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Perceptions of School from Students in a Rural School Environment

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PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL FROM STUDENTS IN

A RURAL SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

By

Helen Ruth Patton Kennard

A Dissertation Proposal
Submitted to the Faculty of
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in Curriculum and Instruction
in the Department of Curriculum, Instruction, and Special Education

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This study investigated the perceptions of school from students of differing ages,

genders, ethnic groups, and grade levels in a rural school environment. The ages were

divided into four categories: 11–12 years of age, 13–14 years of age, 15–16 years of age,

and 17–19 years of age. The ethnic groups in the school population were African

Americans and Caucasians. The different grade levels were 7th through 12th.

Wilson and Corbett (2002), in their book, *Listening to Urban Kids, School*

Reform, and the Teachers They Want, discussed students' views of what they want their

teachers to be like. Wilson and Corbett used interview protocols and documented

students' perceptions of their educational experiences.

In this study, the researcher compared the results to those of Wilson and Corbett

focusing on 10 areas. Students were asked to respond to a series of questions from each

area on the survey, which included the following: (a) student's perception on the

transition to high school; (b) student's perception on learning experiences; (c) student's

perception on success; (d) student's perception on school safety; (e) student's perception

on the school culture and/or environment; (f) student's perception on peer pressure; (g) student's perception on getting good grades; (h) student's perception on instructional differences; (i) student's perception on challenging work; and (j) the student's future plans. The students selected their best choice from the answers given. Using interview protocols, the students responded to the same categories.

The results produced data that will enable teachers, administrators, parents, and policy makers to implement school reform effectively by better understanding the students' perceptions from a rural school environment. Recommendations for further research include the following: (a) determine if the results found in this study are the same as those of students in other rural school environments, (b) gain a greater understanding of the perceptions that students have about school, (c) determine if there is a direct correlation between students' perception of school and student achievement, and (d) determine if school districts will utilize the data to aid in improving instruction, policy, and procedures within the school district.

DEDICATION

I want to dedicate the completion of this research to God, who is the author and finisher of my faith. It is through His wisdom, guidance, and love that this awesome dream has become a beautiful reality. His sustaining power gives me life. He has never left me, for it is through Him that I live, move, and have my being. I give Him the glory, honor, and praise for placing the right people in my path at the right time; for providing opportunities whereby I can grow; and for supplying just what I need at the time that I need it.

First, to my fore-parents and my parents, Wilma Ruth and John E. Patton, Sr., without you all there could have been no me. To my children, Teresa, Angela, Edward, Jr., Edwin, Edwon, and Lillian, I am so grateful to each of you for the undeniable love and support that you have shown during this process. I am so proud to be your mother. To my grandchildren, Zoriah, Edward III, and Morgan, who are just beginning life, I love you and hope that the completion of this dissertation serves as a constant reminder that through hard work and dedication, your dreams can come true. You all have been the wind beneath my wings that has caused me to keep moving forward.

To my brother, John, my sisters, Clara, Jacqueline, Verna, Mary, Zena, Stephania, Katrina, and my extended family, I love you. To my church family, my coworkers, and friends, who are too numerous to list, thank you for your unwavering support and encouragement. I love you and thank God for placing each of you in my life at the right

time. I am better for having known and interacted with you. In love, you have been a

friend, companion, critic, an encourager, a mentor, and a cheerleader. I pray that God will

richly bless each of you for what you have contributed to my life.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

forgotten. Edward W. Kennard, Sr., thank you for assisting in propelling me to my

dream. "Yes, I can!"

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Education reform efforts have traditionally involved teachers, administrators, and, in some cases, parents in exploring and facilitating changes and improvements in schools. Often studies have focused on each stakeholder's role in reform; however, many studies have omitted the voice of the one stakeholder who will be affected greatly in education reform: the student. Several studies support explanations regarding the importance of acknowledging the perceptions that students have about their school and how their perceptions can positively support effective educational reform. This study investigates the perceptions about school from students in a rural school environment. A need exists to aid policy makers in gaining a better understanding of students' perceptions about school in a rural environment.

This chapter begins with a literature review, which provides an understanding of the concept of student perceptions and includes recurring themes that are related to student perceptions of school. It concludes with a statement of the purpose, the research question, and justification for the study.

Student Voice

According to Fletcher (2003) in his article "Broadening the Bounds of Involvement: Transforming Schools with Student Voice," student voice is defined as the unique perspective of young people in schools. He stated that student voice is formed in the same way that adult voice is; that is, experience and education help students create opinions, ideas, and beliefs to which they give voice. Fletcher contended that it is not enough to only recognize student voice, but in order to truly empower students, educators must acknowledge, employ, accentuate, and enforce student voice throughout schools. Fletcher contended that students are uniquely disadvantaged in schools, as their ability to voice their concerns and attitudes is not guaranteed by the United States Constitution, and subsequent court cases are not always held up in students' favor. He claimed that this puts educators in the powerful position to abuse, co-opt, or corrupt student voice in classrooms and in school boardrooms. He sustained that is why merely acknowledging student voice is not enough. Fletcher presented several reasons why student voice must be heard throughout schools. These reasons include (a) considering the student's voice as the consumer input, (b) bridging the student involvement gap, and (c) promoting national civic well-being.

Fletcher (2003) asserted that consumer input is the basis for many businesses. He stated that many business theories have long recognized the essential input of consumers. He asserted that some schools have even adopted this perspective to improve parental involvement and have declared the parents as the clients of schools. Fletcher stated that

despite their role as the end consumer in schools, students are routinely excluded from these ambitious plans. He claimed that classroom involvement, decision-making, and evaluation opportunities throughout the education system can be essential opportunities for parents and students to collaborate to provide authentic responses. Fletcher also conveyed that the student's vital perspective must not be neglected; rather, it should be fostered and engaged in every way.

To Fletcher (2003), democracy is a journey that must start anew for each generation. He contended that democracy is not merely a buzzword, but that it must be an action. He challenged that if the country's democracy is to be active, then it must be taught, experienced, and lived. Fletcher contended that through a deliberate course of change, schools would become an infinite source of release and input for student voice. He asserted that while engaging student voice is not a quick-fix or fly-by-night program, all stakeholders in the school must have an intentional and deliberate voice. This, he conveyed, would allow the process, the time, and the patience required to be successful. Fletcher insisted that students are disadvantaged in schools because their ability to voice their concerns and attitudes is not guaranteed by the United States Constitution. He claimed that many court cases are not always held in the students' favor. Consequently, he argued that by engaging student voice throughout schools, today's educators, administrators, parents, and communities can lay the foundation upon which the future of the United States will be built.

Fletcher (2006) argued that according to academic research and practitioners from across the nation, there are two main categories of barriers to engaging student voice throughout education: structure and culture. Fletcher explained that structure in school is

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any formalized activity within education. He described "4 Ps" in the structure of schools, which include positions, policies, practices, and procedures. He said that it may be tempting to neglect the importance of developing structures that embrace student voice, as it may seem daunting or impossible to change those "4 Ps." However, he insisted that the public education system is inherently steeped in process and that is what makes it a tool of democracy. He argued that in order to secure and to strengthen democracy and education, students must be integrated and student voice must be infused throughout the structure of schools.

Next, Fletcher (2006) described culture. He stated that culture is less concrete and is a more intrinsic factor to engaging student voice throughout education. He insisted that many researchers say that the culture of a school is its personality. He went on to say that just like people, schools can be kind and accepting, rude and disrespectful, wise and guiding, and any other set of characteristics. He established that even more so, schools can be, and usually are, any combination of those characteristics. He substantiated that culture actually dictates structure and that it is obvious in the attitudes, actions, interactions, and relationships of individuals throughout education.

Fletcher (2006) also offered a strategy for overcoming those barriers. This, he concluded, was to develop a district- or school-wide strategy for engaging student voice, including professional development; policies encouraging and sustaining student voice; and integrated approaches to developing, sustaining, and strengthening the impact of student voice. He stated that there are plenty of other examples of the structure and culture of schools serving as barriers to engaging student voice throughout education; however, these are surmountable tasks that every school can and should overcome.

Fletcher concluded that student voice is too valuable to the success of learning and leading in schools and communities to continue to be neglected, alienated, or rejected.

Kushman and Shanessey (1997) challenged adults to examine their own assumptions about student learning through the eyes of students and to treat students as responsible agents of change rather than products of change. From their research, they contended that students are articulate and aware. They also found that students generally give thoughtful, honest answers to questions about their learning experiences and that they are conscious of the restructuring and reform processes going on in their schools. Kushman and Shanessey asserted that listening to students and acting on what they say is usually not the norm. They found that although teachers and staff were open to hearing what students had to say, schools were often at a loss about what to do with the data. The investigators determined that there are many ways to find out what students think and there are also many ways to involve students and faculty in the research and inquiry process as well as ways to integrate the inquiry results into the school improvement process.

Olson (2002) contended that by teaching them, students can become critical investigators of their own circumstances. Olson believed that using this method allowed researchers an opportunity to enhance the accuracy of information collected on schools and also gave students a voice in shaping many educational decisions. Olson also believed that utilizing students as researchers gave them a chance to conduct research on issues that directly affected their lives.

Olson (2002) reported a study in which surveys on race, class, and opportunities were distributed to high school students within 12 school districts in the greater New

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York metropolitan area. Of the more than 7,000 surveys distributed, 4,000 students returned their surveys. Olson had 35 high school students examine the students' responses. The author found that although this type of research challenges traditional assumptions about who the experts are, it also challenged the idea of who gets the opportunity to frame the questions and generate the interpretations. The author also believed that students and educators have significant knowledge about educational practices, structures, dynamics, hierarchies, rituals, and ideologies. Because of this, Olson claimed that valid and useful research should include students as active and involved members of any research team dedicated to the production of knowledge and action, acknowledging that students are important stakeholders in their education.

Olson (2002) found that one of the challenges of this type of research has been to ensure that everyone's voice is heard. She stated that in most cases the more affluent and well-educated students usually feel more entitled to speak and press their perspectives and that they are sometimes less generous about listening to the views of others. In contrast, she stated that less privileged students sometimes are hesitant to speak and are far too willing to assume that others understand information better than they do. Rather than searching for consensus, Olson declared that this type of research is usually explicitly geared toward seeking the different viewpoints that exist within a school building; however, each student's perspective was equally important.

Johnson (1991) long ago noted that students have been outside the school improvement loop. He contended that they were the only group whose voice seems to be absent from the ideas that really affect them. Agreeing, Furtwengler (1991) stated that students learn new skills from their involvement in school improvement and the

restructuring efforts. He claimed that these skills include the following: (a) to communicate effectively with teachers, (b) to confront and address difficult problems, (c) to work effectively in teams, and (d) to set and accomplish improvement goals, which helped students to reap these benefits as they get involved by lending their voices. Johnson also claimed that students' views are distinct in that schools can learn from students' input about instruction, climate or environment, and classroom structure. He asserted that although these are areas that teachers traditionally address, they are areas where students rarely have input, even though they do have a distinct vantage point as learners.

Cook-Sather (2003) agreed that students could teach teachers, administrators, and policy makers much about learning and discipline from their perspectives. In her article "Listening to Students about Learning Differences," Cook-Sather embraced the notion that students' perspectives are missing from the discussions on these matters. She stated that students are directly affected by the definitions of learning and learning differences that inform curriculum and instruction. Thus, the students should help to shape rather than simply be shaped by educational policies and practices. She added that if teachers and researchers are to really listen and respond to the students' perspectives on their experiences of school, then those in power must make major shifts in the ways they think and in how they interact with students. She contended that students have offered a glimpse into their lived experiences, which are experiences that educators and policy makers have often overlooked. She implied that educators could learn in conversation, informed by students, because they are indeed directly affected by the definitions of learning and learning differences.

Student Perceptions from an Urban Setting

Wilson and Corbett (2002) suggested that if substantial reforms to improve what and how much students learn actually occur in schools, then students' descriptions of their classroom experiences should reflect those changes. The authors argued that reform should be noticeable in what students say about school. Earlier, in the *Report for the Philadelphia Education Fund*, *"No Excuses": The Eighth Grade Year in Six Philadelphia Middle Schools*, Wilson and Corbett (1999) discuss students' views of what they wanted their teachers to be like. These findings remained constant over the 3 years during the study. According to the investigators, Philadelphia seemed to provide an appropriate reform context for using students' comments as windows through which to view reform. The school district emphasized student behavior and performance as the primary targets of reform. Although Wilson and Corbett had prior experience with listening to students talk about school and they were convinced that the students' perspectives would be simply stated and profoundly penetrating, they were confident that the results would be a vibrant thread of research on students' lives within the classroom.

Later, in their other book, *Listening to Urban Kids*, *School Reform, and the Teachers They Want,* Wilson and Corbett (2002) stated that a central feature of most urban education reform initiatives is increasing students' sense of belonging at school and, thereby, their commitment to coming to and working at school. Wilson and Corbett asserted that they were fully convinced of the value of listening to students as an important part of planning, implementing, and adjusting reform and they sought to extend that line of research to a larger cohort of middle school students with periodic feedback points to the schools and district.

Wilson and Corbett (2002) stated that their overall purposes for conducting the study were to document students' perceptions of their educational experiences and to track how those perceptions evolved over the 3-year period. The investigators initially selected five middle schools from the Philadelphia School District. Then each school selected 50 student participants for a total of 250 students. The study continued over a 3-year period. In the study, 247 sixth-grade students were interviewed. The participants involved reflected diversity in instructional experience, academic performance, behavior, motivation, gender, and race, proportional to the overall student population.

Wilson and Corbett (2002) used interview protocols with input from school staff members, and the investigators were able to interview the same students during the 3-year period of the study. The data analysis was repeated each year where the investigators began by reading their field notes and writing descriptive memos about the emerging themes. After rereading the data, they determined the predominant themes and established coding categories. This study included both quantitative data, which reflected the percentages of students who made a particular response, and qualitative data, which reflected the illustrative comments from students about various topics.

The investigators found that what students inferred they wanted from their teachers remained constant over the 3-year period of the study. Wilson and Corbett's (2002) research indicated that students valued teachers who (a) stayed on students to complete assignments; (b) went out of their way to provide help; (c) explained things until the lightbulb went on for the whole class; (d) provided students with a variety of activities through which to learn; (e) were able to control student behavior without ignoring the lesson; and (f) understood students' personal situations and factored them

into their lessons. In this investigation, Wilson and Corbett substantiated that the overwhelming majority of students reiterated these characteristics at every opportunity in the interviews conducted over a 3-year period. Wilson and Corbett concluded that for reform to be successful, it has to touch students' classroom lives noticeably and that students are in the best position to let researchers know that this has occurred. Following are the 10 perceptions of urban students presented by Wilson and Corbett (2002).

1. Students' Perceptions on Their Transition to High School

In their investigation of students' perceptions, Wilson and Corbett (2002) found that the students kept positive affirmations about their transition to high school. According to Wilson and Corbett, 82% of the students confirmed that they were ready to do well in high school, while only a few students argued that they were not prepared.

Regardless of the grades the students had received, they left middle school confident that they would complete high school and go on to college enabling them to create a good life for themselves and their families. The authors found that although these students attended non-magnet inner schools and were often told that their prior poor academic grades and performance were mostly a function of their failure to appreciate the value of getting an education, they continued to verbalize their value of education and its importance to their lives. Throughout the study, Wilson and Corbett (2002) found that students talked confidently of their future plans and education's integral role in helping them to realize their dreams.

2. Students' Perceptions on Their Learning Experiences

In the investigation of student perceptions on their learning experiences, Wilson and Corbett (2002) claimed that students made a compelling case for being active as a valuable means for making school-related learning more attractive to them. They stated that students talked about the kinds of work that helped them learn best and what teachers could do to make learning more interesting. The consensus of the students remained the same. Completing projects and conducting experiments were the activities most frequently mentioned by students in response to questions about what kind of work they liked doing best or that helped them to learn best. Wilson and Corbett's (2002) research revealed that students were enthusiastic about doing work of this type, even claiming that it was fun.

Wilson and Corbett (2002) found that while most of the students enjoyed active learning, not every one of them wanted teachers who would allow them to do projects and experiments. The researchers confirmed that an overwhelming number of them explained that they learned best when they were active. However, not all of the students liked active learning, as indicated when some of the students stated that they liked doing work sheets and did not like doing all of the research that is required with active learning.

3. Students' Perceptions on Being Successful in School

Wilson and Corbett (2002) noted that all of the students in this study expected to succeed in life. Most of the students planned to graduate from high school, go to college, and have satisfying careers. The authors claimed that the students entirely trusted that their schools had prepared them to accomplish these goals.

Although statistics indicated that many of the students were wrong, the authors noted that they described gaps in their education that were setting the stage for their failure. Wilson and Corbett (2002) also noticed that the students described teachers' actions that promised to counter those gaps. They identified teachers' actions that were the concrete manifestations of a "no excuses" philosophy. According to the authors, these actions were described as an academic push, stern discipline, extra help, clear explanations, varied activities, and thoughtful relevance. In their study, the "no excuses" philosophy made student success the schools' responsibility, especially in those circumstances in which children and/or their parents were not in a position to handle the responsibility themselves. In Wilson and Corbett's (2002) descriptions of the "no excuses" philosophy, the students explained that these interventions would keep them from failing.

4. Students' Perceptions on School Safety

Wilson and Corbett (2002) noted that during the interviewing process students frequently mentioned the changes in student behavior. Although students stated that they perceived the adults had tightened the enforcement of the rules and had taken the appropriate measures to increase and to ensure security in the buildings, they differed on their answers about the effectiveness of those changes. Students' responses to safety seemed divided as some claimed that the implementation of the new measures was spotty, thereby weakening the impact of safety, while some students suggested that these changes improved the general climate of the school. Then some of the students also

claimed that the enforcement of the rules and the increased security changed the climate of their school.

To obtain students' responses on safety, the Wilson and Corbett (2002) asked a series of questions. One question asked, "Are things different or the same this year at school?" (p. 30). When asked, how the rules were different from other years, one student stated that now the rules wanted "No fighting, no running in the halls, be quieter in the lunchroom" (p. 30). When Wilson and Corbett asked if students were better behaved, the same student's response was "Yeah, they are better behaved" (p. 30). Another student asserted that the new rules had little impact in the school environment. He stated that although the administration had implemented some new rules, such as "If you fight, you get locked up and you can't hang around [the school] after 3:30 cause of the fights," (p. 30) when asked, "Do the stricter rules work" (p. 30)? The student's response was "No, because the NTA [non-instructional teaching assistant] don't put more effort into it (p. 31). At first, it worked, but now they just take you to the Dean" (p. 31). Another question asked by the authors was, "Have there been fewer fights with the new rules?" The student said, "No, they say they will arrest you, but they [students] come right back to class" (p. 31). When asked if the students are better behaved, the student's answer was "No" (p. 31). These students' responses indicated why some students thought that the new rules improved school climate and why yet others felt that there was no improvement in student behavior, which affects school safety.

5. Students' Perceptions on School Culture and/or Environment

Wilson and Corbett (2002) found that the students' perception on school culture and environment could be determined in the following areas: all schools' organization of classes into small learning centers, the students' classroom experiences, and student behavior. The investigation revealed that the organization of the small learning centers included students rotating among a team of teachers. This concept allowed both teachers and students the opportunity to get to know a segment of the population very well.

The students' perceptions of their experiences in the small learning centers varied from school to school. According to Wilson and Corbett (2002), students reported mixed perceptions about the effectiveness of the small learning centers. In two of the schools, students talked about their small learning centers in the context of the field trips taken. Depending on the small learning center, some students stated that they took more trips than students from other small learning centers, who only described being outside the building once or twice during the school year.

According to Wilson and Corbett (2002), one of the schools took the concept of small learning center a step farther in the reorganization process by combining students from different grade levels for small learning center activities. Half of the students thought that this organization plan resulted in fewer fights and brought about more order to the school. The other half of the students found the younger students were immature and unwilling to interact constructively.

Yet, Wilson and Corbett (2002) found that students described another school's organization of the small learning centers around seven different groups, each with a different occupational focus. In these groups, students reported that they actively learned

through taking field trips, that they performed a stage production for local senior citizens' groups, and that one of the groups used the content of the law and government to help articulate instruction across their major subjects.

As students described their classroom experiences, the teachers were the focal point. When Wilson and Corbett (2002) interviewed students about rating their perceptions of their experiences positively or negatively, students put the praise or blame at the teachers' feet. Students described teachers as being either a hero or a scapegoat. According to the authors, the students were clear about what they wanted teachers to be like. They wanted teachers who were eager to help them without playing favorites, teachers who were strict but nice and respectful, and teachers who took the time to explain their work to them without becoming tediously repetitive. More than 75% of the students described the type of teacher they wanted with three characteristics: helpful, strict, and able to explain clearly (Wilson and Corbett, 2002).

6. Students' Perceptions on Peer Pressure

Wilson and Corbett (2002) found that students for the most part described a school where life seemed orderly. In one school in particular, students explained that classroom disruptions were limited to the exploratory classes and the overall tone of the hallways seemed less contentious. Students also hinted in their interviews that misbehavior was sometimes the product of frustration in class and that good teachers taught in a way that encouraged students to pay attention.

In the identified school, the authors also found a more diverse student population. Wilson and Corbett (2002) found in this school that ethnic tolerance arose in the

interviewing process. There was evidence of the greater diversity in the student body. The authors believed that this was the reason that the issue of ethnic tolerance was the topic of discussion in the interviews at this particular site. The authors noted that it was evident that the greater diversity in the student body had become the basis for the students' learning tolerance rather than inciting conflict. For example, they found an African-American male student who volunteered that he hangs out with the Arabic students. When asked why, he stated that it is because they are funny, they crack jokes, and they take him places. Authors also noted that an Arabic female student stated, "The students are all like best friends here" (p. 107).

