanic population, they had not embraced the culture totally as only two other staff members spoke Spanish besides the ESL tutor.
Implications for Practice

The Village of Elizabethan experienced some of the characteristics found in the research regarding rural areas. There was a high concentration of poverty within a section of the town where a majority of the migrant families and farmers lived. A number of these families were limited in their job opportunities due to their low educational level (Davis, 1977; Iceland, 2003, Zill et al., 1995). Furthermore, the children from these economically disadvantaged families were not exposed to the same educational opportunities prior to attending school as those children from the surrounding county schools, which placed them into an educationally disadvantaged situation as well. The town also experienced a “demise of the rural community” as stated by Fitchen (1995) because of the decline in the agricultural market within that area (p. 17).

While one case study cannot provide the precise method for improving academic excellence for at risk students, this research would suggest some components that an elementary school with a disadvantaged population might implement to increase the academic achievement of the students. The process the educational staff began in 2001 to raise expectations, align curriculum, and provide the necessary instruction and intervention programs to improve student achievement had a profound impact on the district.

After reviewing documents and constructing the major themes and subcategories I would have liked to have had more time in the district especially in the early part of the year to explore the themes and instructional practices from the literature more thoroughly. Having additional time to complete the three part interviews with each
of the teachers would have provided additional insight into the history of the district and the educational philosophy of the staff members.

It would be interesting for a replication of this study to be completed spending more than nine days observing and collecting data at the school. Further research could also be conducted by comparing an additional rural elementary school with the same demographics to determine what instructional strategies are consistent between the two schools and how much the school culture is a factor in determining academic excellence. It was the intent of the study to determine effective instructional strategies that could be used with at risk elementary students. Rosenberg (1973) stated that “being poor is always feeling a little mad because you never have what you need” (p. 27). My hope is that educators could use this information to assist their disadvantaged students, so they have everything they need to become academically successful.
References


APPENDIX A

HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW BOARD PERMISSION

AND CONSENT FORMS
TO: Tamara Webb
FROM: Randy Gearhart, Chair
DATE: March 2, 2007
RE: Human Subjects Review Board Approval

The Human Subjects Review Board has approved the research proposal that has been submitted by Tamara Webb. The investigator may proceed with this project.

The primary function of the HSRB is to ensure protection of human research subjects. As a result of this mandate, we ask that you pay close attention to the fundamental ethical principles of autonomy, justice, and beneficence when establishing your research proposal. These ethical principles pertain specifically to the issues of informed consent, fair selection of subjects, and risk/benefit considerations.

If you have any questions, please contact me.

Sincerely,

Randy Gearhart
Phone: 419-207-6198
Fax: 419-289-5460
E-mail: ragehart@ashland.edu

PE: mfw
TEACHER OR PARENT CONSENT TO BE INTERVIEWED  
Effective Instructional Strategies for At-Risk Students in a  
Rural Elementary School

Dear __________________:

The Education Doctoral Program at Ashland University supports the practice of informed consent and protection for human subjects participating in research. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you, __________________, will participate in the present study. You are free to withdraw at any time.

You will be asked to participate in interviews about your school with Mrs. Webb. The interviews will be audio taped and only Mrs. Webb will listen to the tape. Your name will not be used in the research. Your participation is solicited but strictly voluntary. The information will be identified only through a code number.

If you would like additional information concerning this study before or after it is completed, or have any issues or concerns, please contact one of us by phone or mail. Thank you very much for your time, and we appreciate your interest and cooperation.

Sincerely,

Name of investigator  
Tamara Webb  
Phone No. (419) 895-1700 ext 1002  
Address _1575 State Route 96  
City, State, Zip _Ashland OH 44805

Name of Principal  
Phone No. (____)__________________  
Address  
City, State, Zip ______________

I have read and understand the information about "Effective Instructional Strategies for At-Risk Students in a Rural Elementary School." I give consent to participate in this study. I understand that this consent is voluntary and can be withdrawn without penalty any time.

__________________________  
Signature

__________________________  
Date
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDES
Interview Questions for Administrators

1. How long have you been the principal at this elementary school?

2. What is your educational background?

3. How do you determine what standards are most important for your students?

4. How do you provide intervention for those students not mastering the standards?

5. Describe the culture of this school.

6. What successful leader practices have you used at this school?

7. What factors have made this school an “Excellent” school?

8. Describe what you look for in a teacher when you are hiring.

9. What instructional strategies are most effective for your at-risk students?

10. Explain your leadership style.
Interview Questions for Teachers

1. How long have you taught at this elementary school?
2. What is your educational background?
3. How do you determine what standards are most important for your students?
4. How do provide intervention for those students not mastering the standards?
5. Do you use volunteers in your classroom? If so, how are they used?
6. What factors have made this school an “Excellent” school?
7. How is your administrator involved in improving student achievement?
8. What instructional strategies are most effective for your at-risk students?
9. Describe the culture of this school.
APPENDIX C

GRAPHIC ORGANIZER
Fill in the web with ideas from the selection about how Sally Ride made history.