Wilson and Corbett (2002) stated that tolerance of others seemed to carry over into the school settings where in other schools control was fragile. The authors noted that several students responded with clear indication of a positive peer environment at their schools. At one school, authors noticed that an Arabic female student stated that the peer pressure was positive, because all of the students are all like best friends and they all get along. She stated that they like each other and they hang out during lunch and gym. She said that even though she does not pressure them, they like to be near her. A Caucasian female student suggested that "There is a good mix by race here; we are really a tight clique" (p. 107). Then a Latina female student continued, "I hang with the black kids [because] I like anyone who gets along with me and they do" (p. 107). An African-American female student agreed with the response of the other students, stating, "There are lots of different races and they teach me different things; they are friendly" (p. 107). The authors noted that she said that is why she liked school.

7. Students' Perceptions on Getting Good Grades

In their research, Wilson and Corbett (2002) found that adults relied on standards to gauge progress, whereas students used grades, not district-devised performance indices that show their success. In their discussion of future success, students recognized grades as a central ingredient needed if they were to get to college and secure a satisfying career. Wilson and Corbett also reported that grades were a major reference point for how students defined the extent of their success in school. The authors found that grades were endemic to students' notions about how they were doing in school. The authors also found that students talked about doing their class work as a key to their success. Wilson and Corbett established that an overall discussion of the connection between course grades and performance standards would also serve another important purpose. They felt that students would have benefited greatly from clearer ideas about what quality meant, and by having well-defined standards that were clearly reflected in the grading practices would have enhanced the attempts to emphasize excellence.

8. Students' Perceptions on Instructional Differences

Wilson and Corbett (2002) found that in this study on students' perceptions on instructional differences one theme remained constant over the 3-year period: students identified good teachers in the same way and identified dramatic variations in the types and quality of their experiences from classroom to classroom. Students wanted teachers who were willing to help, who were strict but nice, and who were able to explain tasks and content clearly. The authors observed three types of classroom differences in the

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interviews that influenced what and how much students learned. These three types were pedagogical, content, and classroom environment.

During the interview process, Wilson and Corbett (2002) examined the first type of instructional difference, pedagogical. Even though students were unable to refer to research pertinent to learning with which to compare their teachers, they stated that some of their classes frustrated them and that others did not. The authors noted that despite the information related to learning styles and multiple intelligences, many teachers relied on instructional strategies that were primarily suited to one learning style or intelligence rather than teaching to several.

The second type of instructional difference found by Wilson and Corbett (2002) was related to the content of the class. They noted that even though teachers were given or had access to the content frameworks, which contained the topics to be covered in each subject and grade level, still teachers found covering the designated material difficult. Therefore, teachers had to select what material or topics to cover in the day-to-day instruction. This led to some students gaining a good understanding in some topics and areas of the frameworks, while other students taught by other teachers covered completely different topics and areas from the content frameworks.

The third type of instructional difference examined by Wilson and Corbett (2002) was the classroom environment. Claiming that this type was less subtle, they stated that that these differences had little to do with gradations of individuals' acquisition of knowledge or with nuances in the content area covered. Rather, they agreed that the environmental characteristics determined whether the majority of students learned anything at all. This, they conferred, was either because a teacher was reluctant to go

back over previously introduced material or did not appear to be willing to offer extra help or did little to engage the students in learning. Students in each school described situations in which little learning took place at any point in the year.

9. Students' Perceptions on Challenging Work

In their study, Wilson and Corbett (2002) interviewed students from several different schools, and they found that the students' perceptions of the teachers that they wanted remained constant. The authors also found that the students of the different schools were not educationally better off than their counterparts. However, they did find that one school in particular had greater consistency in pedagogy, content, and environment and that there seemed to be more emphasis on mastering challenging content to the extent that the curriculum offerings were developed from the current national standards of what students should know and be able to do. In this particular school, teachers possessed the qualities that most of the students had identified as the teachers that they wanted. In essence, these were "no excuses" teachers who were the kind who enabled them to learn best.

According to Wilson and Corbett (2002), the students had a rich storehouse of classroom experiences and the teachers who taught them, which helped them to understand challenging work. Students from all of the schools tended to be extremely positive about the quality of the education they were receiving as well as how their teachers challenged them in preparation for high school. One student stated, "My teachers, they pursue you. If you do something wrong, they on your back. They tell you they gonna help you, they tell you they want you to do good" (p. 106). Another student

said, "My teacher make you do work. She will help you if you don't understand. Then she will check, see how you doing it, and see that you doing it right" (p. 106). Yet another student continued, "My teachers teach. They don't try to put you down. They want you to learn. If you need help, they can give it until you understand it" (p. 106). Then another student declared, "The teachers really care for you. They make sure you get a full understanding. They keep asking, do you get it? Do you want me to do to again" (p. 106)?

Wilson and Corbett (2002) acknowledged that there seemed to be a connection between challenging work and classroom behavior as students described an environment where life seemed more orderly. Students stated that classroom disruptions were limited to the exploratory classes for the most part and that the overall tone of the hallways seemed less contentious. When the authors observed the school, they agreed with the students interviewed. The authors concurred that perhaps misbehavior was sometimes the product of frustration in class and that good teachers taught in a way that encouraged students to pay attention.

Wilson and Corbett (2002) had an opportunity to interview two female students who had attended at least two of the schools about their perceptions on challenging work. These students also provided comparisons of the nature of the class work, the standards set for work, their teachers, and their peers. With respect to the work, both students remarked that it was more challenging at the same school, school #6. When asked if she liked hard work, the first student stated that she liked doing work that was on her level. She said that the work was much harder at school #6. When asked if the work at school #3 was too easy for her, the student said that she was beyond the work at school #3. She

went on to confirm that the work at school #6 was much harder and that it was more like what she could do. She stated, "School #6 teachers start you at your level and then move you up. School #3 teachers start you too low" (p.106).

Wilson and Corbett (2002) noted that both students made a point of how strongly they felt that their work was tailored to a grade level above them at school #6. Although they were in junior high school, these students agreed that in algebra, science, and reading their teachers gave them ninth-grade work. When asked if they were doing lots of review work or learning new stuff, the students conferred, "We did some review early in the year, but now we are doing mostly ninth-grade stuff. Our teachers consider us ninth-graders. That's what they tell us" (p.110). Student 2 said that teachers would talk to them [at school #6] and tell them about the importance of graduating and being ready for high school. They also said that teachers say that they are no longer kids, but instead they are adults; and when they get in high school, teachers will not give them second chances.

10. Students' Perceptions on Future Plans

The findings from Wilson and Corbett (2002) reflected the students' value of education as they talked confidently of their future plans. They also maintained that education plays an important role in helping them to realize their dreams, which showed that they valued education. Over 80% of the students interviewed felt that their school had effectively prepared them for success in high school. The remaining 18% indicated that some of their teachers had done a good job of preparing them for success while other teachers had not. Some 90% of the students perceived a need for going on to college, which remained constant over the 3-year period. The overall perceptions of students in

this study indicated six significant findings: (a) students expected to succeed in life; (b) they planned to graduate from high school and go to college; (c) they expected to have satisfying careers; (d) most students believed that their schools had prepared them to accomplish these goals; (e) some students described gaps in their education that they believed was setting them up for failure; and (f) they identified teachers' actions that promised to provide them the necessary encouragement that would help them to succeed.

Wilson and Corbett (2002) found that the inner-city middle school students dreamed big and that their dreams fell into three main categories related to their future plans. All students planned to go to high school and to graduate; most of them expected to go to college; and nearly all of them anticipated finding employment in their preferred occupational fields or areas. Wilson and Corbett found that these beliefs remained constant from and even strengthened throughout middle school. Ninety percent of the students acknowledged a need for postsecondary education or training.

Wilson and Corbett (2002) asserted that most of the students also felt that they were well prepared to meet not only their educational challenges but the vocational challenges as well. Although the authors could not detect any great sophistication in the students' understanding of how their dreams would be realized, students identified the keys for success that they thought would aid them in achieving at all levels of life: working hard, getting good grades, and doing what they are told.

Rural Schools

Although students throughout the United States must pass similar graduate exit requirements, there are educational issues that emerge within small rural schools. As with

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urban schools, rural schools are held accountable for reaching national standards found in such legislation as No Child Left Behind. Often, however, rural schools are not considered when decisions are made concerning school policy and legislative demands. Legislators and policy makers seemingly make decisions that affect all schools nationwide using information received from urban schools. In their article "Differing Circumstances, Shared Challenges: Finding Common Ground Between Urban and Rural Schools," researchers Truscott and Truscott (2005) cited three possible reasons why the problems and the ongoing debate about education policy are more evident in urban schools than in rural schools. The authors stated that perhaps more is known about urban schools because (a) most major media outlets are located in cities, or (b) because high population densities in cities make the challenges more visible, or (c) because voters are concentrated in cities. They contended that regardless of the reasons, focusing primarily on urban schools establishes a needless rural–urban antagonism and ignores that urban and rural communities face similar struggles even though their circumstances may be different. They defined urban areas as those having 1,000 people or more per square mile, while rural communities have fewer than 150 people per square mile.

Robinson (2004), in the study "Voices in the Hallway: Three Rural Iowa Schools," provides insight into the small, rural school districts. Robinson's study was compared to a similar study done with large urban schools. Robinson stated that although similar issues emerged from the two studies, other issues demonstrated the different realities of education in rural Iowa and the education in a large culturally diverse urban setting.

According to Robinson (2004), the National Education Association (NEA) estimated that 40% of American schoolchildren can be classified as rural and that nearly half of American schools are located in rural areas and small towns. These estimates caused Robinson to pose several questions: (a) Are the issues, experiences, and realities of schooling the same for small rural schools as for urban schools? (b) Do the voices of rural Iowa schools match their urban counterparts as described by the Claremont Graduate School researchers? (c) If the Claremont study documents the voices of urban and suburban students, teachers, and community members, should researchers not document the voice for one third to one half of the nation's school population, the rural student? Robinson's study sought to answer those questions by building on the original Claremont research in which she examined the central issues of rural schooling through the eyes of those who attend, teach, administer, support, and participate in the rural schools and then compared those issues that were identified with the issues raised in the Claremont study over 10 years earlier.

As indicated by Robinson (2004), students recognized that the small size of the school gave them more one-on-one attention, which they appreciated. The smaller school size also allowed them to be involved in extracurricular activities at a higher participation level than they would at a larger school. She also asserted that all groups interviewed identified negative aspects of the small school size. Robinson claimed that although the students stated that everybody knows everybody was one of the most positive features, many of the students noted that gossip and a lack of privacy were some of the most notable downsides. Another negative feature of small rural schools noted by the students was that many of them had been in the same classes since kindergarten. Therefore, many

of the high school students reported that when they reached dating age their classmates seemed more like siblings rather than potential dates.

Robinson (2004) also found that school leaders in the three rural communities felt that recent state budget cuts and the current state funding formulas put more stress on the rural school districts. She also established that a decline in enrollment or a small state budget can have negative ripple effects throughout the district. Robinson alleged that many rural communities have fewer resources to address the problems that plague society. Those problems she documented were (a) the breakdown of the traditional family structure, (b) low income levels, and (c) drugs and alcohol. The author confirmed that each school district recognized that pressure from the state to reorganize and merge with other districts was a possibility. The author also recognized that the students were keenly aware of the financial problems that their schools faced. Students expressed their knowledge of a formal sharing with neighboring districts or even that a possible merger with a nearby town was an option.

Robinson (2004) found that students shared a generally positive feeling about school and what was happening at the school. A common consensus from the different groups interviewed, was that the school was a friendly place, where everybody knows everybody, and that it was a good school. Robinson also maintained that although the students generally rated their school's education as average to above average, they recognized that they had fewer class offerings. She also found that the college-bound students expressed some concern about adjusting to college life, but their concerns were more often about the social adjustments rather than the academic adjustments.

In the article "Rural Students Look to E-Learning for Advanced Courses," Collins (2005) also acknowledged that students in rural schools continued to face the problem of the availability of course offerings. He stated that because of their size, rural schools did not provide advanced-level courses to students. He inferred that many rural schools have turned to technology in order to resolve this problem. According to Collins, nearly half of all rural school districts had students taking distance education courses. He stated that distance learning is especially popular in rural districts, where student enrollment may be too small to justify offering many advanced-level courses.

In the article "If Teachers Are Good to You: Caring for Rural Girls in the Classroom," Seaton (2007) explored eight rural middle school girls' perceptions of the connections with the girls' teachers. Seaton asserted that teachers offer a vital source of support for adolescent girls living in rural communities as girls come to an important stage in the development of their identities. Seaton established that during the period of adolescence, girls develop the ability to think abstractly about their place in the world and to evaluate their capacity to become efficacious young adults. Thus, she states, adolescence represents a critical juncture in which one first begins to negotiate the intersection of one's self, beliefs, worth, and potential in a particular society and culture.

Seaton (2007) maintained that as girls move through adolescence, the contexts in which they begin to craft a sense of self are paramount in shaping their adult identities. She said for adolescent girls growing up in rural communities, who may face inadequate social and capital resources, restricted opportunities for social connections, and limited adult role models, connections with teachers play a central role in girls' self-understanding. Seaton contended that healthy connections with adults can provide

adolescents with tools to become engaged students and empowered citizens, encouragement and advice in the face of adversity, the foundations needed to craft a sense of self-esteem, a space in which youth can try out new ideas, and assistance in planning for the future.

Summary of Literature Review

The literature review provided an understanding of the concept of student voice as it relates to school reform. Several studies provided in-depth discussions about the importance of student voice, and several supported the importance of acknowledging the perceptions that students have about school. These studies also supported the premise that students' perceptions can positively impact school reform.

Fletcher (2003) defined student voice as the unique perspective of young people in schools. He stated that the student voice is formed in the same way that adult voice is formed—through experience and education, which help to create opinions, ideas, and beliefs to which they give voice. He contended that it is not enough to recognize student voice, but it is necessary to empower students by enforcing student voice throughout schools. Kushman and Shanessey (1997) challenged adults to examine their own assumptions about student learning through the eyes of students and to treat students as responsible agents of change rather than products of change. They found that students generally give thoughtful, honest answers to questions about their learning experiences and that they are conscious of the restructuring and reform processes going on in their schools.

Using urban city students' perceptions of school on a host of topics, Wilson and Corbett (2002) emphasized the value of students as constructive education critics as they portrayed the teachers that they wanted as well as the teachers that they wanted to avoid. They interviewed students over a 3-year period on the changes they saw in their educational plans and experiences, their schools, and their classrooms during this time. Students also described the differences in pedagogy, subject content, and learning environment as they moved from classroom to classroom. Wilson and Corbett concluded that for reform to be successful, it has to touch students' classroom lives noticeably and that students are in the best position to report that this has occurred.

A review of the literature on rural schools provided the findings of several researchers. Truscott and Truscott (2005) cited three possible reasons why the problems and the ongoing debate about education policy are more evident in urban schools than in rural schools. The authors stated that perhaps more is known about urban schools because (a) most major media outlets are located in cities or (b) because high population densities in cities make the challenges more visible or (c) because voters are concentrated in cities. They contended that regardless of the reasons, focusing primarily on urban schools establishes a needless rural–urban antagonism and ignores that urban and rural communities face similar struggles even though their circumstances may be different. They also defined urban areas as those having 1,000 people or more per square mile, while rural communities have fewer than 150 people per square mile.

Robinson (2004) provided insight into three small, rural school districts. Robinson's study was compared to a similar study done with large, urban schools.

Robinson compared and found that some of those same issues that urban schools and their students experienced were evident in rural schools and their students.

Seaton (2007) explored eight rural middle school girls' perceptions of the connections with the girls' teachers. Seaton asserted that teachers offer a vital source of support for adolescent girls living in rural communities as girls come to an important stage in the development of their identities. The students offered insight about their day-to-day experiences and their relationships with their teachers in their small, rural school environment.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate rural students' perceptions of school. The results from this study were used to compare the perceptions of students attending rural schools to those of students in an urban environment. These results can be used to aid administrators and policy makers in better understanding the perceptions of rural students about school, thereby helping them to make better decisions in areas that directly impact those students.

Research Question

The following question will be examined in this research:

What are the perceptions of school from 7th- to 12th-grade students who are in a rural school environment?

Wilson and Corbett (2002) claimed that if substantial reforms to improve what and how much students learn actually occur in schools, then students' descriptions of

their classroom experiences should reflect those changes. These authors agreed that reform should become noticeable in what students say about school. They claim that a central feature of most urban education reform initiatives is increasing students' sense of belonging at school and thereby their commitment to coming to and working at school. They went on to say that even though students may not be aware of intentional investments in planning and training intended to enable their teachers and administrators to act differently, their accounts of what they and their teachers do in class should serve as indications of whether the reform has penetrated to the classroom level. Wilson and Corbett stated that although these indications do not carry the political weight of supposed objective measures like standardized test scores, they should provide a school system with valuable information about whether changes in test scores accurately reflect any substantive changes in teaching and learning.

Justification for the Study

The review of literature revealed many research studies that involve urban school students' perceptions about school. Although there are several studies that involve rural school students' perceptions about school, it is important for me to examine the perceptions about school of the students where I serve as an administrator. The perception of school and what school reformation should be is channeled by legislators and those whose focus somewhat indirectly affects it. The research has shown that teachers, administrators, parents, legislators, and the media seem to shape what should be happening in schools. This shows an evident gap in the literature as it relates to students' perceptions from rural environments. This lack of literature in the areas of focus also

indicates that there is apparently a need for this study and the results of the data. It is equally important to recognize the existence of the perceptions of students in rural schools in order to give them a voice in the literature.

It is also important to understand that the results of this study produced useful data that will enable teachers, administrators, parents, and policy makers to understand the perceptions that students in a rural environment possess about school. Because school reform is ever evolving and that evolution directly impacts all students in every geographical area, it is important for those who assist in setting national and state standards as well as school reformation to have an understanding of the perceptions of students from rural school environments.

Further, it was important that this study was conducted in order to utilize the findings to aid in making effective decisions in school reform relative to this school site. It was also important to me, as the principal at this school, to understand what the students' perceptions were within this school, as related to the particular areas surveyed, because I believe that how students actually feel about school ultimately affects their attendance and performance both academically and behaviorally in school. The areas of focus were as follows: (a) student's perception on the transition to high school; (b) student's perception on learning experiences; (c) student's perception on being successful; (d) student's perception on school safety; (e) student's perception on the school culture and/or environment; (f) student's perception on peer pressure; (g) student's perception on getting good grades; (h) student's perception on instructional differences; (i) student's perception on challenging work; and (j) student's future plans.

CHAPTER II

METHODOLOGY

This study investigated the perceptions of school from students in grades 7 through 12 in a rural school environment in Mississippi. This chapter discusses the methodology used to complete this study. It is composed of the following sections: Research Design, Participants, Instrumentation, Interviewing, Procedure, and Data Analysis.

Research Design

This study is considered qualitative. It utilized a descriptive and a comparative design. In their study *Listening to Urban Kids, School Reform, and the Teachers They Want,* Wilson and Corbett (2002) also used a qualitative and descriptive design. Wilson and Corbett interviewed 247 sixth-grade students in their longitudinal study that lasted over a 3-year period. In contrast, in the present study, 121 students participated who were in grades 7–12 in a rural Mississippi school. Participants completed a survey and were interviewed over a 1-year period.

According to Glesne (1999), in qualitative research the experience of learning as a participant observer often precedes interviewing and is the basis for forming questions. Glesne also argued that the things that the researcher sees and hears about the people and

circumstances of interest become the nuggets around which the researcher constructs questions. In order to offer clarity, she maintained that research questions formulate what the researcher wants to understand; the interview questions are what the researcher will ask people in order to gain that understanding. Glesne stated that by whatever means obtained, the questions asked must fit the researcher's topic; the answers elicited must illuminate the phenomenon of inquiry. She continued that the questions must be anchored in the cultural reality of the respondents; the questions must be drawn from the respondents' lives.

Yin (1988) stated that it is the investigator who is intruding into the world of the subject being studied rather than the reverse. He continued that under these conditions, the investigator must make special arrangements to be able to act as an observer (or even as a participant–observer). This will not be necessary in this study as the researcher is the principal in the school. Yin also noted the investigator's behavior is the one likely to be constrained. This will not be the case because the researcher, the principal of the school, and the students, the participants, both interacted daily in the school setting.

Additionally, the students completed a researcher-designed survey based on the findings of Wilson and Corbett (2002). The survey contained information in reference to the personal demographics of the participants, which includes the following: (a) age, (b) gender, (c) ethnic background, and (d) grade level. The survey included the following categories, based on the work of Wilson and Corbett: (a) transition to high school; (b) learning experiences; (c) student success; (d) school safety; (e) school culture; (f) peer pressure; (g) getting good grades; (h) instructional differences; (i) challenging work; and (j) students' future plans.

The researcher in this study is the principal of the rural Mississippi school where the study takes place. I have 17 years' experience as an assistant teacher, classroom teacher, gifted teacher, and school administrator (see Curriculum Vitae in Appendix A).

Participants

The participants in this study were the students enrolled at West Kennard County High School **(**WKCHS), which consists of both junior high and high school students in grades 7 through 12 from the rural area in Kennard County, MS. West Kennard County High School is a part of the Kennard County School District. The participants included all students enrolled, except for those in the self-contained Special Education classroom. The ages of the students are 12–21 years. Of the 140 students enrolled, about 78% were females and about 22% were males. The ethnic backgrounds of the student population were 89% African American and 11% Caucasian.

Instrumentation

Wilson and Corbett (2002) conducted a study that revealed the perceptions of students from urban schools. They interviewed students and presented their findings. Within their findings, they reported students' perceptions in 10 categories. I also conducted interviews with students in my school using those same 10 categories, as interview topics. Additionally, I chose to use a survey with these same 10 categories. I decided to use the survey to ensure each student had the opportunity to respond to each category with anonymity.

The survey used in this study was an adaptation of the interview protocols used by Wilson and Corbett (2002) in their study. The basic premise for using a survey was that I am the researcher in this study, and I am the principal at the school where the research takes place. A survey was appropriate, given the subordinate and superordinate relationship of the researcher and the students. The survey permitted anonymity of responses by students.

A survey was used to solicit responses by asking participants questions and then examined the relationships among the responses. A survey seemed ideal for this type of study because its design allowed the researcher to obtain the information readily from the participants anonymously.

The survey was divided into 11 sections (see Appendix B). The first section of the survey was the demographics, which included the following areas: age, gender, ethnic background, and grade level. The topics of the next 10 areas were as follows: (a) transition to high school; (b) learning experiences; (c) student success; (d) school safety; (e) school culture; (f) peer pressure; (g) getting good grades; (h) student perception on instructional differences; (i) perceptions on challenging work; and (j) students' future plans. Each of these areas contains several questions related to that topic.

Interviews

McMillan and Wergin (2002) described several types of qualitative research. The first type is ethnographic, a study that involved direct engagement with the participants and environments to obtain an in-depth description and interpretation of behavior within a culture or social group. According to the authors, the intent is to understand in depth the

phenomena being studied; the observations and interviews typically take place in naturally occurring settings and tend to be for a period of time. The authors contend that ethnographies collect observational data and/or interview data and then summarize and analyze the data. They stated that the conclusions are based on a synthesis of the data that were collected.

The next type of qualitative research is a case study, in which the researcher uses in-depth analysis of one or more bounded systems, such as events, programs, communities, settings, schools, individuals, and social groups. This describes the phenomenological qualitative study. According to McMillan and Wergin (2002), a phenomenological qualitative study is one in which the experiences and perceptions of selected participants are examined in depth. The purpose is to understand the essence and meaning of the participants' perspectives.

In accordance with these two descriptions given by McMillan and Wergin (2002), I not only used the survey but also conducted interviews in this case study to gain a more in-depth understanding of the students' perceptions about school. Students were asked to voluntarily participate in the surveys. Once participants volunteered for the interviews, I set up designated times and used the survey questions to prompt the interviews with the participants and recorded their responses. I coded the survey/interview questionnaire so that the information given by the participants was not identifiable (e.g., 0701, 0801, etc.).

Procedures

I received written approval from the Mississippi State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (see Appendix C),

the Superintendent of Education of the Kennard County School District (KCSD), and the KCSD Board before beginning the study. I had to appear before the KCSD Board to obtain permission to conduct the research. The superintendent provided a letter of support of the study and the school board agreed unanimously to approve the research.

Mouly (1963), in his study *The Science of Educational Research,* revealed that there may be several problems in using a questionnaire or survey, which are as follows: (a) non-returns, (b) a lack of understanding of the survey by the participant, and (c) the participant's carelessness in completing the survey. I counteracted these problems with the following procedures: (a) explained the directions to the participants prior to their participation; (b) kept the survey simple by having participants place an X beside their response; and (c) after the administration of the survey, I retrieved it promptly.

An information package containing a cover letter, parent's consent form, student's assent form, and the survey was provided to each parent. The cover letter provided an explanation of the research project. In addition, confidentiality was assured in the study and explained to the participants before beginning participation.

Yin (1988) acknowledged that for interviewing key persons, the investigator must cater to the interviewee's schedule and availability. In order to accommodate the needs of students, the homeroom or activity period was utilized. Each morning students met in homeroom or activity period for the first 20 minutes of the school day. During that period, each grade level, 7–12, met with class sponsors (faculty and staff who oversee that grade level's fund-raising activities, class meetings, and issues pertinent to each particular grade level for the school year). During one of those meetings or activity periods, students were given a copy of the survey packets to take home to their

parent/guardian, which explained how the survey was to be answered and how the survey was to be conducted. The letter also explained that participation in the research was strictly voluntary and that it did not pose any harm to the students.

The participants were given the survey during the homeroom or activity period. The directions for completing the survey were explained to the participants by the researcher. To keep the surveys anonymous, participants were asked to put the completed surveys in a container placed on a table when they exited the classroom. Once all participants completed the surveys, the researcher collected the surveys.

Informal interviews were conducted over a 1-year period. Since I was the principal at West Kennard County High School, I had daily interactions with the students. Therefore, I was able to conduct informal interviews with the students. The informal interviews included conversations with students, before, during, and after school.

Data Analysis

In *Listening to Urban Kids, School Reform, and the Teachers They Want,* Wilson and Corbett (2002) interviewed students and presented their findings under 10 categories. This study is an adaptation of that study. In this study, the researcher interviewed students about their perceptions of school. Yin (1988) also stated that the nature of the interview is much more open-ended and an interviewee may not necessarily fully cooperate in answering the questions. Therefore, along with the interviewing process, I used a survey, analyzing the data to determine the perceptions of students from a rural school environment. I examined those findings in the same categories used by Wilson and

Corbett (2002): (a) transition to high school; (b) learning experiences; (c) student success; (d) school safety; (e) school culture; (f) peer pressure; (g) getting good grades; (h) instructional differences; (i) challenging work; and (j) students' future plans.

According to Merriam (1998), multiple or comparative case studies involve collecting and analyzing data from several cases. She stated that in multiple case studies there are two stages of analysis, the within-case analysis and the cross-case analysis. Merriam maintained that for the within-case analysis, each case is first treated as a comprehensive case in and of itself. She claimed that data are gathered so the researcher can learn as much about the contextual variables as possible that it might have a bearing on the case. She asserted that once analysis of each case is completed, cross-case analysis begins. Once the students' perceptions from the rural environment were analyzed, I compared those findings to the categorical findings of Wilson and Corbett (2002) of the students from the urban setting.

Data analysis occurred as data were being collected through the survey and interviews. The constant and comparative method of data analysis was used (Yin, 1988). This method was also used to compare findings from my study to findings from Wilson and Corbett (2002).

CHAPTER III

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of high school students in a rural school environment. This chapter provides the results of the study. It is composed of the following sections: Description of Participants, The Researcher, Connecting the Inquiry of Students' Perceptions of School from an Urban Environment to Students' Perceptions of School from a Rural Environment, the Survey, the Informal Interviews, Results of Surveys and Interviews, and the Comparisons of Urban and Rural Schools Environments. The chapter concludes with the Summary.

Description of Participants

The participants in this study were the students enrolled at West Kennard County High School (WKCHS), which consisted of both junior high (7th and 8th grades) and high school students (9th–12th). They were from the rural areas on the west side of Kennard County, MS. West Kennard County High School is a part of the Kennard County School District (KCSD). Over 90% of the student participants at WKCHS received free and reduced lunch. The ages of the students were 11–21 years. Of the 140 students enrolled at WKCHS, about 78% were female and about 22% were male. The ethnic backgrounds of the student population were 89% African Americans and 11%

Caucasians. There were no other ethnic groups enrolled at WKCHS at the time that this study was conducted. Of those 140 students enrolled at WKCHS, 121 agreed to participate in the study. The participants by grade levels included 31 in 7th grade, 13 in 8th grade, 18 in 9th grade, 22 in 10th grade, 21 in 11th grade, and 16 in 12th grade. The students who were in self-contained Special Education (SPED) did not participate in the study.

The Researcher

I started my educational profession as a first-grade assistant teacher for 6 years in the Patton City School District (PCSD). The majority of the students who were enrolled in that classroom were students who had failed the first grade. I found that although they had different learning styles and interests, they were successful when different learning strategies were implemented. During that time I decided that I wanted to become an elementary school teacher. I entered Mississippi State University (MSU) as a non-traditional student and earned a B.S. degree in elementary education (see Curriculum Vitae in Appendix A).

After graduation, I obtained a position as a third-grade teacher in the PCSD. As I began to teach and observed the students in my classroom, I found a group of diverse learners who were excited and eager to learn and who needed to be challenged. Wanting to strengthen my knowledge base, I decided to pursue a master's degree in elementary education. I was able to earn certification to teach gifted education along with the master's degree. Later, I took a position to teach gifted education to second- and third-grade students. While teaching gifted education, I earned my National Board

Certification with the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. The National Board process allowed me to examine the instructional process more in depth.

Beginning to understand even more the art of successful and effective teaching and learning made me want to influence student learning in a more profound way. I knew that I could affect curriculum and instruction within my classroom, but I felt that I could impact it even greater in an administrative role. Therefore, I decided at that time to pursue a degree in administration. I earned an educational specialist degree in educational leadership from MSU.

I served as an assistant principal at WKCHS for 1 year before becoming the principal. As a former elementary education and gifted education teacher, I had been responsible only for the instruction of the students who were placed in my classroom. Now, as the principal of this rural high school, my responsibilities quickly took on a greater challenge.

As the principal, my primary responsibilities of managing the day-to-day operations of the school included functioning as the instructional leader; ensuring the safety of the students, faculty, and staff; promoting and maintaining the school culture and an environment conducive to learning; maintaining the upkeep of the buildings; managing the transportation of the students; promoting and/or maintaining student attendance; and overseeing the athletic programs. Therefore, it became very important for me to understand the concerns of students and their perceptions of school. It was my belief that if students perceived they were connected to the school and felt good about coming to school, then their attendance would improve. If student attendance improved, they would be present in class for instruction. Once the students received effective

instruction, the overall academic level of the school would improve, resulting in all of the stakeholders having a better overall sense of pride about themselves as well as about the school.

In my role as the principal of WKCHS, I had the opportunity to interact with the students on a daily basis, and the participants and I developed a positive rapport. It was interesting to note that during my first year as principal at WKCHS, the students still seemed to think of me as an outsider because I did not reside in the Kennard community. On the first day of school in early August, as students arrived, one African-American female in the 10th grade approached me and asked if she could ask me a question. Once I told her yes, she asked, "Now, how long are you going to be here?" in a rather sarcastic tone. I asked, "Why are you asking me that? I just got here." She replied, "Everybody that comes, they always leave. So how long are you going to be here?" As we continued to converse, she informed me that in the past 3 years, there had been four principals at WKCHS. She explained, "One year, we even had three principals." After that statement, I began to understand why she was concerned.

To aid in building a positive rapport with the students, I made it a habit to greet the students each morning as they arrived. I also made sure that I was in the halls as the students changed classes during the day to interact with them. I knew that our interactions were positive when I heard students imitating me as they spoke to each other while they passed in the hallway. Then they started coming by my office "just to speak to me" whenever they got an opportunity. I also visited two or three classrooms each morning to interact with the students. I would ask them how they were doing and made sure that I practiced an open-door policy where students could come to talk to me about anything

that was bothering them or any type of problem that they were having. I listened to them and discovered that these short communications allowed the students to build a relationship of trust with me. These interactions proved beneficial as they allowed the students to understand that I was interested in their well-being as well as established their understanding of the expectations that I had for them as students at WKCHS.

Connecting the Inquiry of Students' Perceptions of School from an Urban Environment to Students' Perceptions of School from a Rural Environment

Wilson and Corbett (2002) suggested that if substantial reforms to improve what students learn as well as how much they learn occurred in schools, then students' descriptions of their classroom experiences should reflect those transformations. They argued that school reform should be observed in what students say about school. In *No Excuses: The Eighth Grade Year in Six Philadelphia Middle Schools*, Wilson and Corbett (1999) discussed students' views of what they wanted their teachers to be like. The authors found that students were very vocal in their perceptions of the teachers they wanted. Students identified teachers' actions that were the concrete manifestations of a "no excuses" philosophy. According to the authors, these actions were described as an academic push, stern discipline, extra help, clear explanations, varied activities, and thoughtful relevance. Wilson and Corbett (2002) had prior experience with listening to students talk about school, and they were convinced that the students' perspectives would be simply stated and profoundly penetrating. They were confident that these results would be a vibrant thread of research on students' lives within the classroom. Using the

students' view as a window in which to begin school reform seemed to be an avenue that I could pursue, because I was in a position in which I was able to interact with the students at WKCHS on a daily basis. During the 3-year study conducted by Wilson and Corbett, those findings remained constant. According to the authors, PA seemed to provide an appropriate reform context for using students' comments as windows through which to view school reform. The school district emphasized student behavior and performance as the primary targets of reform. As the principal of WKCHS, these too were areas of primary concern for me.

Later, in their book *Listening to Urban Kids*, *School Reform, and the Teachers They Want,* Wilson and Corbett (2002) stated that a central feature of most urban education reform initiatives is increasing students' sense of belonging at school and thereby their commitment to coming to and working at school. If this was true for my students, I felt that the best way to obtain the information needed for school reform at WKCHS would be to utilize a format similar to what Wilson and Corbett had used. The authors also declared that they were fully convinced of the value of listening to students as an important part of planning, implementing, and adjusting reform. Wilson and Corbett stated that their overall purposes for conducting the study were to document students' perceptions of their educational experiences and to track how those perceptions evolved over the 3-year period. As I read Wilson and Corbett's discussions, I questioned if the students from the rural school environment at WKCHS would be as open as the students from the urban environment and share their perceptions of school. I also wondered if the students from WKCHS's classroom experiences would be similar or

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different to those described by the urban students that Wilson and Corbett had written about in their study.

Wilson and Corbett (2002) had described how the value of listening to students is an important part of planning, implementing, and adjusting reform. I knew that in order to have an effective school transformation, I needed to know what the students at WKCHS perceived about school. I also needed the students to share their classroom experiences, instructional differences, and their perceptions as a whole about school so that I could understand and use those perceptions to aid in any type of constructive school reform needed.

The Survey

Wilson and Corbett (2002) used interview protocols with input from school staff members, and the investigators were able to interview the same students during the 3-year period of the study. The data analysis was repeated each year where the investigators began by reading their field notes and writing descriptive memos about the emerging themes. The survey for this study was created based on the topic areas that surfaced during the Wilson and Corbett study. Each category of the survey had specific questions relative to the topic area formed in this survey (see Appendix B). As mentioned previously, I thought that a survey was the best way to collect the data needed and to provide anonymity. I thought the results would provide the students' perceptions of this rural school. And, in turn, those results would provide me with a view needed to lead effective school reform.

A survey seemed ideal for this type of study because its design would allow me to readily obtain the information from the participants anonymously. The survey was divided into 11 sections. The first section of the survey was the demographics, which included four questions about the students in the following areas: age, gender, ethnic background, and grade level.

The next part of the survey is divided into 10 sections or categories with questions relative to students' perceptions about a specific topic or subject. These categories are as follows: (a) transition to high school, which has three questions; (b) learning experiences, which has four questions; (c) student success, four questions; (d) school safety, six questions; (e) school culture, five questions; (f) peer pressure, five questions; (g) getting good grades, six questions; (h) instructional differences, five questions; (i) challenging work, five questions; and (j) students' future plans, five questions.

Each morning, WKCHS students meet in homeroom or activity period for the first 20 minutes of the school day. During that period, each 7th- through 12th-grade level meets with class sponsors (faculty and staff who oversee that grade level's fund-raising activities, class meetings, and issues pertinent to each particular grade level for the school year). During the homeroom or activity periods, students were given a copy of the packets that contained a letter to parents about the research study and a Parent Consent Form. These forms explained how the survey would be answered and how the study would be conducted. The letter also explained that participation in the research was strictly voluntary and that it would not pose any harm to the students.

Once students returned the Parent Consent Forms and completed the Student Assent Forms, they were asked to complete the survey during homeroom or activity

period. The directions for completing the survey were explained to the participants by the

researcher. They were asked to read each question carefully and place an (X) beside their

response to each question. They were told that their answers would remain anonymous.

To keep the surveys anonymous, participants were asked to place the completed survey in

a container that was placed on a table as they exited the classroom. Once the participants

had completed the surveys, the researcher collected the surveys.

The Survey Results

Demographics

The students participated and completed a researcher-designed survey based on

the findings of Wilson and Corbett (2002). The first part of the survey contained

information in reference to the personal demographics of the participants, which includes

the following, as shown in Table 1: (a) age, (b) gender, (c) ethnic background, and (d)

grade level.

Table 1:   Demographics of Participants

Age of Participants	11–12 years 17% (21)	13–14 years 24% (29)	15–16 years 40% (48)	17–21 years 19% (23)		
Gender	Males 27% (33)	Females 73% (88)				
Ethnic Background	African American 89% (108)	Caucasian 11% (13)				
Number of Participants by Grade Level	7th 26% (31)	8th 11% (13)	9th 15% (18)	10th 18% (22)	11th 17% (21)	12th 13% (16)

One hundred and twenty-one students at WKCHS agreed to participate in this study. The students' ages ranged from 11 to 21 years. Of the 121 students who participated in the survey, 27% were males and 73% were females. The ethnic backgrounds of the students were 89% African American and 11% Caucasian. There were no other ethnic groups enrolled at WKCHS at the time that this study was conducted.

The next sections of the survey provided the participants an opportunity to answer questions in 10 categories. The categories are as follows: (a) transition to high school; (b) learning experiences; (c) student success; (d) school safety; (e) school culture; (f) peer pressure; (g) getting good grades; (h) instructional differences; (i) challenging work; and (j) students' future plans. Each of the categories had several questions related to the topics in order to gain insight into the students' perceptions in that particular area.

The Perceptions of Students from a Rural School Environment

1. Students' Perceptions on Their Transition to High School

For many school districts, high school is considered as the 9th–12th grades because these are the grades in which Carnegie units are earned in order to pass on to each grade level and to meet the requirements for graduation from high school. However, in the KCSD, students in grades 7 through 12 are housed on one site. Therefore, students who leave the elementary school in 6th grade do not attend a middle school but enter 7th grade at a high school site. In this study, students entered high school when they entered the 7th grade.

Transition to any new school can be uncomfortable for many students. That is why it was important to understand the perceptions of the students at WKCHS on their transition to high school. It was equally important for students to articulate their success or lack of success in the transition process in order to consider their transitional needs. Based on the findings, I will be able to aid faculty, staff, and the students in making a smoother and more successful transition into the high school environment. The students'

perceptions will also help the administration, faculty, and staff to be able to respond appropriately to their needs as they transition from the elementary school to 7th grade at WKCHS and again from 8th grade to 9th grade (high school) within the school. The Transition to High School category rendered the following results.

Nearly all of the WKCHS students surveyed had a positive perception of their transition to high school, as shown in Table 2. Some 90% of the students agreed that the school faculty and staff made the transition easier for them. However, based on the grades during the first 9-week grading period for 7th grade students, there was an evident decline in their grades. Also, there were more discipline referrals and infractions written for the 7th grade students than any other grade in high school. Yet, 90% of the students described their transition from elementary to high school as positive. The results of the students' perceptions on their transition to high school are shown in Table 2.

Table 2:   Transition to High School

Question	Results
1. Did the school staff help to make your transition to this school easy?	
A) Yes	90%
B) No	10%
2. How was it for you to make the change from elementary to high school?	
A) Extremely Difficult	10%
B) Difficult (But I adjusted quickly)	15%
C) Somewhat Difficult	15%
D) Easy	60%
3) How well prepared were you for high school?	
A) Well Prepared	65%
B) Somewhat Prepared	35%
C) I was not prepared for high school.	0%

Based on the findings in this section, several questions can be raised. First, it is important to understand why 10% of the students did not feel that the staff at WKCHS made their transition easy and what particular factors attributed to their perceptions. The results also showed that 60% of the students indicated that the change from elementary to high school was easy. More specifically, 15% of them implied that the change was

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difficult but they adjusted quickly. Then 15 % showed that it was somewhat difficult, and the remaining 10% described their experience as extremely difficult. Although 60% of them indicated that the change was easy, the data revealed that nearly 40% of students had some level of difficulty in making the change from elementary school to high school in their transitional process.

As a researcher, I want to understand more specifically the challenges as well as the levels of difficulty perceived by the students. Sixty-five percent of the students indicated that they were well prepared, and 35% of them showed that they were somewhat prepared. Based on those results, I want to know why there is such a discrepancy. It is important to note that none of the students at WKCHS felt that they were unprepared to enter high school.

2. Students' Perceptions on Their Learning Experiences

As the instructional leader, it is important to understand the perceptions of students on their learning experiences at WKCHS in order to aid in constructing even more effective learning experiences for them. The four questions in this area of the survey referred to the students' perceptions on their learning experiences, as shown in Table 3. The general consensus of the students about their learning experiences was positive.

The first question addressed the types of activities that helped them to learn best. Sixty percent of the students indicated that they learned best by completing assignments on the computer, while 30% noted that they enjoyed active learning, which included working in small groups and talking and discussing the lesson with the teacher and other

students. Only10% of the students showed that they leaned best by completing activity or

work sheets. None of the students indicated that they learned best by having their teacher

lecture and give notes.

Table 3:   Learning Experiences

Questions	Results
1. What kinds of activities help you to learn best in class?	
A) Completing activity or work sheets	10%
B) Working in small groups with other students	15%
C) To have your teacher to lecture and give notes while you write them down	0
D) Talking and discussing the "lesson" with the teacher and other students	15%
E) Completing assignments on the computer	60%
2. I do not learn in class when	
A) I have to do all of the work by myself	35%
B) I must work in a group with others	41%
C) I have to read	24%

Table 3 (continued)

3. What do your teachers do to help you to learn?	
A) Encourage you to do your best.	45%
B) Re-teach and explain what you don't understand the first time.	35%
C) Encourage you to ask questions if you don't understand.	0
D) My teachers do not help me to learn.	20%
4. Do you have opportunities in class to work with computers or other kinds of technology?	
A) Yes	47%
B) No	53%

Students also indicated how they did not learn in class. Forty-one percent of the students showed that they did not learn best when they had to work in groups with others, while 35% of them suggested that they did not learn when they had to do all of the work by themselves.

Next, 24% of them acknowledged that they did not learn in class when they had to read. Some 45% of the students indicated that they learned best when teachers encouraged them, and 35% of them indicated that they learned best when teachers re-teach and explain what they did not understand from the lesson when it was taught the first time. One out of five students responded that they felt that their teachers did not help them learn. Less than half of the students maintained that they had opportunities to work with computers in class, while just over half of them indicated an opposite response.

From the results several findings evolved that will aid in promoting more in-depth and successful learning experiences, based on the results of how the students at WKCHS suggested they learned best. First, the majority of the students indicated that they learned best when involved in learning experiences where they were actively involved in activities such as completing assignments on the computer, working in small groups, and talking and discussing the lesson with the teacher and other students. Second, they learned best when teachers encouraged them and when teachers would re-teach and explain the material to them. Third, none of the students indicated that they learned best when the teacher would lecture and give notes. Last, none of the students indicated that teachers encouraged them to ask questions if they did not understand.

3. Students' Perceptions on Being Successful in School

Regardless of their academic grades, their behavior, and/or discipline record, the majority of the students surveyed indicated that they were successful, as shown in Table 4. Although the majority, 63%, of the students' definition of "being successful in school" was preparing them to go to college, 22% of them recognized preparing them to get a job after high school as being successful in school. Then 10% of them indicated that getting good grades was the meaning of success. Another 5% conveyed that success in school meant to act right.

Table 4:   Students' Success

Questions	Results
1. What is your definition of being successful in school?	
A) To get good grades	10%
B) To "act right in class"	5%
C) Preparing you to go to college	63%
D) Preparing you to get a job after high school	22%
2. Are you successful in school?	
A) Yes	95%
B) No	5%
3. Is it easy or difficult for you to be successful in school?	
A) Easy	59%
B) Difficult	41%
4. Do your teachers let you know that you are successful in their class?	
A) Yes	65%
B) No	35%

The results illustrated that nearly all of the participants in the study felt that they were successful in school, with a 95% affirmative. Only a small percentage of the students thought that they were unsuccessful in school. Over half of the students indicated that it was easy to be successful in school. Then the majority of them showed that their teachers let them know that they are successful in their classes.

Although the students' overall perception on being successful in school was positive, the outcomes also indicated that less than half of the students found it difficult to be successful in school and that about one third of them perceived that their teachers did not communicate when they were successful in their classes. These are some of the challenges that students at WKCHS face. Therefore, their perceptions on being successful will be invaluable in the school's redesign, which is why it is important for me to give weight to their perceptions on their being successful in school.

4. Students' Perceptions on School Safety

This category examined the students' perceptions of school safety. There are six survey questions that are in this area, as shown in Table 5. The students' overall perception of feeling safe at school was positive.

Ninety-five percent of the students acknowledged that they felt safe at school, while only 5% of them indicated that they did not feel safe at school. The majority of the students showed that they did not think that there were any unsafe places in the school. Very few of the students indicated that there were any unsafe places in the school, while 100% of them indicated that they felt that their school building was safe. The majority of the students indicated that they were not afraid or intimidated by any other students.

Table 5:   School Safety

Questions	Results
1. Do you feel safe at school?	
A) Yes	95%
B) No	5%
2. Are there any unsafe places in school?	
A) Yes	2%
B) No	98%
3. Do you feel that your school building is safe?	
A) Yes	100%
B) No	0
4. Are you afraid or intimidated by other students at your school?	
A)Yes	4%
B)No	96%
5. Are you afraid or intimidated by teachers or any other staff members who work at your school?	
A) Yes	0
B) No	100%

Table 5 (continued)

6. I feel safe when the principal and/or the police officer monitors the school building and the campus during the day.	
A) Yes	100%
B) No	0

The results showed that only about 4% of the students had a perception of being afraid or intimidated by other students at their school. None of the students indicated that they were afraid or intimidated by any of the school personnel. In addition, 100% of the students indicated that they felt safe when the principal and/or a police officer monitored the school buildings and the campus during the day, which is positive.

As the administrator of WKCHS, I want all students to feel safe. If students feel unsafe at school, that feeling can affect school attendance and student achievement, which are both key to having a successful and effective learning environment at school. However, in order to provide a safe and nurturing environment for all of the students at WKCHS, as the principal, I must ensure that the concerns of the 5% of the students who indicated that they did not feel safe at school; the 4% of the students who felt afraid or intimidated; and the 2% that indicated that there are unsafe places in the school must be addressed.

5. Students' Perceptions on School Culture and/or Environment

This category examined the students' perceptions of the culture and/or environment of WKCHS. The overall perception of the school culture was positive, as students indicated that they liked being at the high school, as shown in Table 6. The majority of the students revealed that they liked being at the high school. A high percentage of them also indicated that they felt a part of the school.

Eighty percent of the students indicated they thought students were treated fairly. Ninety percent of the students suggested students made choices that got them into trouble. The majority of the students perceived that students were recognized for positive behavior and for academics. The results of the survey indicated that, overall, the students' perceptions about the school culture and environment were positive.

Table 6:   School Culture/Environment

Questions	Results
1. Do you like being at this high school?	
A) Yes	95%
B) No	5%
2. Do you feel like you are a part of the school?	
A) Yes	76%
B) No	24%
3. Are students treated fairly at this school?	
A) Yes	80%
B) No	20%
4. Do students make choices that get them in trouble?	
A) Yes	90%
B) No	10%
5. Are students recognized for positive behavior/academics?	
A) Yes	99%
B) No	1%

The data also revealed that 5% of the students did not like being at school; 24% of them did not feel like they were a part of the school; 20% of them thought that students were not treated fairly; 10% of them felt that students did not make decisions that got them in trouble; and that only 1% of them felt that students were not recognized for positive behavior and academics. Based on the research on building and maintaining a positive school culture and environment, the perceptions of these students at WKCHS must also be addressed in order to find ways that will cause all students to have positive feelings about their time spent at WKCHS and feel like they are a part of the school.

6. Students' Perceptions on Peer Pressure

This category explored areas that are related to peer pressure. These areas included the students' own perception of peer pressure and how they felt about how peer pressure influenced other students at their school, as shown in Table 7. In order to understand how the students defined peer pressure, they were asked to select the meaning of "peer pressure." Results indicated that the majority of the students had some knowledge of peer pressure. They indicated that their definition of peer pressure was "being pressured to do something just to fit in with my friends." Then the other 5% indicated that the meaning of peer pressure was "to be easily influenced by another."

Table 7:   Peer Pressure

Questions	Results
1. What is your definition of "peer pressure"?	
A) To be easily influenced or controlled by another	5%
B) Being pressured to do something just to fit in with my friends	95%
C) Using my own thoughts to control my actions	0
2. Do you think that some students do not attend school or classes because of peer pressure?	
A) Yes	67%
B) No	33%
4. Most of the students at our school treat each other with respect.	
A) Yes	57%
B) No	43%
5. Some issues or problems that you face at school are:	
A) Bullying or teasing	25%
B) Harassment by other students	0
C) Harassment by teachers	0
D) Not feeling safe	10%
E) Not having the appropriate learning materials	0

Table 7 (continued)

F) Not having the appropriate technology to do and complete research	35%
G) My teacher does not give me the help that I need.	8%
H) I don't enjoy coming to school.	10%
J) I want to come to school, but problems at home cause me to stay at home.	12%

Sixty-seven percent of the students felt that other students did not attend school and classes because of peer pressure. While the same percentage agreed that they felt good about coming to school each day, only 33% of them confirmed that they did not feel that peer pressure from other students affected student attendance at school or in class. Then some 57% of the students indicated that they felt that students treated each other with respect, while almost half of the students indicated that they did not feel that students treated each other with respect.

Although the last question in this section asked that students indicate some issues or problems that they faced at school, students only selected one issue or problem that they faced each day at school. Not having the appropriate technology to complete research was at the top of the list with 35%. The second highest issue or problem perceived by students was that students were bullied or teased by other students, with 25%. Then 12% of the students pointed out that "they wanted to come to school, but problems at home caused them to stay at home." Ten percent of the students indicated that they did not enjoy coming to school, while another 10% of them indicated that they did not feel safe in school and considered that an issue or a problem. Finally, students'

perception that teachers did not give them the help that they needed was represented by 8% of the students.

7. Students' Perceptions on Getting Good Grades

This area examined the students' perceptions on getting good grades. The students' overall perception of getting good grades was positive, as seen in Table 8. Seventy-five percent of the students who took the survey indicated that they felt that it was "easy to get good grades." Although this may have been their perception, in reality, most of the students did not "get good grades."

Table 8:   Getting Good Grades

Questions	Results
1. Is it easy or difficult to get good grades?	
A) Easy	75%
B) Difficult	25%
2. What grades do you usually get?	
A) All A's	10%
B) A's and B's	33%
C) B's and C's	33%
D) C's and D's	12%
E) D or Below	12%

Table 8 (continued)

3. Do you get feedback from your teachers on your assignments?	
A) Yes	99%
B) No	1%
4. Do teachers make you redo work that is not acceptable?	
A) Yes	98%
B) No	2%
5. Do you believe that your teachers give you work/assignments that challenge you?	
A) Yes	100%
B) No	0
6. Do you think that it is important to prepare for your classes and for tests in order to get good grades?	
A) Yes	100%
B) No	0

While over two thirds of the students felt that it was easy to get good grades, data indicated the reverse, in that only about 25% of the students earned the average needed to be placed on the honor roll at the end of the 9-week grading period. When students identified the grades they usually earn, only 10% identified that they got all A's, while

33% earned A's and B's, then 33% earned B's and C's, 12% earned C's and D's, and 12% indicated that they earned D's and below.

The majority of the students indicated that they did receive feedback from their teachers. Nearly 100% of the students agreed that their teachers made them redo any unacceptable work. All of the students overwhelmingly agreed that teachers gave them work that challenged them. Although the students' grades were not any indication that they would prepare for classes and for tests on a consistent basis, 100% of them agreed that it was important to prepare for classes and tests if they wanted to get good grades. Overall, this category indicated positive student perceptions on getting good grades.

8. Students' Perceptions on Instructional Differences

As the instructional leader, it is important to listen and respond to the students' perceptions on their experiences of school. To better understand the students' perceptions on their teachers' instructional differences, five questions were created. The results are shown in Table 9.

Table 9:   Instructional Differences

Questions	Results
1. Do you behave differently for certain teachers?	
A) Yes	42%
B) No	58%

Table 9 (continued)

2. Do you think that you learn more in some classes than in other classes?	
A) Yes	52%
B) No	48%
3. Do you get many opportunities to be creative in your classes?	
A) Yes	50%
B) No	50%
4. Do some teachers need to make class learning experiences more interesting?	
A) Yes	99%
B) No	1%
5. What type learning activities help you to learn best?	
A) I have to do all of the work by myself.	10%
B) When I must work in a group with others	70%
C) When I have to read for myself	10%
D) When I do lessons and activities that relate to real-life situations	10%

First, over 50% of the students agreed that they did not act any differently for any of their teachers. Second, students were split almost down the middle as 52% of them

implied that they did not learn more in some classes than in others and 48% declared that they did learn more in some classes than in others. Then there was a similar divide as students indicated that they had opportunities to be creative in classes, with 50% on either side. Next, nearly all students (99%) agreed that teachers needed to make learning experiences more interesting. The last question in this section examined the types of learning activities that helped students to learn best. The majority of students echoed that they learned best when they worked in a group, and the results for the other three responses had equal results.

The results revealed that almost 100% of the students agreed that teachers need to make learning experiences more interesting. It is important that the students are given a continuous voice in which to share their learning experiences. This will allow teachers at WKCHS to make shifts and changes in the way that they interact with students as they prepare to provide for effective learning experiences.

9. Students' Perceptions on Challenging Work

The five questions in this section of the survey assessed the students' perceptions on challenging work that they were given by their teachers, as shown in Table 10. Results confirmed that 52% of the students "asked their teacher for help in understanding the material." Twenty-three percent of the students indicated that they would get help from a friend, while less than 20% designated that they "re-read for a better understanding." Less than 10% of the students showed that they "just don't do the work."

Table 10: Challenging Work

Questions	Results
1. What do you do when the school work is difficult for you?	
A) Ask your teacher for help in understanding the material	52%
B) Get help from your friend	23%
C) Re-read for a better understanding	17%
D) Just don't do it	8%
2. Which subject is the most difficult for you?	
A) Reading	11%
B) Mathematics	7%
C) Algebra	17%
D) Geometry	35%
E) Science	17%
F) Biology	7%
G) History	7%
3. Should the teacher help you when the work is difficult?	
A) Yes	100%
B) No	0

Table 10 (continued)

4. Which type of class work do you prefer, easy or difficult?	
A) Easy	47%
B) Difficult	53%
5. Is the school library a challenging and fun place to learn?	
A) Yes	65%
B) No	35%

Data indicated that 35% of the students felt that geometry was the most difficult subject. Two subjects resulted with a tie for second in being the most difficult with 17% for algebra and the same for science. Results also revealed that reading was the third most challenging subject for students. Subsequently, students specified mathematics, biology, and history as the least challenging with 7% each. Students unanimously agreed that they felt that teachers should help when the work is difficult. After that, over half of the students noted that they preferred difficult work. The results also showed that well over the majority of the students thought that the school library was a challenging and fun place to learn.

In addition, the results disclosed that nearly half of the students did not ask the teachers for assistance when they did not understand their work. It also indicated that almost 10% of students made the decision not to complete their assignments at all. Students' responses will aid in the teachers' preparing to heighten student interest in the

instructional process as well as strategies that will promote effective teaching and

learning at WKCHS.

10. Students' Perceptions on Future Plans

The final category in this study investigated the students' perceptions on their

future plans, as shown in Table 11. The students' overall perception was positive about

their future plans. The questions focused on what plans the students had for the future.

Students were asked, "What do you plan to do after high school in terms of further

schooling, work, or a career?" Through the data it was discovered that 76% of the

students planned to attend college once they graduated from high school. Seventeen

percent of the students had plans to attend a trade school once they graduated, and 4% of

the students planned to find employment right out of high school. Two percent of the

students wanted to pursue a military career, while only 1 % of them had no plans after

graduation.

Table 11: Students' Future Plans

Questions	Results
1. What do you plan to do after high school in terms of further schooling, work, or a career?	
A) Go to college	76%
B) Attend trade school	17%
C) Find a job right out of high school	4%
D) Military (Army, Navy, Air Force, or Any of the Armed Forces)	2%
E) I have no plans at this time.	1%
2. Do you feel that this school is preparing you well to accomplish your goals?	
A) Yes	82%
B) No	18%
3. Do your teachers encourage students to go to college?	
A) Yes	94%
B) No	6%
4. Do you think that college will help you to have a better life?	
A) Yes	100%
B) No	0

Table 11 (continued)

5. Do you have family and friends who have graduated from college?	
A) Yes	82%
B) No	12%

The results indicated that the majority of the students, 82%, agreed that the school was preparing them to accomplish their goals, while 18% of students disagreed. An overwhelming 94% of the students conveyed that their teachers encouraged them to go to college, whereas only 6% of the students felt the reverse. Unanimously, 100% of the students believed that college would help them to have a better life. Students also indicated if they had any family and friends who had graduated from college. While 82% of the students had family and/or friends who had graduated from college, 18% of the students surveyed did not have a member of their family nor did they have any friends who had graduated from college.

This is an equally important category because preparation for graduation and post-high-school success is the main goal for students as they transition into WKCHS. As the principal, it is important to understand what the students' future plans are in order to provide the learning experiences that they will need in preparation for their choices.

Informal Interviews

Although the surveys might readily yield the students' perceptions on how they felt about school, I recognized the need to couple those perceptions with the informal

interviews because I felt that the interviews would provide students with a voice in order to gain more insight into why they felt the way they did. The informal interviews or conversations were conducted with the students at various times and places during the school day. Some conversations were held in the hallway, the library, the cafeteria, in my office, and in other areas of the buildings. Many times the students would say that they just wanted to talk, and I allowed them the time to talk as I listened to them. The interview protocols were based on the questions from the survey and the concerns that surfaced during the informal conversations during conferences and conversations with the students.

During initial conversations with the students during daily interactions, they began to reveal a number of concerns related to the categories that were in the survey. Some of the concerns that had surfaced during our informal conversations were discussed during the interviews. Some of those concerns were peer pressure, a difference in some of the teachers' instructional styles, and students' learning experiences. Other concerns that surfaced were that some students felt that they were being bullied by other students, which caused them to feel unsafe at school, and their aspirations about being successful in school.

Of the 121 students who agreed to participate in the study by completing the survey, only 78 agreed to be interviewed. Some students did not choose to share in the informal interviews because they did not "really" want to "open up" to the principal or because their past experiences had not been positive with someone that they deemed an authority figure. However, because most of the students were comfortable in interacting with me on a daily basis, it was somewhat easy to conduct the informal interviews.

Results of the Informal Interviews

The following categories were the same as the survey and provided the participants opportunities to answer the interview protocols in the 10 categories. These categories were (a) transition to high school; (b) learning experiences; (c) student success; (d) school safety; (e) school culture; (f) peer pressure; (g) getting good grades; (h) instructional differences; (i) challenging work; and (j) students' future plans.

1. Students' Perceptions on Their Transition to High School

Nearly all of the students interviewed had a positive perception of their transition to high school**.** There were three main themes that students indicated as reasons that made their transitions to high school easy. First, nearly all of them agreed that the school staff helped to make the transition easier for them. "They made it easier for us because they welcomed us and encouraged us to do our best," stated a 10th-grade female. Another senior male remembered that "the staff was easy to get along with." Then another 7th-grade student said that the staff and faculty "had everything right. They gave me the classes that I needed to pass." One said that his schedule was messed up and "she" (meaning the counselor) made the schedule right. An 8th-grade female student said her transition was made easier because "each teacher discussed the materials we would need and the expected behavior in their classroom." Yet another 11th-grade female said that the school staff helped her "because they always try their best to help me whenever I needed it."

A 10th-grader also stated that she just did not expect for high school to be hard because she felt that her elementary school had prepared her well. She acknowledged that

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at first switching classes and being on time for classes was a bit difficult for her to get used to. She stated that once she got used to it, switching classes was really fun because she did not have to stay in the same class all day long. She stated, "Staying in one teacher's class all day and seeing one teacher all day was boring. So, this was so much better. I also think that I learn better by having more than one teacher." A 9th-grade Caucasian female student described her successful transition as easy because, as she stated, "to me, it was just another school year to me, because I was ready for high school."

The second theme that surfaced during the interviews was that most of the students already knew someone at the school. A senior male said, "I had older brothers at the school, and they helped me to get prepared." A 10th-grade male said that his brother answered all of the questions that he had about coming to WKCHS. Another 11th-grade male went on to say, "My transition was easy because I knew most of the students. Most of the students at this school are my cousins and my friends."

The third theme that evolved was that although most of the students admitted that their transition to the high school was easy, some said that they had some difficulty during their transition. Even though the majority of the students said that their transition into high school was easy, a small number of the students stated the opposite about their transition. They said that it was somewhat difficult at first, but most of them stated that they adjusted very quickly. One male student stated that it was difficult because he had to get used to the different surroundings and that at first he thought that some of the other students talked about him all of the time when he came to "this" school. Then, an 11th-grade male student also acknowledged that the change from elementary to high school

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was somewhat difficult for him at first. He, too, stated that his transition became much easier because of the faculty and staff members and because he knew most of the students. He went on to say, "My transition became easier since I knew most of the students, because most of the students at this school are my cousins and my friends." He also said that he was well prepared because some of the classes were easy.

2. Students' Perceptions on Their Learning Experiences

In the area of learning experiences, students shared their explanations of their learning experiences by responding to four questions. The first question examined the kinds of activities that helped them to learn best in class. A large majority of the students said that they found that working in small groups with other students helped them to learn best.

One student stated, "It's easier and we all help each other." A 10th-grade male said that working in small groups made him understand better because they could talk and discuss their assignments in the group. A 10th-grade female student said, "I like working in small groups because if I don't know the answer, then you know someone who does." An 11th-grade male student agreed, stating, "I like working in small groups best because when you don't understand, then your friend might." An 8th-grade female shared her justification of working in small groups, stating, "Small groups with my peers help me understand lessons on my own level as a student." One student said, "I still can learn, but I don't like working by myself." Yet another student said, "I like to compare and contrast my answers with my fellow classmates, so when I work alone, it's harder to do that."

While most of the students agreed that working in groups was a positive way for them to learn, some students disagreed. An 11th-grader stated, "The group setting is not the best way for me to learn because some of the students in the group always talk too loud." Only a small number of students indicated that they preferred to discuss the lesson with their teacher and other students because "they can get a better understanding from the lesson."

Although one student said that she believed that her teachers did everything they could to help her, most of the students shared strategies that they felt did not help them to learn. One of the problems for some students was when they had to do all of the work by themselves.

Another area that posed a problem for students was reading alone or by themselves. Several students indicated that they did not like when they had to read alone. Most of them felt better reading with a partner or in a small group. An African-American female in the 10th grade explained, "I don't learn in class when I have to read by myself because I might misunderstand the reading. In a group, you can have somebody else to explain it to you or you can talk about what we read and get a better understanding." She continued with her explanation: "I just don't read very well." Another student indicated the same basic premise and said, "I don't like when I have to read 'cause I might not understand what I read, but in a group other folks help you."

Students provided their responses about the strategies that teachers used to help them to learn. Many of the students explained that they liked when teachers encouraged them to learn. One male student said, "I like being encouraged." He continued, "When some of my teachers encourage me, they give me some one-on-one time with my lesson,

and that helps me." Other students indicated that they liked when teachers would re-teach and explain what they did not understand because "they" (the teachers) made sure that they understood. Several students shared that they learned best with teachers who encouraged them to ask questions because they do not "get it" the first time.

When asked if they had opportunities to work with computers and other kinds of technology in class, the majority of the students indicated that they had to do research for most of their classes or look up things on the Internet. One of the major problems that surfaced during the interviews was that in completing research assignments, students often had problems with the computers at school. As one student said, "Half of them don't work." Then an 11th-grade male said, "I don't have opportunities to use the computers for class work because it is always something wrong these computers at school." Another student said that when they had class assignments, there were not enough computers for everybody to work on at the same time. About 85% of students reported that they did not have computers at home to complete assignments.

3. Students' Perceptions on Being Successful in School

Overall, the majority of the students gave a positive definition of their perception of being successful in school. An African-American 11th-grade female said that she could not choose just one of the definitions given to describe being successful in school "because it takes all of that to get you prepared for life." She declared "that includes getting good grades, acting right in class, preparing us to go to college, and preparing us to get a job when we get out of high school. All of this is being successful in school."

Another 10th-grade female student agreed with her and said, "It is important to do all of this [citing the definitions in the survey] to be successful."

Even though that was the response of those two students, several others preferred to choose a definition on what being successful in school meant to them. Many of them said that "getting good grades in school" indicated that they were successful. One female student affirmed and said, "I think being successful in school, you have to have good grades." Other students said success was being prepared to go to college. As one 10th-grade female stated, "If we are successful in school, we can make it in college." A male 9th-grade Caucasian student said success was "preparing 'you' to go to college so I can get a good job."

An 11th-grade male said, "My definition of being successful in school is doing your work." Then a 10th-grade female said she believed that being successful in school is when the faculty and staff make sure that students are ready for the real world. When asked if she or students had a part to play in that, she replied, "Yeah, we need to take every opportunity to get ready for the real world, while we're here [in school]."

Next, when students were asked if they were successful in school, almost 100% of them gave an affirmative that they were successful in school. Very few of them admitted that they were unsuccessful in school. Most students seemed to think that they were successful in school because they got good grades. A 9th-grade African-American female described her success: "I make B's and C's in my classes, and that's 'kinda' good. I think I can say that's successful enough." Another student, a 12th-grade African-American male, said, "Yes, I am successful in school because I get A's and B's." Then, an 11th-grade African-American male said that he was successful because "he is good at what he

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does." One student answered, "Sometimes, I think I am successful at this school." When asked to elaborate, he said, "'Cause I make okay grades, but sometimes I think I can do better." An 8th-grade female student had a different view of success in school and said she was successful in school because "I try to respect students and the staff so that it can take me far." She explained that "her folks always taught her that her attitude affected her altitude." So she said that she "chose to respect others" so that she could be successful.

The majority of the students said that it was easy to be successful in class. The students gave several reasons to support their response, which include the following: "Because I have a positive outlook and I make good grades"; "It is easy to be successful in school because the teachers help you until you get a good understanding"; "It is easy because the only thing you got to do is study"; "It is easy because the work is not hard"; "It is easy because I pay attention in class"; "Do what you got to do"; and "It helps to study."

There were only a small number of students who said that it was difficult to be successful in school and described their reasons, which include the following: "It's difficult because sometimes the work is hard"; "It is difficult because it's always somebody distracting you from learning"; "I have other things to do besides school work"; and "Peers make 'being successful' not cool. It's just a choice that you have to make because they make you feel bad sometime for being successful."

Well over half of the students' responses revealed that their teachers informed them when they are successful. Several students said, "Yes, my teachers tell me when I am doing good." A 10th-grader said, "The teachers let us know by telling us our grades." An 11th-grade female stated, "My teachers let me know when I am successful because

she gives me verbal praise!" Another student conveyed, "Some of my teachers want the best! So they always tell us when we doing good." Then a female student said, "My teachers like to brag on us bein' successful." An 8th-grade male said, "Sometimes, I get congratulated. But most times they let me know from my grades." A Caucasian 11th-grade female expressed, "Yes, my teachers always let me know when I am successful. My teachers always tell me when I am doing good."

Some students did not feel the same way. They said that their teachers did not let them know when they were successful often. Several students indicated that it was not an ongoing practice for their teachers to inform them of their success. An 11th-grade male said, "Well, sometimes they do. But sometimes when they do, it's too late. You already got a bad grade."

A few students did not have a positive reply and said that their teachers did not let them know when they were successful. One 10th-grade female described her experiences with her teachers by saying, "If you don't ask our teachers, then we won't know. 'Cause they don't just tell you." An 11th-grade female said, "No, they don't let me know when I am successful. Sometimes, I don't know until the end of the 9 weeks, and that's just not right."

4. Students' Perceptions on School Safety

In this category, students gave their perceptions on school safety. The majority of the students said that they felt safe. When asked why, they gave differing reasons why they felt safe. One student said that she felt safe "because the teachers and staff protect me." Another 11th-grade male described his reason for feeling safe, saying, "The reason I

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feel safe is because nothing really happens here except fights." When asked what he meant by that, he said, "Fights don't scare me. People fight all the time. Anyway, we don't have that many fights. You just have to stay from 'round the people who like to get into it with each other." Then an 11th-grade female said, "I feel safe because all of the doors are locked." One 10th-grade female said, "I do feel safe because we have a police officer that patrols the school. You don't know when he is going to come by. We just look up and he's peepin' in the door or walking down the halls. I think that helps us do what we suppose to." A 9th-grade female said, "I feel safe because I don't feel threatened at school." An 8th-grade male explained, "I feel safe at school because when there are behavior problems that could turn violent, the teachers make sure that it doesn't get that far out of hand."

Only a small number of students felt that they were unsafe at school. One student said that he did not feel safe at school all of the time, just sometimes. One 11th-grade female said, "I am sorry, but I don't feel safe at school. Our school is old, and we don't have anything in this school to protect us but locked doors." Another student agreed with that response and stated, "I don't feel safe 'cause just 'cause you lock a door, doesn't mean that you safe."

The majority of the students said that there were not any unsafe places in the school. Most of their responses supported the perception that teachers, faculty, and staff monitored the building. One student said, "I haven't really seen any unsafe spots at this school. At my other school they had long halls and stairs. Sometimes, kids would hide out under the stairs and 'jump' other kids when they came by. But here we don't have that problem cause someone always looking." Another student said, "No, because

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teachers and staff are always watching us." Another student concurred: "Every place on campus is supervised, so I don't think there are any unsafe places." Yet another student said, "Teachers are all around and make things safe."

Some students thought that there were some unsafe places in the school. An 11th-grade female said, "Even though most of the school is safe, sometimes things be happening in the bathroom." When asked what kind of things, she replied, "When girls don't like you or get into it and wanna fight, sometimes they do try to get at you in the bathroom." One student said that sometimes in "other classes," he did not feel safe. When asked to continue, he said, "In some of my classes, students say things real low so the teacher can't hear them or make signs like they going to beat you up."

About two thirds of the students echoed the similar response that they believed that the building was safe. Their responses centered on the fact that "all the doors were kept locked." Then a 9th-grade female said, "My building is very safe."

Some students did not give a positive response to the building's safety and stated that it was not safe. They gave different descriptions about the condition of the building and why they felt that it was not safe. For example, one student said, "It's raggedy. The building has leaks." An 11th-grade male student said, "No, our building is not safe, because the ceiling is leaking water." Yet another said that "the building is very old and anything can happen at any time." Then another male student said, "Our building is not safe because stuff be breaking." When asked what he was referring to, he stated, "The leaks in the roof. It's leakin' water in the hallway and in some of my classrooms too."

Most of the students agreed that they were not afraid or intimidated of any students. One 12th-grade male student said, "I am not afraid because they ain't stupid

enough to mess with me." Another student said, "I am not afraid because I know all of the students." Another student explained, "I do not feel intimidated because I don't bother nobody and nobody bothers me." One student described her feelings. She said, "I just give school my best and forget about the rest."

Some students had the opposite response. A 10th-grade female admitted, "Yes, sometimes, I am intimidated by other students, because everybody ain't the same and you don't know what's in their head or what's going through their minds."

The majority of the students agreed that they were not afraid or intimidated by any of the faculty and staff at the school. An 8th-grade female student said, "The faculty and staff have one common goal, to prepare us for life after high school." A 12th-grade male student said, "No, because don't nobody intimidate me." Then another student said, "No, because I like all of my teachers." Another student responded, "No, not at all, because I have no reason to be afraid of them. And even if I was afraid I have parents to talk to." A 9th-grade female said, "I see them as people trying to keep us on the right path." Then a 10th-grade Caucasian female said, "Everybody treats me well, so I am not intimidated by any of the faculty and staff."

The students provided their responses about feeling safe when the principal and/or the police officer monitor the school building and the campus during the day. One student described his perception: "With the principal and the police officer checking on us, nothing should happen with them here." Most of the students said that they did feel safe when the principal or the police officer monitored the building and the campus. One student said, "I am glad that they [the principal and the police officer] monitor our school because I feel safe, 'cause I know that they won't let anything happen to me." Then an

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11th-grade female said, "Yes, because I know that someone is watching us." One student explained, "I just feel better because the principal is around." One student stated, "A little security lets me know that the principal and the police officer do care."

A smaller percentage of students indicated that they did not have any problems at school, so they felt that it really did not make any difference whether the principal or the police officer monitored the school. A 10th-grade male student said, "Even when they are not here, I feel safe."

5. Students' Perceptions on School Culture/Environment

This area investigated students' perceptions on the school culture and/or environment. It consisted of 5 questions. In the first question, "Do you like being at this high school?" the majority of the students agreed that they liked being at WKCHS. One of the main reasons students gave for liking their school was because of the small number of students and the small size of the school. One 12th-grade male student said, "Yes, I like my school because the courses are easy. Plus, it's my last year." A 9th-grade female said, "I like this school because it is a small school and everybody can get along. Also I like sports. At this school just about everybody who wants to play can play. At least you can try out to play. If I was at a bigger school I really don't think I would even be able to be a part of the basketball team."

Another reason that students gave for liking WKCHS is the small class sizes and the one-on-one interaction between students and teachers. A 9th-grade female student claimed, "I like my small school because of the education I'm getting. The teachers take

time with you and you can ask questions when you don't understand. In my classes my teachers don't mind helping you."

However, some students felt differently about being at WKCHS. An African-American 10th-grade female said that she did not feel like she was a part of the school. She said, "I don't play any sports or anything, so I don't feel like I'm a part."

Most of the students said that they felt like they were a part of the school. Many of them said that they felt good about coming to school. A 12th-grade male said, "I really feel like I am a part of this school, because I have been at this school all my life." An 11th-grader stated, "I feel a part of the school because I am a part of many things. I feel that every student makes up this school." Another student said, "I know that I am a part of West Kennard High because I blend right in."

Students provided their perceptions about students being treated fairly at the school. The majority of the students agreed the students were treated fairly at school. Being treated fairly and having the opportunity to "share" their side of "the story" were two reasons that students said made them feel like they were treated fairly. An 8th-grade female said, "When something is going on at the school, they [the principal and the teachers] always try to listen to all sides of the story before they just punish you."

There were only a few students who perceived that students were not treated fairly and said that they felt that there were some teachers who treated some students "better" than they treated others. Another student explained that he believed that some teachers at the school showed favoritism to some students. One student remarked that sometimes "different" students get treated differently by some of the teachers.

Students were given an opportunity to express their feelings about students making choices that got them in trouble. Many of the students agreed that some students made choices that got them in trouble. One student, a 10th-grade female, said that students make choices that get them in trouble all of the time. She added, "They know the rules and so when they don't do right, then they get in trouble. They know that they got to do right." Another 10th-grade male said, "Kids do make decisions that get them in trouble. I think that they should think before they do stupid things." Other students made similar comments such as "I think that some [kids] do 'it' because of their friends" and "They [students] say and do crazy and uncalled for things that cause them to get in trouble."

In regard to students being recognized for positive behavior and academics, a large part of them agreed that they were recognized for positive behavior and for academics. Students sited several activities that recognized students. The Movie Day, the Skating Party, Awards and Recognition Day, and the Awards' Breakfast were cited as favorites by students for them being recognized for doing positive things. One student agreed, "Yes, we are recognized for positive behavior and for making good grades all of the time. But I especially like when we have Movie Day. Really, our teachers always give us awards for a lot of things." An 11th-grade male supported that perception and said, "I like when we are recognized for the good things that we do. That encourages us to keep up the good work."

6. Students' Perceptions on Peer Pressure

Next, the students gave their perceptions on peer pressure. First, they gave their definition of peer pressure. Of the three definitions given, most students chose the definition of being pressured to do something just to fit in with friends. Students explained why they chose that for the answer. An 11th-grade male said, "Some people are very easy to be pressured into doing something." Another student explained, "Some people might want to hang out with a certain crowd but in order for them to be in that crowd, they might have to do something bad." Then one student said, "Students are pressured into doing something just to fit in with their friends, because everyone wants to 'fit' in," which was in agreement with the statement made by another student: "The reason is because you want to look good in your friends' eyes."

Only a few students chose the other two definitions to define peer pressure. Several students chose the definition to be easily influenced or controlled by another. As explanation for making that selection, one student said, "Some students just let other students boss them around." An even smaller number of students said that using their own thoughts to control their actions was the definition of peer pressure. One 12th-grade male clarified his choice and stated, "You can pressure yourself to do the right thing or the wrong thing. So really you are your own peer pressure."

Participants voiced their perceptions about peer pressure being the reason students did not attend school or classes. In the informal interviews, nearly half of them said that they believed that peer pressure caused students to not attend school and classes. They cited several reasons that supported their perceptions, such as "To some people, school isn't cool because the more popular kids do everything but go to school." One male

student said, "People are not perfect; they go through hard times." He described "hard times" as not having the right clothes to wear, not feeling like "you" fit in with the rest of the folks at school, and just having a hard time at home with your folks at home. Another said, "Some kids just don't want to be bothered by no one at all. So, they don't come to school." A female student said, "Kids don't come to school because they can't be themselves without being talked about. Sometimes, you don't want people to judge you; you just want to be who you are." A 9th-grade female stated, "If some kids don't want to do nothing, then they don't do it. When they don't want to come to school, they just don't come 'cause they think it's cool not to come."

Just over half of the students said that they did not think that peer pressure caused students not to attend school or classes. A 7th-grade female said, "If students don't come to school, then that's their choice. Can't nobody keep you from coming to school if you wanna come." A 10th-grade female stated, "I don't think peer pressure keeps them from coming to school, because if their parents found out that they were not coming, it wouldn't be nice what would happen to them."

Students provided their perceptions about how they felt about coming to school each day. The majority of them indicated that they enjoyed coming to school each day. Several students said, "I love school." Some students even said, "Yes, I enjoy coming to school each day because I love 'this' school." One student said, "I am proud to come to school each day." When students were asked why they liked to come to school, they gave differing responses. One 11th-grade female said proudly, "I have a great feeling from knowing that I can receive an education, something that my ancestors couldn't do."

A few students stated that they did not like to come to school each day. They cited reasons such as "I just don't want to come, I could be chillin' at the house." Another said, "Sometimes, I just feel tired all of the time and feel like I want to be at home." Several students claimed that they did not feel good about coming to school each day; they failed to provide comments or responses to support why they did not feel good about coming to school.

Next, students provided their perceptions about feeling students at WKCHS were treated with or without respect. The students' responses were split almost down the middle. About half of them thought students at WKCHS treated others with respect, while the others said that students did not respect each other. An 11th-grade female said, "I believe that most of the students here treat others with respect, because they are good people." Another concurred, "The people that I hang around, we all respect each other. We stay from around people that got a bunch mess goin' on."

Students who felt that their classmates at WKCHS did not respect each other gave several different responses that supported their reasoning. One student said, "No, they [students] don't treat each other with respect, because most students don't care about others." Another stated, "No, because some people call each other names and treat them very badly." A 12th-grade female claimed, "Most of the students here don't treat others with respect." She said, "There are a lot of conflicts. I think that if we all respected each other greatly, we could cut down on those conflicts." Then an 8th-grade male said, "Half of these kids don't care for each other." An 11th-grade student exclaimed, "No, most of these kids don't respect each other. You can tell that by the drama that goes on. They don't show you, but these kids got a lot of drama."

The last area allowed students a chance to give their perceptions on issues or problems that they face at school. One student summed up her reason why students did not respect each other. She said that many of "the children just don't have any home training." Students remarked on several issues that concerned them at school. There were several students who said that they did not have any issue or concern at school. One student said that no situation can become a problem unless she allowed it. Another 10th-grade female said, "I don't have any problems at school." Several of the students stated that they did not encounter any problems at school, while other students voiced the issues and concerns that they had at school.

The major issue or concern that students gave was being bullied and teased by other students. One student commented, "I don't think kids really mean any harm, but they just like to joke around too much. All of the time, you don't feel like joking when other folks still doing it. That causes a lot of problems." An 11th-grade female said, "The biggest problem that I have is that some students just pick on each other for no reason. That's what make you feel bad, when you get picked on for no reason. I think that's when students get mad and wanna fight."

Another area of concern for students was not feeling safe. When asked to explain, several students noted the condition of the building rather than the element of safety from someone committing a harmful act against them. A 9th-grade male said, "The building is old, and I just don't feel safe in this building. The roof leaks all of the time when it rains. That's the biggest problem."

The next area that students noted as a concern was not having the appropriate technology to do and complete research. One student complained, "Most of the time, the

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computers don't work properly when I need to do my work." Another student said, "We should have more learning materials and more up-to-date computers. I like doing my work on computers, but they just don't work sometimes. I don't have a computer at home, and I have to do my work at school. But, I can't 'cause these won't work."

7. Students' Perceptions on Getting Good Grades

In this category, students addressed six areas in which they presented their perceptions on getting good grades in school. Most students declared that it was easy to get good grades, while a smaller number of them said that it was difficult for them to get good grades. However, all of the students agreed that if they studied hard, they could make good grades.

First, students offered their perceptions on the easiness or difficulty of getting good grades. The majority of the students admitted that it was easy to get good grades. Most students admitted that they studied and tried to do their best. Others acknowledged that they felt that if any of the students would study hard they would be able to get good grades. Another student said, "Getting good grades is easy because all you have to do is to pay attention in class." One 12th-grade student said, "Because we have less students at our school, teachers have time to come and help us one-on-one. We have more time to work with our teachers, and we get to know what they expect from us. So it's easy to get good grades, if you want to." Another student added, "If you learn what the teachers 'say,' you can make good grades."

There were students who admitted that it was difficult for them to make good grades and offered reasons for their perceptions. One student stated that it was difficult to

make good grades. She disclosed, "You have to study really hard to get them [good grades]." Another student admitted, "The work gets harder as you move on up to higher class levels. So you got study to make sure that you get good grades." Another 11th-grade student acknowledged, "Getting good grades is difficult for me. But, I know that it is easy to get good grades, but 'you' have to study. And I just don't like to study."

Then students addressed the grades that they earned. This category was divided into specific categories, ranging from *All A's to D or Below*. Most of the students charted their grades within a specific category within the selections given.

The students were vocal in their grade selection categories. Only a very few students stated that they earned grades in the first category, *All A's*. One student said, "I get all A's because I do my work, I study, and I try my best." Most of the students claimed that their grades fell into the *A's and B's* category. A 10th-grade male said, "I'm pretty smart, so I get good grades. I make sure that I get A's and B's." Another 8th-grade female student commented, "I have to push myself to make good grades, but I know eventually I can achieve that A and B Honor Roll." Even fewer students selected the *B's and C's* category. A 10th-grade female stated, "I make fair grades to keep me just above average." None of the students interviewed admitted that they earned grades in the last two categories: *C's and D's* or *D and Below*.

After that, students provided their perceptions on getting feedback from their teachers on their assignments. The majority of the students said they received feedback from their teachers on their assignments. One student admitted, "They go over 'it' and answer questions when needed." Another said, "They show me the grade I made." A 12th-grader said, "My teachers give me feedback when I ask for it or need a better

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understanding of the assignments." An 11th-grader said, "Yeah, my teachers always give me feedback. They tell me if my answers are wrong or right." A 10th-grade male stated, "They tell me what I did wrong and how I can know how not to make that mistake again." Only a few students said that they received feedback from their teachers. One student stated, "Most of my teachers don't even tell me my score for any of my assignments."

Next, students provided their perceptions about teachers making them redo their work that was not acceptable. Most of the students agreed that teachers did give them an opportunity to redo their assignments if they were not acceptable. One student said that sometimes her teacher returned her work because it was not accurate. She said that when she redid her assignments correctly she understood it better and would get a higher grade. Several students said that some of their teachers would allow them to redo their assignments. While some teachers were agreeable or as the students termed it, "They will work with you," students reported that some teachers were not as agreeable and did not allow them to redo their work. Another student added, "It depends on who the teacher is," whether they would give them an opportunity to redo their work.

Several of the students said that their teachers did not return their work to them. They explained that most of their teachers would explain the directions and the expectations when giving assignments, and these students felt that their peers should know what was acceptable before turning in their assignments.

Then students gave their perceptions about their teachers giving them challenging work. The majority of the students indicated that their teachers gave challenging work and assignments. Supporting her answer, a 10th-grade female said, "Some of the

assignments that my teachers gave me made me think. Sometimes, I had to do some research to finish the assignment." Another student said, "I think they give challenging work because they want to see what you know." In her summation, a 9th-grade female said, "Yes, they give us work that challenge us, but really, it just helps to make us smarter."

There was a fewer number of students who indicated that their teachers did not give challenging work. A 7th-grader said, "Maybe someday my teachers will give me challenging work, but right now, it just ain't hard to me." Another 11th-grader said, "Some of my teachers do give challenging work and some of them don't. So, I guess you can say in a way yes and in a way no."

The last area examined students' perceptions on the importance to prepare for classes and tests in order to get good grades. An overwhelming majority of the students said that it is important to prepare for their classes and for tests in order to get good grades. They supported their answer with the following responses: "You always should study even if you think you know the stuff"; "Preparing for your classes and tests helps when it comes down to studying"; and "Yes, because you need to pass tests, so you gotta prepare to do that."

The small number of students who stated that they did not think that it was important to prepare for classes and for tests had the following responses: "No, it is not important, because some students just don't have to study to get good grades" and "I don't think it is important for everybody, because sometimes I have to study and sometimes I don't, and I get good grades." Some of the students simply said that they did not feel that it was important to prepare and did not give any support of their responses.

8. Students' Perceptions on Instructional Differences

There were five areas that examined students' perceptions on instructional differences. The first area focused on students' perceptions of behaving differently for certain teachers. Over 80% of the students said they behave differently for certain teachers. They qualified their answers with different responses. A 12th-grader stated, "In some of some of my classes, I act different because some teachers are cool to talk to." An 11th-grade student said, "I act differently because I don't think that some teachers show respect to the students, but they want respect from the students." A 10th-grader said, "I behave a little different for some teachers than I do for others because some teacher, you just have to front in front of. I mean you have to act a certain way in front of them because they expect you to." Another 10th-grader said, "I act differently for some teachers because some teachers don't allow you to do anything. In some classes, the teachers let you talk a little bit as long as you are getting your work done. Then some teachers won't even let you talk at all or get up for anything at all."

The rest of the students agreed that they did not behave any differently for any of their teachers. One student said that he did not behave differently for his teachers because he did not feel that he had to. Another said, "No, because I listen to all of my teachers."

The next area examined if students thought that they learned more in some classes than in other classes. The majority of the students agreed that they learned more in some classes than they did in other classes. Many said that they thought that this was a result of how teachers taught. An 8th-grader said, "Yes, I learn more in some classes than in others because some teachers just teach in different ways. See, I like when teachers let us work in groups, and I learn more that way than just letting the teacher give us notes and talk to

us." A 9th-grade student said, "I know that most all of my teachers teach me well, but there are 'some' that when the kids act up in class, we don't learn what we supposed to." A 10th-grade student said, "It's just that some teachers don't teach on a high level. 'They' all teach but some just take it to another level and challenge us more." A 7th-grader said that he thought that some of his classes were more interesting than others and held his attention more.

Only a few students said they did not learn more in some classes than in other classes. A student qualified her answer and said, "All of the teachers are almost the same. They all give you work and expect you to do it. If you do it, then you are going to learn." Another student said, "I don't learn any 'more' in different teachers' classes; it depends on the relation that the students and the teachers have."

The third area asked students if they felt that they were given many opportunities to be creative in their classes. Almost all of the students interviewed indicated that they had opportunities to be creative. One student said, "Teachers like to see if we're learning certain things. And that is a good way for them to see what we're learning." Another student said, "I get to express how I feel each time I participate in class. I like when we do present projects, especially when we do PowerPoints." Many of them said that they had chances to be actively involved in their class work. Some of them described class projects, using the science lab with different experiments, writing assignments, research assignments, making PowerPoint presentations, working out problems on the board, and classes in which they used active scenarios in the learning process.

The next focus was on students' perceptions of some teachers' need to make some of their learning experiences interesting in their classes. While some students said no,

more of them said yes. An 8th-grader said, "I don't think that teachers really need to make classes any more interesting, because I have just learned how to adjust to their teaching style."

The students who said that teachers needed to make learning experiences more interesting provided the following responses. An 11th-grade student said, "Most of my classes are boring, so I would be happy if the teachers will make some of the lessons more interesting where we can be 'doing stuff' instead of listening to them give us notes." A 9th-grader said, "Some of my classes are boring. We learn the stuff the teachers teach us, but it would be a whole lot better if they would make it more interesting." Another said, "When I am bored in class, I don't pay attention."

The last focus was on the type of learning activities that helped students to learn best. They had four types of learning activities but only discussed three of them. Most of the students agreed that they enjoyed learning when they could work in a group with others. A student supported her answer and stated, "Group work is great because it allows peers to share their knowledge with one another." Another said, "My group members impact my vision on certain things." Then another said, "I like working in a group with others at things, because I learn from them."

Next, several students agreed that they learned best when they had to read for themselves. One student explained that he learned more when he had to read by himself because he understood what he was reading better. Then a few students said that they learned best when they do lessons and activities that are related to real-life situations. One student said that when her teachers used real-life situations, she could understand the meaning better and make connections to what she was learning.

9. Students' Perceptions on Challenging Work

This topic consisted of five areas related to students' perceptions on challenging work. The first question examined students' perceptions on what they do when school work is difficult for them. Students had 4 choices from which to select. The overwhelming majority of the students agreed that they ask the teacher for help in understanding the material when their school work is difficult. A 10th-grader said, "I always ask my teachers because they don't mind helping students." Another student said, "I don't mind asking the teacher because I want to make good grades." Yet, an 11th-grader said, "I do whatever I can to understand it [the material] fully."

Only a few students stated that they would get help from a friend when their school work is difficult. A 9th-grader supported his statement: "I ask a friend 'cause they might be able to break it down to me more than my teacher. You see, sometimes they know what the teacher is trying to say, and your friends can just explain it better."

In the next part of the interview, students provided their perceptions on the subject that was the most difficult for them. Some students said that they did not have any subjects that were difficult. A 12th-grader said, "None of my subjects were hard for me. I didn't have any problems in any of my classes." A 10th-grader said, "I don't have any subjects that are difficult." However, there were some students that indicated that they had difficulty with some subjects. Geometry was the subject that most students said that they had difficulty making good grades in and that it was also their most difficult subject to understand. Several students said that they just did not understand what the teacher was teaching. One student said, "I am not a math person. I just can't get it sometimes." The next subject that most students found difficult was algebra. A 10th-grader stated, "I

just kind of hate algebra. It's just hard. Maybe if 'Ms. B' let us work in groups with each other, we might can help each other." History was the next subject that students felt was difficult. One student said, "I'm sorry, but I just don't get history. All of those dates and places and people, I just get them mixed up sometimes. Sometimes, I just don't get it."

Then students gave their perceptions about teachers helping when work is difficult. All students said that teachers should help when the work is difficult. One student said, "I think that they should help so that the work won't be so hard." Another said, "Sometimes teachers will help if you ask them for help." Yet another added, "Teachers should help when the work is difficult, because they should want you to pass the class." In contrast, another student said, "Just because the work is difficult doesn't mean the teacher has to help. She should help only if I can't do it."

Next, students provided their perceptions about preferences for easy or difficult work. The majority of the students stated that they wanted difficult work. They used expressions such as "I like the challenge"; "When work is difficult, it makes me smarter"; and "I like when I have challenging work because I like to think sometimes." One student said, "I like both easy and difficult school work because sometimes I want easy assignments and then sometimes I like a challenge." Only a very few students indicated that they liked easy work. A 10th-grader said, "I like work that I ain't gotta' work at really hard."

Last, students gave their perceptions on whether the school library was a challenging or fun place to learn. Students responded down the middle on this question. Some of them said that they enjoyed going to the library, while others said that they did not care to go to the library. One student said, "I really enjoy the atmosphere in the

library. The displays and the brainteasers are great." Another said, "I enjoy going there because of all of the books that you can read. I really like to read." On the other hand, one student said that he did not like going to the library because "they don't have a good selection of books." An 8th-grader said, "I don't like to read, so I don't like to go the library." Then a 12th-grade student said, "I just really don't ever go the library, because I do my work in class and I have a computer at my house so I can do my research there."

10. Students' Perceptions on Future Plans

This area explored the students' perceptions of their plans for the future. This area consisted of five questions related to the topic. In the first area, students responded to their plans regarding what they would do when they would complete high school: furthering their schooling in college, entering the workforce, enlisting in the armed forces, and/or pursuing a career. The majority of the students indicated that they would go on to college once they have completed high school. An 11th-grader said, "I am going to college. That's what my folks expect me to do." A 10th-grader said, "I plan to go to college because I want to get a good job." Another 10th-grade female said, "I want to be a nurse, so I have to go to college to get a nursing degree. That's why I have to take more science classes as my electives." Only a very few of the students said that they would attend trade school to learn a trade and/or join the military.

Students stated they felt that this school was preparing them well to accomplish their goals. Most of them stated that they felt that the school was preparing them well to accomplish their goals. A small number stated the opposite. A 12th-grade student said, "In a way, I think that the school is doing a good job, the teachers teach us and make sure

that we are learning. They take us on trips to different colleges so we will know what they expect if we are going to go to their college." Another student said, "I think that the school is doing a good job 'cause I am doing well. I feel that they're helping me to achieve my goals."

Then students were asked if they felt that teachers encouraged them to go to college. Nearly all of the students reported that their teachers encouraged them to go to college. Some of the students also reported that some of the other faculty and staff also encouraged them to go to college. There were students who stated that the counselor, administrators, librarian, In-School Suspension teacher, and custodians encouraged them to go to college once they have finished high school. An 11th-grader said, "Yes, our teachers always encourage us to go to college. They even provide us with skills needed for college. They want us to be the best we can be." A 10th-grade student said, "Everyone here wants us to go to college. They all help us try to be ready for college." A 12th-grader said, "All of my teachers encourage me to go to college. They tell us what classes we need and help us fill out our financial aid and even help us get ready to take the ACT so we will be ready for college." Finally, an 11th-grade student said, "Our teachers encourage us to go to college because they want good things in life for us."

Students discussed if they thought that attending college would help them to have better lives. All of them responded positively. They said that they thought that college would help them to have better lives. One student said, "Of course, I believe that going to college will help me to have a better life, because you got to have more than a high school education to be successful in life." Another student said, "I think that college will help you to find the career that's best for you." An 8th-grade student stated, "I think a

college education can help me to get a good job." One 10th-grade student said, "I think that it [college] can help you have a better life because you learn more and it can make living easier."

Last, students responded to whether they had family and friends who have graduated from college. Most of the students agreed that they had family and friends that had graduated from college. However, several of them admitted that they did not have any relatives or friends who had graduated from college.

Many of the students who said that they had relatives or friends who had graduated from college also said that those relatives and friends encouraged them to go on to college. A 9th-grade student said, "Both of my parents graduated from college, and they are doing alright financially. I know that I need a college education to make it in the world. My dad keeps telling me that you gotta have one to be successful now." A 12th-grader said, "My sister and a couple of my cousins graduated from college. They always encouraged me to go too."

Of the students who admitted that they did not have family members or friends who had graduated from college, several stated that most of their family members and friends started having babies and finally dropped out of high school. They went on to say that those individuals never made the effort to finish high school or to seek to further their education. A number of the students simply admitted that they did not know anyone in their immediate family or even a close friend who had gone to college.

Results of the Surveys and Interviews of Students' Perceptions of School

from a Rural Environment

Through the utilization of surveys and informal interviews with the researcher, students provided their perceptions of their school environment. The following results were revealed in each category.

1. Students' Perceptions on Their Transition to High School

The present study found that nearly all of the students, about 85%, from the rural school environment had a positive perception of their transition to high school. There were three main themes that students indicated as reasons that made their transitions to high school easy.

The first theme was that nearly all of the students agreed that the school staff helped to make the transition easier for them. They stated that the staff made it easier for them because they welcomed and encouraged them to do their best and that the staff was easy to get along with. One student described his experience and said that the staff and faculty "had everything right, by ensuring that students had the classes that they needed to pass." He continued that his schedule was incorrect and the counselor quickly corrected his schedule. One student said that her transition was easier because each teacher discussed the materials that they would need and discussed the expected behavior for his or her classroom.

The second theme that surfaced during the interviews was that most of the students already knew someone at the school. One student described his experience including him having older brothers at the school who helped him to get prepared.

Another student said that his brother answered all of the questions that he had about coming to the school. Another 11th-grade male went on to say that his transition was easy because he knew most of the students. During the interviews, it became apparent that most of the students at the school are related, which made their transition into WKCHS much easier.

The third theme that evolved was that although most of the students admitted that their transition to the high school was easy, some of them admitted that they had some difficulty during their transition. Even though the majority of the students said that their transition into high school was easy, a small number of them stated it was somewhat difficult at first but that they adjusted very quickly.

2. Students' Perceptions on Their Learning Experiences

In this study, a large majority of the students said that they found that working in small groups with other students helped them to learn best. One student stated that it was easier when they worked in small groups and that they could help each other. Students also indicated that working in small groups helped them to understand better because they could talk and discuss their assignments. They thought it was an effective way to learn.

Many of the students elaborated on the fact that they liked when teachers encouraged them to learn. One student said that he liked to be encouraged by his teacher. He said that when some of his teachers encouraged him they would give him some one-on-one time with his lesson, and that helped him. A small number of students indicated that they preferred to discuss the lesson with their teacher and with other students because

they could get a better understanding from the lesson. Other students indicated that they liked when teachers would re-teach and explain what they did not understand because they (the teachers) made sure that they understood. Several students shared that they learned best with teachers who encouraged them to ask questions because sometimes they "don't 'get it' the first time."

The majority of the students indicated that they had to do research for most of their classes or find information on the Internet. One of the major problems that surfaced during the interviews was that students often had problems in completing those research assignments, because the computers at school did not work properly and were outdated. One student said that there were not enough computers for everybody to work on at the same time when trying to complete class assignments. An overwhelming number of students also reported that they did not have computers at home to complete assignments.

This area also investigated students' perceptions of strategies that did not help to learn in class. Based on the students' responses, reading and reading comprehension continued to be a problem for high school students, those in 9th through 12th grades. One problem for some students also was when they had to do all of the work by themselves. Another area that posed a problem for students was reading alone or by themselves. Several students indicated that they did not like when they had to read alone. Most of them felt better reading with a partner or in a small group.

3. Students' Perceptions on Being Successful in School

Results showed in both the surveys and the interviews that the students believed that they were successful in school and prepared for life outside of school. In the first

area, the overall majority of students gave a positive definition of their perception of being successful in school. Most of the students admitted that it took a combination of the definitions given to be successful in school. They claimed that being successful included getting good grades, acting right in class, getting prepared to go to college, and becoming prepared to get a job when they get out of high school. They also said that being successful is when the faculty and staff make sure that they are ready for the real world.

Almost 100% of the students indicated that they were successful in school. Most students seemed to think that they were successful in school because they got good grades. Only a few of them admitted that they were unsuccessful in school. The majority of the students perceived that it was easy to be successful in class. They gave several reasons to support their feelings. They said that they believed that because they had a positive outlook and made good grades, it was easy to be successful. They added that they were successful because they had teachers that helped them and made sure that they had a good understanding of their work. They also stated that studying is needed to be successful.

Well over half of the students perceived that their teachers informed them when they are successful. Several students said, "Yes, my teachers tell me when I am doing good." They said that their teachers told them their grades, gave them verbal praise, and bragged on them when they were being successful. Students described having teachers who congratulated them.

Almost all of the students who took the survey and those interviewed planned to graduate from high school, go to college, and/or have satisfying careers. They also seemed to trust that the school had prepared them well to accomplish those goals.

Students also wanted teachers who did not accept excuses but pushed students to do well. Most of the students said that they were successful because they had teachers that helped them and made sure that they had a good understanding of their work.

4. Students' Perceptions on School Safety

The majority of the students indicated that they felt safe at school. They gave different reasons why they felt safe. Students said that they felt safe because they felt that the teachers and staff protect them. Another student described feeling safe because nothing really happened, except fights. Students also noted feeling safe because the doors were locked and the police officer patrols the school. Other students cited that teachers were proactive and made sure that things did not get out of hand when there were behavior problems that could have turned violent.

However, in the interviews, a few students claimed that they did not feel safe because of the age of the school building. For the most part, students cited constant campus supervision and the fact that there were not any unsafe places on campus as reasons that they felt safe at school.

Both the surveys and the interviews showed that students acknowledged that teachers were proactive when there were behavior problems that could have turned violent. Some students even suggested that positive changes had improved the general climate of the school. Other students also claimed that the enforcement of the rules by teachers and administration, along with the increased security of officers walking throughout the school helped to change the climate of their school. Some students said

that they felt safe because they felt that the teachers and staff protected them. Students also noted feeling safe because the classroom doors were locked.

5. Students' Perceptions on School Culture and/or Environment

The students' perceptions on their school culture and environment were positive. Most of them said that they felt good about coming to school each day and that they were a part of the school. The majority of the students agreed that they liked being at WKCHS. Students recognized several areas as major influences that promoted the positive perception. One of the main reasons students gave for liking their school was because of the school's small student population. They stated that because of the school's small student population, everybody could get along. Sports were a positive influence for the students. They reported that just about everybody who wants to play has the opportunity to play any of the sports offered at the school. Students thought that if they were at a larger school, they would not have as many opportunities to be a part of the athletic programs as they are at WKCHS.

Another reason that students gave for liking WKCHS was that because of the small class sizes, they could have more one-on-one interaction with their teachers. Many of the students said that their teachers took time with them and that they could ask questions when they did not understand because their teachers would help them. Although there were a few students who thought that they were treated unfairly, the majority of the students said that being treated fairly and having the opportunity to have a voice to explain whatever were two reasons they felt good about their school. Being

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recognized for good behavior and academics was also a reason that students felt good about being at WKCHS.

It was found that students interacted in a smaller population or group within the school, and this seemed to have contributed to a more positive school environment. Students believed that the smaller student population allowed them and their teachers the opportunity to get to know each other very well, which resulted in less behavior problems and fights. They also believed that the small class sizes resulted in a more one-on-on interaction with their teachers. This was one of the most common influences recognized by the students, which helped to result in a more effective learning environment and an even more positive overall school environment from the surveys and it was communicated during the interviews.

6. Students' Perceptions on Peer Pressure

The students' overall perception of peer pressure was positive. The majority of the students said that peer pressure is to be easily influenced or controlled by another. They felt that their classmates influenced other students. They believed that some areas were influenced by peer pressure. They felt that many of the fights, excessive absenteeism, kids skipping classes, students feeling that they do not have the right clothes to wear, students feeling like they do not fit in with other students, and students having the desire to impress others were all influenced by peer pressure. Although most students said that they felt good about coming to school each day, some of them admitted that they just did not attend school because of peer pressure.

Students' perceptions were split almost down the middle about whether students at WKCHS were treated with respect. About half of them thought students were treated with respect, while the others perceived that students did not respect each other. One of the major issues or concerns was being bullied and teased by other students.

This study also revealed that students perceived that they understood peer pressure and admitted that it existed within their school. Students indicated that for the most part, school life seemed orderly and peer pressure was mostly positive. At WKCHS, the ethnic groups were not very diverse and consisted mostly of African-American students and a small number of Caucasian students. However, it was noted that students did not report any negative peer pressure noted along racial lines. Most students reported positive perceptions of peer pressure, and more than half of the students stated that they felt good about coming to school each day.

7. Students' Perceptions on Getting Good Grades

The majority of the students agreed that they felt that it was easy to get good grades and that in order to get good grades one had to study hard. Even though they admitted that, only a few of them acknowledged that they received all A's. Although many of them said that they understood what was necessary to be successful, they confessed that sometimes they just did not do what it took to be successful academically.

Most students admitted that if they studied and tried they could do better. Others acknowledged that they felt that if students would study hard, then they would be able to get good grades. Students perceived that because there are fewer students at WKCHS, teachers have time to help them one on one. They said they have more time to work with

their teachers and to know what their teachers expected from them. The majority of the students said that they received feedback from their teachers on their assignments and that teachers gave them an opportunity to redo their assignments if they were not acceptable.

Students perceived that making good grades was equivalent to being successful in school. They also seemed to recognize grades as a central ingredient needed if they were going to further their education and in preparing for a satisfying career. Students agreed that feedback from their teachers on their class work and assignments aided them in being successful in school. These were the types of teachers that most students agreed that they wanted.

8. Students' Perceptions on Instructional Differences

Students gave their perceptions on instructional differences and communicated the types of teachers they wanted. They indicated that they wanted teachers who were willing to help them, teachers who were strict, and those who were able and willing to explain the lesson clearly. Some students admitted that they behaved differently for different teachers because of the expectations of the particular teacher.

Most students agreed that they learned more in some teachers' classes than in other teachers' classes, based on the way the teachers taught. They said that they behaved better for teachers who had positive classroom management than in classes that were not well structured, stating that they learned more and behaved better in classrooms in which teachers kept them on task. They also enjoyed learning environments in which they could interact with each other in small groups, projects, research assignments, and active

learning. Students also indicated that they could share knowledge with one another and group members could impact their learning on certain things simply because they could learn from each other.

Almost all of the students indicated that they had opportunities to be creative in their classes. Many of them said that they had chances to be actively involved in their class work. Some of them described class projects, using the science lab with different experiments, writing assignments, research assignments, making PowerPoint presentations, working out problems on the board, and classes in which they used active scenarios in the learning process.

Most of the students indicated that some teachers needed to make learning experiences more interesting. Many described their learning experiences as boring. One student said, "Most of my classes are boring, so I would be happy if the teachers will make some of the lessons more interesting where we can be doing stuff, instead of listening to them give us notes." A 9th-grader also said that some of her classes are boring, and that they learned the stuff the teachers teach, but it would be a whole lot better if the teachers would make the lessons more interesting.

9. Students' Perceptions on Challenging Work

Students described their perceptions on challenging work, and the overwhelming majority agreed that they asked the teacher for help in understanding the material when their school work was difficult. Only a few students stated that they would get help from their friend when their school work was difficult. Some students said that they would ask a friend because the friend might be able to break down the material or lesson better.

They explained that sometimes their friends know what the teacher is trying to say and can explain it better.

Although the majority of the students perceived that none of their subjects were difficult for them, there were some who indicated that some subjects were very difficult. Geometry, algebra, and science were the subjects that most students indicated that they had difficulty understanding. History, biology, and mathematics were the next subjects that most students found difficult. All students agreed that teachers should help them when their class work is difficult. However, in high school, some students admitted that reading was a challenge because they did not like to read. During the interviews, one reason some students gave for preferring to have group assignments was because one of their group members could read and explain the assignments.

10. Students' Perceptions on Future Plans

Students gave their perceptions on their future plans. All of them responded positively. The majority of the students in both the surveys and the interviews perceived that they would go to college once they have completed high school. Most said that they thought that college would help them to have better lives. Several students said that they planned to go to college because they wanted to get a good job. Other students talked about their future plans, which included attending trade school to learn a trade and/or joining the military. Some of the students said that they had relatives or friends who had graduated from college and that those relatives and friends encouraged them to go on to college.

It was also found that nearly all of the students reported that their teachers encouraged them to go to college. Some of the students reported that some of the other faculty and staff at WKCHS also encouraged them to go to college. There were students who stated that the counselor, administrators, librarian, In-School Suspension teacher, and the custodians encouraged them to go to college once they have finished high school. One student said, "Yes, our teachers always encourage us to go to college. They even provide us with skills needed for college. They want us to be the best we can be."

Finally, there were some students who admitted that they did not have family members or friends who had graduated from college and that most of their family members and friends started having babies and dropped out of high school. Students' perceptions were that most of those individuals never made the effort to finish high school or to seek to further their education; this made them want to finish high school and go to college.

How the Students Perceived the Urban and Rural School Environments

The results of this study, students' perceptions from a rural environment, are compared to those results investigated from students from an urban environment by Corbett and Wilson (2002). Students' perceptions are compared in the same 10 categories and render the following findings.

1. Students' Perceptions on Their Transition to High School

In their investigation of students' perceptions, Wilson and Corbett (2002) found that the students kept positive affirmations about their transition to high school.

According to Wilson and Corbett, 82% of the students confirmed that they were ready to do well in high school, while only a few students argued that they were not prepared for the transition.

The present study found that nearly all of the students, about 85%, from the rural school environment had a positive perception of their transition to high school. There were three main themes that students indicated as reasons that made their transitions to high school easy.

The first theme was that nearly all of the students agreed that the school staff helped to make the transition easier for them. They stated that the staff made it easier for them because they welcomed and encouraged them to do their best and that the staff was easy to get along with. One student described his experience and said that the staff and faculty "had everything right, by ensuring that students had the classes that they needed to pass." He continued that his schedule was incorrect and the counselor quickly corrected his schedule. One student said that her transition was easier because each teacher discussed the materials that they would need and discussed the expected behavior for his or her classroom.

The second theme that surfaced during the interviews was that most of the students already knew someone at the school. One student described his experience including him having older brothers at the school who helped him to get prepared. Another student said that his brother answered all of the questions that he had about coming to the school. Another 11th-grade male went on to say that his transition was easy because he knew most of the students. During the interviews, it became apparent that

most of the students at the school are related, which made their transition into WKCHS much easier.

The third theme that evolved was that although most of the students stated that their transition to the high school was easy, some of them admitted that they had some difficulty during their transition. Even though the majority of the students said that their transition into high school was easy, a small number of them stated it was somewhat difficult at first but that they adjusted very quickly.

Overall, the findings of Wilson and Corbett (2002) and those of this study were similar. Roughly, about 82–85 % of the students in both studies confirmed that they were ready or prepared to do well in high school and that their transition into high school was positive. Students noted several factors including the school staff's welcoming them, encouraging them, and being easy to get along with as components that made that transition easy. Knowing someone at the school was also a positive factor that made the students' transition into high school easier.

2. Students' Perceptions on Their Learning Experiences

In the investigation of student perceptions on their learning experiences, Wilson and Corbett (2002) claimed that students construed a compelling case for being active as a valuable means for making school-related learning more attractive to them. They stated that students talked about the kinds of work that helped them learn best and what teachers could do to make learning more interesting. The consensus of the students remained the same. Completing projects and conducting experiments were the activities most frequently mentioned by students in response to questions about what kind of work they

liked doing best or that helped them to learn best. The research revealed that students were enthusiastic about doing work of this type, even claiming that it was fun.

In this study, 59% of the students said that they found that working in small groups with other students helped them to learn best. One student stated that it was easier when they worked in small groups and that they could help each other. Students also indicated that working in small groups helped them to understand better because they could talk and discuss their assignments. They thought it was an effective way to learn.

During the interviews, many of the students elaborated on the fact that they liked when teachers encouraged them to learn. One student said that he liked to be encouraged by his teacher. He said that when some of his teachers encouraged him they gave him one-on-one time with his lesson, and that helped him to understand it better.

A small number of students indicated that they preferred to discuss the lesson with their teacher and with other students because they could get a better understanding from the lesson. Other students indicated that they liked when teachers would re-teach and explain what they did not understand because they (the teachers) made sure that they understood. Several students shared that they learned best with teachers who encouraged them to ask questions because sometimes they "don't 'get it' the first time."

The majority of the students indicated that they had to do research for most of their classes or find information on the Internet. One of the major problems that surfaced during the interviews was that students often had problems in completing those research assignments, because the computers at school did not work properly and were outdated. One student said that there were not enough computers for everybody to work on at the

same time when completing class assignments. An overwhelming number of students also reported that they did not have computers at home to complete assignments.

This area also investigated students' perceptions of strategies that did not help to learn in class. Based on the students' responses, reading and reading comprehension continued to be a problem for high school students, those in 9th through 12th grades. One problem for some students also was when they had to do all of the work by themselves. Another area that posed a problem for students was reading alone or by themselves. Several students indicated that they did not like when they had to read alone. Most of them felt better reading with a partner or in a small group.

Comparatively, both studies indicated that students preferred active learning rather than lecture-driven instruction. In Wilson and Corbett's (2002) study, students described active instruction such as completing projects and experiments as activities that they enjoyed most. In this study, students favored working in small groups to complete assignments because they could learn from each other and gain understanding by discussing their assignments.

In both studies, students wanted teachers who encouraged them to do their work and had expectations of them. Some students indicated that they wanted teachers who would take time to explain their lesson to them, even encouraging them to ask questions when they do not understand the lesson the first time.

3. Students' Perceptions on Being Successful in School

Wilson and Corbett (2002) noted that all of the students in this study expected to succeed in school and in life. Most of the students planned to graduate from high school,

go to college, and have satisfying careers. The authors claimed that the students entirely trusted that their schools had prepared them to accomplish these goals.

In this study, it was noted also that the students believed that they were successful in school and prepared for life outside of school. In the first area, the overall majority of students gave a positive definition of their perception of being successful in school. Most of the students admitted that it took a combination of the definitions given to be successful in school. They claimed that being successful included getting good grades, acting right in class, getting prepared to go to college, and becoming prepared to get a job when they get out of high school. They also said that being successful is when the faculty and staff make sure that they are ready for the real world.

Almost 100% of the students perceived that they were successful in school. Most students seemed to think that they were successful in school because they got good grades. The majority of the students perceived that it was easy to be successful in class. They gave several reasons to support their feelings. They said that they believed that because they had a positive outlook and made good grades, it was easy to be successful. They added that they were successful because they had teachers that helped them and made sure that they had a good understanding of their work. They also stated that studying is needed to be successful.

Well over half of the students perceived that their teachers informed them when they are successful. Several students said, "Yes, my teachers tell me when I am doing good." They said that their teachers told them their grades, gave them verbal praise, and bragged on them when they were being successful. Students described having teachers who congratulated them.

In both studies, most of the students planned to graduate from high school, go to college, and/or have satisfying careers. Wilson and Corbett (2002)   found that their students trusted that their schools had prepared them well to accomplish these goals. Wilson and Corbett said that students wanted teachers who did not accept excuses but pushed students to do well.

This study also found that the majority of the students perceived that they were successful and that their school was preparing them to meet those goals. Most of the students said that they were successful because they had teachers that helped them and made sure that they had a good understanding of their work.

4. Students' Perceptions on School Safety

Wilson and Corbett (2002) noted that during the interviewing process, students frequently mentioned the changes in student behavior. Although students stated that they perceived that the adults had tightened the enforcement of the school and classroom rules. Students felt that they had taken the appropriate measures to increase security in the buildings. According to the authors, some students differed on their answers about the effectiveness of those changes. Students' responses to safety seemed divided as some claimed that the implementation of the new measures were spotty, thereby weakening the impact of safety, while some students suggested that these changes improved the general climate of the school. Some of the students also claimed that the enforcement of the rules and the increased security changed the climate of their school.

However, in this study, the majority of the students said that they felt safe at school. They gave different reasons why they felt safe. Students said that they felt safe

because they felt that the teachers and staff protect them. Another described his reason for feeling safe as nothing really happening except fights. Students also noted feeling safe because the doors are locked and a police officer patrols the school. Other students cited that when there are behavior problems that could turn violent, the teachers are proactive and make sure that things do not get out of hand. Only a few students claimed that they did not feel safe because of the age of the school building. For the most part, students cited constant campus supervision and the fact that there were not any unsafe places on campus as reasons that they feel safe at school.

Both studies noted that students cited that when there are behavior problems that could turn violent, the teachers are proactive. Some students suggested that positive changes improved the general climate of their school. Some also claimed that the enforcement of the rules and the increased security were tools that aided in changing the climate of their school. In both studies, the authors noted that the majority of the students said that they felt safe at school. Some students said that they felt safe because they felt that the teachers and staff protected them. Students also noted feeling safe because the doors are locked and a police officer patrols the school.

5. Students' Perceptions on School Culture and/or Environment

Wilson and Corbett (2002) found that the students' perception on school culture and environment could be determined in the following areas: the organization of all schools' classes into small learning centers, the students' classroom experiences, and student behavior. The investigation revealed that the organization of the small learning centers was where students rotated among a team of teachers. This concept allowed both

teachers and students the opportunity to get to know a segment of the population very well.

The students' perceptions of their experiences in the small learning centers varied from school to school. According to the authors, Wilson and Corbett (2002), students reported mixed perceptions about the effectiveness of the small learning centers. In two of the schools, students talked about their small learning centers in the context of the field trips taken. Some students stated that they took more trips than students from other small learning centers, who only described being outside the building once or twice during the school year.

According to Wilson and Corbett (2002), one of the schools took the concept of a small learning center a step further in the reorganization process by combining students from different grade levels for their small learning centers activities. Half of the students thought that this organization plan resulted in fewer fights and brought about more order to the school. The other half of the students found the younger students were immature and unwilling to interact constructively. The smaller learning center resulted in more order within the school, thus allowing the students to feel safer.

Nonetheless, in this study, the students' perceptions on their school culture and environment were positive. Most of them said that they felt good about coming to school each day and that they were a part of the school. The majority of the students agreed that they liked being at WKCHS. There were several areas that students recognized as major influences of the students' positive perceptions. One of the main reasons students gave for liking their school was because of the school's small student population. They stated that because of the school's small student population, everybody could get along. Sports

were a positive influence for the students as well. They reported that just about everybody who wants to play has the opportunity to play any of the sports offered at the school. Students thought that if they were at a larger school, they would not have as many opportunities to be a part of the athletic programs as they have at WKCHS.

Another reason that students gave for liking WKCHS was that because of the small class sizes, they could have more one-on-one interaction with their teachers. Many of the students said that their teachers took time with them and that they could ask questions when they did not understand because their teachers would help them. Although there were a few students who thought that they were treated unfairly, the majority of the students said that being treated fairly and having the opportunity to have a voice to explain whatever were two reasons they felt good about their school. Being recognized for good behavior and academics was also a reason that students felt good about being at WKCHS.

In the investigation in both studies, researchers found that when students interacted in a smaller population or group within their school, it attributed to more of a positive school environment. Students believed that this concept allowed them and their teachers the opportunity to get to know each other very well, which resulted in less behavior problems and fights. Small class size resulting in more one-on-on interaction with their teachers was one of the most common influences recognized by the students of both studies, which helped to result in a more effective learning environment and even a more positive overall school environment.

6. Students' Perceptions on Peer Pressure

Wilson and Corbett (2002) found that students for the most part described a school in which life seemed orderly and peer pressure was positive. In one school in particular, students explained that classroom disruptions were limited to the exploratory classes and the overall tone of the hallways seemed less contentious. Students also hinted in their interviews that misbehavior was sometimes the product of frustration in class and that good teachers taught in a way that encouraged students to pay attention.

In that same school, Wilson and Corbett (2002) also found a more diverse student population. The authors established that in this particular school, the subject of ethnic tolerance came up in the interviewing process. There was evidence of the greater diversity in the student body. The authors noted that it was evident that the greater diversity in the student body had become the basis for the students learning tolerance rather than inciting conflict. Wilson and Corbett stated that tolerance of others seemed to carry over into the school settings, where in other schools control was fragile. The authors noted several students' responses that gave a clear indication of a positive peer environment. One response that authors believed impacted peer pressure positively was given by an Arabic female student, who conferred, "The students are all like best friends here; we all get along." She stated that the students just liked each other, that they liked to hang out during lunch and gym, and even though she did not pressure any of them, they liked to be near her.

In the current study, the students' overall perception of peer pressure was positive. The majority of the students said that peer pressure is to be easily influenced or controlled by another. The students said that their classmates influenced many students.

They believed that some areas were influenced by peer pressure. Areas such as fights, students having excessive absenteeism, students skipping classes, students feeling that they do not have the right clothes to wear, students feeling like they do not fit in with the rest of the students, and students having the desire to impress others are all affected by peer pressure. Although most students said that they felt good about coming to school each day, some of them admitted that they were affected by peer pressure.

Next, students' perceptions were split almost down the middle about whether students at WKCHS were treated with respect. About half of them thought students were treated with respect, while the others perceived that students did not respect each other. One of the major issues or concerns was being bullied and teased by other students.

Both studies also revealed that students perceived that they understood peer pressure and admitted that it existed within their schools. Both groups also stated that for the most part, school life seemed orderly and that peer pressure was positive. In Wilson and Corbett's study, the ethnic groups were more diverse than in the present one, but students described positive interactions between the groups. At WKCHS, the ethnic group was not as diverse and consisted mostly of African-American students, and there was not any negative peer pressure noted along racial lines. Students reported positive perceptions of peer pressure, and over half of the students stated that they felt good about coming to school each day. However, a difference at WKCHS was that students were split down the middle about whether or not students treated each other with respect.

7. Students' Perceptions on Getting Good Grades

In their research, Wilson and Corbett (2002) found that adults relied on standards to gauge progress, whereas students used grades, not district-devised performance indices that show their success. In their discussion of future success, students recognized grades as a central ingredient needed if they were to get to college and secure a satisfying career. Wilson and Corbett also reported that grades were a major reference point for how students defined the extent of their success in school. The authors found that grades were endemic to students' notions about how they were doing in school. The authors also found that students talked about doing their class work as a key to their success. Wilson and Corbett established that an overall discussion of the connection between course grades and performance standards would also serve another important purpose. They felt that students would have benefited greatly from clearer ideas about what quality meant. Having well-defined standards that were clearly reflected in grading practices would have enhanced the attempts to emphasize excellence.

On the other hand, in this study, the author showed that although all of the students had agreed that they felt that it was easy to get good grades and that in order to get good grades one had to study hard, very few of them admitted that they received all A's. Many of them voiced that they knew what it took to be successful even though they admitted that they did not do what it took to be successful.

The majority of the students admitted that it was easy to get good grades. Most students admitted that they studied and tried to do their best. Others acknowledged that they felt that if students studied hard they would be able to get good grades. Students perceived that because there are fewer students at WKCHS, teachers have time to help

them one-on-one. They said they have more time to work with their teachers and to know what the teachers expect from them. The majority of the students said that they received feedback from their teachers on their assignments and that teachers gave them an opportunity to redo their assignments if they were not acceptable.

Researchers in both studies found similar findings. Students were conscious of the fact that making good grades was equivalent to being successful in school. They recognized grades as a central ingredient needed if they were going to further their education and in preparing for a satisfying career. Students communicated their agreement that getting good grades was easy and that they only had to study hard. Both groups agreed that feedback from their teachers on their class work and assignments aided them in being successful in school.

8. Students' Perceptions on Instructional Differences

Wilson and Corbett (2002) found in their study on students' perceptions on instructional differences that one theme remained constant over the 3-year period: students identified good teachers in the same way and identified dramatic variations in the types and quality of their experiences from classroom to classroom. Students wanted teachers who were willing to help, who were strict but nice, and who were able to explain tasks and content clearly. The authors observed three types of classroom differences in the interviews that influenced what and how much students learned. These three types were pedagogical, content, and classroom environment.

Wilson and Corbett (2002) examined the first type of instructional difference, pedagogical. Even though students were unable to refer to research pertinent to learning

with which to compare their teachers, they stated that some of their classes frustrated them and that others did not. The authors noted that despite the information related to learning styles and multiple intelligences, many teachers relied on instructional strategies that were primarily suited to one learning style or intelligence rather than teaching to several.

The second type of instructional difference found by Wilson and Corbett (2002) was related to the content of the class. They noted that even though teachers were given or had access to the content frameworks, which contained the topics to be covered in each subject and grade level, still teachers found it difficult to cover the material designated. Therefore, teachers had to select what material or topics to cover in the day-to-day instruction. This led to some students gaining a good understanding in some topics and areas of the frameworks, while other students taught by other teachers covered completely different topics and areas from the content frameworks.

The third type of instructional difference examined by Wilson and Corbett (2002) the authors was the classroom environment. Claiming that this type was less subtle, they stated that these differences had little to do with gradations of individuals' acquisition of knowledge or with nuances in the content area covered. Rather, they agreed that the environmental characteristics determined whether the majority of students learned anything at all. This, they conferred, was either because a teacher was reluctant to go back over previously introduced material or did not appear to be willing to offer extra help or did little to engage the students in learning. Students in each school described situations in which little learning took place at any point in the year.

In the present study, over 80% of the students said they behaved differently for certain teachers. A 12th-grader stated, "In some of some of my classes, I act different because some teachers are cool to talk to." An 11th-grade student said, "I act differently because I don't think that some teachers show respect to the students, but they want respect from the students." A 10th-grader said, "I behave a little different for some teachers than I do for others because some teachers, you just have to front in front of them. I mean you have to act a certain way in front of them because they expect you to."

The majority of the students agreed that they learned more in some classes than they did in other classes. Many said that they thought that this was a result of how teachers taught. The study showed that students liked working in groups and they learned more when there was good classroom management and when teachers gave work that was interesting and challenged them. An 8th-grader said, "Yes, I learn more in some classes than in others because some teachers just teach in different ways. See, I like when teachers let us work in groups, and I learn more that way than just letting the teacher give us notes and talk to us." A 9th-grade student said, "I know that most all of my teachers teach me well, but there are 'some' that when the kids act up in class, we don't learn what we supposed to." A 10th-grade student said, "It's just that some teachers don't teach on a high level. They [teachers] all teach, but some just take it to another level and challenge us more." A 7th-grader said that he thought that some of his classes were just more interesting than others and held his attention more.

Almost all of the students indicated that they had opportunities to be creative. Many of them said that they had chances to be actively involved in their class work. Some of them described class projects, using the science lab with different experiments,

writing assignments, research assignments, making PowerPoint presentations, working out problems on the board, and classes in which they used active scenarios in the learning process.

Most of the students said that teachers needed to make learning experiences more interesting. Many described their learning experiences as boring. One student said, "Most of my classes are boring, so I would be happy if the teachers will make some of the lessons more interesting where we can be 'doing stuff' instead of listening to them give us notes." A 9th-grader said, "Some of my classes are boring. We learn the stuff the teachers teach us, but it would be a whole lot better if they would make it more interesting."

Most of the students agreed that they enjoyed learning when they could work in a group with others. Students found that they can share knowledge with one another, group members can impact their vision on certain things, and they can learn from each other.

Several students agreed that they learned best when they had to read for themselves. One student explained that he learned more when he had to read by himself because he understood what he was reading better. Then a few students said that they learned best when they do lessons and activities that are related to real-life situations. One student said that when her teachers used real-life situations, she could understand the meaning better and make connections to what she was learning.

In both studies, students communicated the types of teachers they want. They wanted teachers who were willing to help, strict, and able and willing to explain the content clearly. Students admitted that they behaved differently for different teachers. Most students agreed that they learned more in some teachers' classes than others.

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Students discussed positive classroom management and classes that were not well structured, stating that they learned more and behaved better in classrooms in which teachers kept them on task. They enjoyed learning environments in which they could interact with each other in small groups, projects, research assignments, and active learning. Students found that they could share knowledge with one another and group members could impact their vision on certain things simply because they could learn from each other.

9. Students' Perceptions on Challenging Work

In their study, Wilson and Corbett (2002) interviewed students from several different schools, and they found that the students' perceptions of the teachers that they wanted remained constant. The authors also found that the students of the different schools were not educationally better off than their peers in the other schools. However, they did find that one school in particular had greater consistency in pedagogy, content, and environment and there seemed to be more emphasis on mastering challenging content, to the extent that the curriculum offerings were developed from the current national standards of what students should know and be able to do. In this particular school, teachers possessed the qualities that most of the students had identified as the teachers that they wanted. In essence, these were the "no excuses" teachers who enabled the students to learn best.

In this study, as students described their perceptions on challenging work, the overwhelming majority agreed that they asked the teacher for help in understanding the material when their school work was difficult. Only a few students stated that they would

get help from their friend when their school work was difficult. One student said that he asked a friend because the friend might be able to break it down to him better. He went on to say that sometimes his friends know what the teacher is trying to say and can explain it better.

Although several students said that none of their subjects were difficult for them, there were some who indicated that some subjects were very difficult for them. Geometry was the subject that most students said that they had difficulty understanding. The next subjects that most students found difficult were algebra and then history. All students agreed that teachers should help them when the class work is difficult.

Equally, students from Wilson and Corbett (2002) and the present study identified teachers who enabled them to learn best when they had challenging work. They described teachers who did not accept failure as an option. These were teachers who helped them to understand difficult material by taking the time to explain the difficult subjects to them. These teachers also allowed them opportunities to work with other students who could help them to understand their school work better. Students also agreed that teachers should help them when they did not understand.

10. Students' Perceptions on Future Plans

Wilson and Corbett's (2002) findings reflected the students' value of education as they talked confidentially of their future plans. Students maintained that an education is important in helping them to realize their dream, which showed that they valued education. Over 80% of the students interviewed felt that their school had effectively prepared them for success in high school. The remaining 18% indicated that some of their

teachers had done a good job of preparing them for success while other teachers had not. Some 90% of the students perceived a need for going on to college, and this remained constant over the 3-year period. Wilson and Corbett found that throughout the study students talked confidently of their future plans and education's integral role in helping them to realize their dreams.

Wilson and Corbett (2002) found that the overall perceptions of students in the study indicated six significant findings. These findings were as follows: (a) students expected to succeed in life; (b) they planned to graduate from high school and to go to college; (c) they expected to have satisfying careers; (d) most students believed that their schools had prepared them to accomplish these goals; (e) some students described gaps in their education that they believed were setting them up for failure; and (f) they identified teachers' actions that promised to provide them the necessary encouragement that would help them to succeed.

Wilson and Corbett (2002) also established that the inner-city middle school students dreamed big and that their dreams fell into three main categories related to their future plans. All students planned to go to high school and to graduate; most of them expected to go to college; and nearly all of them anticipated finding employment in their preferred occupational fields or areas. Wilson and Corbett established that these beliefs remained constant from and even strengthened throughout middle school. Ninety percent of the students acknowledged a need for postsecondary education or training.

In this study, the researcher found that the perceptions that students had on their future plans from a rural school environment were no different from those students in the study that Wilson and Corbett (2002) conducted. The majority of the students indicated

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that they would go on to college once they have completed high school. All of them responded positively. They said that they thought that college would help them to have better lives. Several students said that they plan to go to college because they wanted to get a good job. Some of the students talked about their future plans, which included attending trade school to learn a trade and/or joining the military. Many of the students said that they had relatives or friends who had graduated from college and that those relatives and friends encouraged them to go on to college.

In this study, it was also found that nearly all of the students reported that their teachers encouraged them to go to college. Some of the students reported that some of the other faculty and staff also encouraged them to go to college. There were students who stated that the counselor, administrators, librarian, In-School Suspension teacher, and custodians encouraged them to go to college once they have finished high school. One student said, "Yes, our teachers always encourage us to go to college. They even provide us with skills needed for college. They want us to be the best we can be."

Finally, there were students who admitted that they did not have family members or friends who had graduated from college and that most of their family members and friends "started having babies and dropped out of high school." The researcher found that although students said that most of those individuals never made the effort to finish high school or to seek to further their education, this made them want to finish high school and go to college. In the comparison to Wilson and Corbett (2002), students from their research had positive plans about their futures, citing careers that they wanted to pursue, whether they were achieving at a successful academic level or not. As the principal, it was very important to understand the concept that the students at WKCHS had about

their future plans. I had to have a view of how they perceived their future in order to work with the counselor to provide the needed information on the careers that would interest them and to encourage them to plan for their future.

Students from Wilson and Corbett (2002) and the present study maintained that an education is important in aiding them in obtaining their goals and their dreams. Students' perceptions from the rural environment were no different from those from an urban setting. The majority of the students in both studies indicated that their school had effectively prepared them to be successful or was preparing them for the next stage of their educational phase. The majority of the students reported that their teachers encouraged them to go to college. It was clear that students understood the value of an education and that most of them had plans to pursue a college degree, to join the workforce, to learn a trade, or to join the armed forces.

Summary

This chapter provided the results from this study. This study utilized qualitative research that was comprised of a survey and informal interviews that investigated the perceptions of students from a rural school environment in 10 categories. Then the investigator compared the results of students from a rural environment in this study to the findings of students from an urban setting in a study conducted by Corbett and Wilson (2002). The following categories reflect the results found.

Survey Results

1. Students' Perceptions on Their Transition to High School

Nearly all of the WKCHS students surveyed had a positive perception of their transition to high school**.** Some 90% of the students agreed that the school faculty and staff made the transition easier for them. The results also showed that well over 60% of the students indicated that the change from elementary to high school was easy. In the interviews, students supported the responses given in the surveys. Almost all of the students interviewed said that they felt that their transition into high school was successful. They readily admitted that the school staff and faculty made the transition smooth. Students added that they felt good about the transition because they felt prepared for high school and they had siblings or relatives and/or knew someone at the high school.

2. Students' Perceptions on Their Learning Experiences

The general consensus of the students about their learning experiences was positive. In the survey the majority of the students indicated that they learned best when involved in learning experiences in which they were actively involved. Well over half of the students also revealed that the majority of the students enjoyed activities such as completing assignments on the computer as the way that they learned best. Also, the survey showed that students were in agreement that they did not learn best when the teacher would lecture and give notes.

3. Students' Perceptions on Being Successful in School

Survey results illustrated that nearly all of the participants in the study felt that they were successful in school, with a 95% affirmative. Only a small percentage of the students thought that they were unsuccessful in school. Over half of the students indicated that it was easy to be successful in school, and the majority of them showed that their teachers let them know that they are successful in their classes.

4. Students' Perceptions on School Safety

The results showed that overall most of the students felt safe at school, with a small number of students being afraid or intimidated by other students at their school. None of the students indicated that they were afraid or intimidated by any of the school personnel. In addition, all of the students indicated that they felt safe when the principal and/or a police officer monitored the school buildings and the campus during the day, which is positive.

5. Students' Perceptions on School Culture and/or Environment

The overall perception of the school culture was positive, as the majority of the students indicated from the surveys that they liked being at the high school. A large percentage of them also indicated that they felt a part of the school. Over 80% of students in the present study indicated that they thought students were treated fairly. The majority of the students admitted that they were recognized for positive behavior and academics.

6. Students' Perceptions on Peer Pressure

Results indicated that the majority of the students had some knowledge of peer pressure. Most students indicated that their definition of peer pressure was being pressured to do something just to fit in with their friends. A small percentage indicated that the meaning of peer pressure was to be easily influenced by another. Then, over half of them said that they felt that students treated each other with respect.

A high number of students in the present study indicated that students did not attend school because of peer pressure. Citing issues and problems that they faced each day at school, about one third of students agreed that not having the appropriate technology to complete research was number one, with being bullied or teased the second highest. Next, they stated that problems at home that kept them from coming to school. Others indicated that they did not enjoy coming to school, while a small number of them showed that they did not feel safe in school. Eight percent of them had a problem when teachers did not provide the adequate help to them.

7. Students' Perceptions on Getting Good Grades

The overall students' perception was positive on getting good grades. Seventy-five percent of the students who took the survey indicated that they felt that it was easy to get good grades. In the interviews, some students also indicated that they did receive feedback from their teachers, but all of them overwhelmingly agreed that teachers gave them work that challenged them.

8. Students' Perceptions on Instructional Differences

Over half of the students agreed that they did not act any differently for any of their teachers. Then they were split almost down the middle on whether they learned more in some classes than in others. There was a similar divide as students indicated that they had opportunities to be creative in classes. Next, nearly all students agreed that teachers needed to make learning experiences more interesting.

9. Students' Perceptions on Challenging Work

Results also revealed that reading was a challenging subject for students. Students unanimously agreed that they felt that teachers should help when the work is difficult. After that, over half of the students noted that they preferred difficult work. The results also showed that well over the majority of the students thought that the school library was a challenging and fun place to learn. The results showed that nearly half of the students did not ask the teachers for assistance when they did not understand their work. They also indicated that almost 10% of students made the decision not to complete their assignments at all.

10. Students' Perceptions on Future Plans

Results indicated that the majority of the students, 82%, agreed that the school was preparing them to accomplish their goals. An overwhelming 94% of the students said that their teachers encouraged them to go to college, and 100% of the students believed that college would help them to have better lives.

Interview Results

1. Students' Perceptions on Their Transition to High School

The present study confirmed that students felt that they were ready or prepared to do well in high school and that their transition into high school was positive. Students noted several factors that included the school staff's welcoming them and encouraging them as components that made that transition easy. Knowing someone at the school and having relatives or siblings who were presently attending the high school were also positive factors that made the students' transition into high school easier.

2. Students' Perceptions on Their Learning Experiences

During the interview process, students preferred active learning rather than lecture-driven instruction, which supported the data they had given in the surveys. Students preferred discussions with their teachers and their peers as the type of learning experiences from which they benefited. They claimed that small groups helped each other because even when they did not know an answer, their friend might. They also supported the results given in the survey by adding that while discussing their work, they could compare and contrast their answers with their classmates.

3. Students' Perceptions on Being Successful in School

Overall the majority of the students interviewed described their experiences in school as successful. Students gave descriptions such as getting good grades, acting right in school, getting prepared for college, and getting prepared to get a job as being

successful in school. There were only a small number of students who admitted that they were not successful in school. Over half of them admitted that their teachers let them know when they were successful.

4. Students' Perceptions on School Safety

The majority of the students interviewed said that they felt safe at school. Their responses supported the information given in the surveys. Students gave several reasons why they felt safe at school, citing the teachers and school staff protecting them and feeling safe when the police officer and/or the principal monitors the building and campus. Students said that they believed that this helped them to do right because they did not know when the monitoring would take place. Students also claimed that teachers were always watching them and that most places were supervised.

Only a few students said that they did not feel safe. Some students indicated that they did not feel safe because of the condition of the building but not because of the threat of eminent danger from any individual. Many students cited feeling unsafe because of the leaks in the roof. They also said that sometimes fights occur in the bathrooms.

5. Students' Perceptions on School Culture and/or Environment

Students agreed that they liked being at the school. They agreed that the smaller student population and small class sizes were two of the main reasons that they liked being at WKCHS. They contended that everyone knew everybody and that because of the small number of students they had opportunities to play sports that they might not have had at a larger school. Students also agreed that teachers were able to add more one-on-

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one time with them because of the small class size. Most students said that they felt good about coming to school each day and felt that they were a part of the school. Only a very few students who did not participate in sports or any clubs said that they did not feel like they were a part of the school.

6. Students' Perceptions on Peer Pressure

In the survey and the informal interviews, the results showed that students learned best when teachers encouraged them and when teachers would re-teach and explain the material to them. In the interviews, students described how teachers encouraged them. Several students described experiences when teachers provided one-on-one time when they did not understand the lesson or material given the first time. Students shared that they liked when teachers encouraged them to complete their assignments. Nearly 100% of the students interviewed agreed that their teachers made them redo any unacceptable work.

7. Students' Perceptions on Getting Good Grades

The interviews revealed that students perceived that it was easy to get good grades. The majority of the students admitted that if they studied they could receive good grades. They also cited that the smaller school size gave them more opportunities to have one-on-one academic assistance. There were some students who noted that it was not easy to get good grades. One student said that it was not easy to get good grades because the work gets harder as you move up to the next grade level.

8. Students' Perceptions on Instructional Differences

During the interviews students said that they wanted teachers who encouraged them to do their work and had high expectations of them. Some students indicated that they wanted teachers who would take time to explain their lesson to them, even encouraging them to ask questions when they do not understand the lesson the first time. The perceptions of the students who were interviewed reflected what the surveys indicated, that they wanted teachers who expected them to do well and had expectations of them as well as teachers who made them redo work and who informed them about their academic success. In other words, students in the Wilson and Corbett (2002) study and the present study revealed that they wanted teachers who would not accept excuses but would challenge them in their class work.

9. Students' Perceptions on Challenging Work

The large majority of the students admitted that they asked their teachers for assistance and help when the work was challenging or difficult for them. Several of them said that they had no problem asking the teacher because they wanted to make good grades. Some students said that they usually asked a friend for help when they did not ask their teacher. Some of them admitted that they preferred to ask a friend because their peers could break the material down in a way that they could understand sometimes better than the teacher. Students indicated that geometry was the most difficult subject for them, with algebra coming in second, and then history. They suggested that working in small groups might aid them in understanding the material better.

10. Students' Perceptions on Future Plans

This study also found that the majority of the students perceived that they were successful and that their school was preparing them to meet those goals. Most of the students said that they were successful because they had teachers that helped them and made sure that they had a good understanding of their work. They admitted that they had relatives who had graduated from college and that those individuals encouraged them to go to college. Students who did not have family members or friends who had graduated from college admitted that most of the females started having babies and finally dropped out of school.

How Students Perceived the Urban and Rural School Environments

There were noticeable comparisons in the results of Corbett and Wilson's (2002) study and the present study.

1. Students' Perceptions on Their Transition to High School

Interviews confirmed that roughly 82–85 % of the students in Wilson and Corbett's and the present study confirmed that they were ready or prepared to do well in high school and that their transition into high school was positive. Knowing others at school was a positive factor that caused students to have a positive transition into high school.

2. Students' Perceptions on Their Learning Experiences

Researchers from both studies also found that when students interacted in a smaller population or group within their school, it attributed to a more positive school culture or environment. Students stated that they believed that this concept allowed them and their teachers the opportunity to get to know each other very well, which resulted in less behavior problems and fights. Small class sizes, which resulted in more one-on-one interaction with teachers, was one of the most common influences recognized by the students of both studies. They pointed out that they believed that it helped to provide a more effective learning environment and even a more positive overall school environment.

3. Students' Perceptions on Being Successful in School

Both studies noted that nearly all of the students expected to succeed in life and in school. Most of the students believed that they were well prepared and ready for life outside of school. Students cited several factors such as getting good grades, acting right in class, getting prepared for college, and becoming prepared to get a job as being successful. They also said that being successful was adequate preparation for the real world.

4. Students' Perceptions on School Safety

In both studies, during the interviews, students suggested that the teachers were proactive when there were behavior problems that could turn violent. Some students suggested that positive changes improved the general climate of their school. While

others also claimed that the enforcement of the rules and the increased security were tools that aided in changing the climate of their school. Students of WKCHS said that they felt safer when the police officer or the principal monitored the school building and the campus. In both studies, the authors noted that the majority of the students said that they felt safe at school. Some students said that they felt safe because they felt that the teachers and staff protected them because the doors were locked.

5. Students' Perceptions on School Culture and/or Environment

In the investigation in both studies, researchers found that when students interacted in a smaller population or group within their school, it attributed to a more positive school environment. Students believed that this concept allowed them and their teachers the opportunity to get to know each other very well, which resulted in less behavior problems and fights. Small class size, which resulted in a more one-on-one interaction with their teachers, was one of the most positive influences recognized by the students of both studies. They believed that this helped to provide a more effective learning environment and an even more positive overall school environment.

6. Students' Perceptions on Peer Pressure

Another similarity that surfaced in both studies showed that students perceived that they understood peer pressure and admitted that it existed within their schools. Both groups also stated that, for the most part, school life seemed orderly and peer pressure was positive. However, in Wilson and Corbett's (2002) study, the ethnic groups were

more diverse than at WKCHS, but students described positive interactions between the groups.

At WKCHS, the ethnic group consisted mostly of African-American students with a small percentage of Caucasian students, and there was not any negative peer pressure noted along racial lines. Students reported positive perceptions of peer pressure, and over half of the students stated that they felt good about coming to school each day. However, at WKCHS students were split down the middle on whether students treated each other with respect.

7. Students' Perceptions on Getting Good Grades

Wilson and Corbett (2002) and the present study found similar findings. Students were aware of the fact that making good grades was equivalent to being successful in school. They recognized grades as a central ingredient needed if they were going to further their education and prepare for a satisfying career. Students communicated their agreement that getting good grades was easy and that one only had to study hard. Both groups agreed that feedback from their teachers on their class work and assignments aided them in being successful in school.

8. Students' Perceptions on Instructional Differences

In both studies, students communicated the types of teachers they wanted. Students from both groups implied that they wanted teachers who were willing to help, who were strict, and who were able and willing to explain the content clearly. Students admitted that they behaved differently for different teachers. Most students agreed that

they learned more in some teachers' classes than others. Students discussed positive classroom management and classes that were not well structured, stating that they learned more and behaved better in classrooms in which teachers kept them on task. They enjoyed learning environments in which they could interact with each other in small groups, projects, research assignments, and active learning. Students found that they could share knowledge with one another and group members could impact their vision on certain things simply because they could learn from each other.

9. Students' Perceptions on Challenging Work

Equally, students from both studies identified the teachers who enabled them to learn best were those who were the most challenging. They described teachers who did not accept failure as an option. They described the teachers as those who helped them to understand difficult material by taking the time to explain the difficult subjects to them. These teachers also allowed them opportunities to work with other students who could help them to understand their school work better. Students also agreed that teachers should help them when they did not understand.

10. Students' Perceptions on Future Plans

Students from both studies maintained that an education is important in aiding them in obtaining their goals and their dreams. Students' perceptions from the rural environment were no different from those from an urban setting. The majority of the students in both studies indicated that their school had effectively prepared them to be successful or was preparing them for the next stage of their educational phase. The

majority of the students reported that their teachers encouraged them to go to college. It is clear from both studies that students understand the value of an education and most of them have plans to pursue a college degree, learn a trade, or join the armed forces.

In Wilson and Corbett's (2002) study and the present investigation, the majority of the students planned to graduate from high school, go to college, and/or have satisfying careers. Wilson and Corbett found that their students trusted that their schools had prepared them well to accomplish these goals. Wilson and Corbett also said that students wanted teachers who did not accept excuses but pushed students to do well. The present study revealed that those students also wanted teachers who encouraged them to do well. They, too, felt that they were well prepared for life after school.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The final chapter of this study consists of the following four sections: Summary, Conclusions, Recommendations, and Chapter Summary.

Chapter I begins with the introduction and literature review, which lay the groundwork for this research study. According to Fletcher (2003), student voice is defined as the unique perspective of young people in schools. He stated that student voice is formed in the same way that adult voice is; that is, experience and education help students create opinions, ideas, and beliefs to which they give voice. Fletcher contended that it is not enough to only recognize student voice, but in order to truly empower students, educators must acknowledge, employ, accentuate, and enforce student voice throughout schools. Research on students' perceptions about school from a rural school is essential because it is important to allow students to have a voice in which they can share their perspectives about the different aspects of school.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of school of students in a rural school environment. The results from this study were used to compare the perceptions of students attending rural schools to those of students in an urban

environment. These results can be used to aid administrators and policy makers in better understanding the perceptions of rural students about school, thereby helping them to make better decisions in areas that directly impact those students.

The following question was examined in this research: What are the perceptions of school from 7th- to 12th-grade students who are in a rural school environment?

Wilson and Corbett (2002) suggested that if substantial reforms to improve what and how much students learn actually occur in schools, then students' descriptions of their classroom experiences should reflect those changes. The authors argued that reform should be noticeable in what students say about school. Wilson and Corbett (2002) stated that they were fully convinced of the value of listening to students as an important part of planning, implementing, and adjusting reform.

Using interview protocols, Wilson and Corbett (2002) investigated the perceptions of urban students. These perceptions formed the basic tenets of the research involving the perceptions of the rural students in this study. Wilson and Corbett were able to interview the same students during the 3-year period of their study. The authors found that students discussed what they wanted their teachers to be like and that these findings remained constant over the 3 years during the study.

Truscott and Truscott (2005) cited three possible reasons why the problems and the ongoing debate about education policy are more evident in urban schools than in rural schools. The authors defined urban areas as those having 1,000 people or more per square mile, while rural communities have fewer than 150 people per square mile. The authors also stated that perhaps more is known about urban schools because (a) most major media outlets are located in cities or (b) because high population densities in cities make the

challenges more visible or (c) because voters are concentrated in cities. They contended that focusing primarily on urban schools establishes a needless rural–urban antagonism and ignores that urban and rural communities face similar struggles even though their circumstances may be different.

According to Robinson (2004), the National Education Association (NEA) estimated that 40% of American school children can be classified as rural and that nearly half of American schools are located in rural areas and small towns. As with urban schools, rural schools are held accountable for reaching national standards found in such legislation as No Child Left Behind. Often, however, rural schools are not considered when decisions are made concerning school policy and legislative demands. Legislators and policy makers seemingly make decisions that affect all schools nationwide using information received from urban schools.

Robinson (2004) provided insight into three small, rural school districts. Robinson's study was compared to a similar study done with large, urban schools. She compared and found that some of those same issues that urban schools and their students experienced were evident in rural schools and their students. She found that many rural communities have fewer resources to address the problems that plague their society; that the decline in enrollment or a small state budget can have a negative ripple effect throughout the district; and that students were keenly aware of the financial problems that their districts face.

The review of literature revealed many research studies that involved urban school students' perceptions about school. Although there were several studies that involved rural school students' perceptions about school, it was important for me to

examine the perceptions about school of the students where I serve as an administrator. The perception of school and what school reformation should be is channeled by legislators and those whose focus somewhat indirectly affect it. The research has shown that teachers, administrators, parents, legislators, and the media seem to shape what should be happening in schools. This showed an evident gap in the literature as it relates to students' perception from rural environments. The lack of literature in the areas of focus also indicated that there is apparently a need for this study and the results of the data. It is equally important to recognize the existence of the perceptions of students in rural school in order to give them a voice in the literature.

I conducted interviews with students in my school using those same 10 categories. Additionally, I chose to use a survey with these same 10 categories. I decided to use the survey to ensure that each student had the opportunity to respond to each category with anonymity.

The survey used in this study was an adaptation of the interview protocols used by Wilson and Corbett (2002) in their study. It is also important to understand that the results of this study produced useful data that will enable teachers, administrators, parents, and policy makers to better understand the perceptions that students in a rural environment possess about school. Because school reform is ever evolving and that evolution directly impacts all students in every geographical area, it important for those who assist in setting national and state standards as well as school reformation to have an understanding of the perceptions of students from rural school environments.

Further, it was important that this study was conducted in order to utilize the findings to aid in making effective decisions in school reform relative to this school site.

It was also important to me, as the administrator, to understand what the students'

perceptions are within this school as related to the particular areas that were surveyed. I

believe that how students actually feel about school ultimately affects their attendance

and performance both academically and behaviorally in school. These areas of focus

were the following: (a) student's perception on the transition to high school; (b) student's

perception on learning experiences; (c) student's perception on being successful; (d)

student's perception on school safety; (e) student's perception on the school culture

and/or environment; (f) student's perception on peer pressure; (g) student's perception on

getting good grades; (h) student's perception on instructional differences; (i) student's

perception on challenging work; and (j) student's future plans. The conclusions and

recommendations are presented in the next sections.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of school of students

in a rural school environment. The results from this study were used to compare the

perceptions of students attending rural schools to those of students in an urban

environment. The study was conducted using a survey and interview protocols (see

Appendix B) adapted by the researcher. The survey included one demographic section

and 10 sections with questions related to each topic. The participants were students from

the rural school where the researcher was an administrator. The participants were given

the survey, and then those who agreed, participated in the interview process.

The researcher drew several conclusions from the data resulting from this

research. Results showed students' perceptions of school from a rural environment and

students' perceptions of school from an urban environment are often the same. During the interview process in Wilson and Corbett's (2002) study and the present study, some of the responses that students shared were similar. Research results from this study revealed that the students' perceptions from a rural school environment were an invaluable asset that can aid in school reformation for this rural school, WKCHS, and that this data will also add to the literature on rural students' perception of school.

Recommendations

Due to the limited amount of research available on students' perceptions from a rural school environment, I examined the students' perceptions of school from the rural Mississippi school where I serve as the administrator. The study revealed that the students' perceptions from the rural school environment were very similar to those from students from an urban school environment. Participants also provided insight that can be utilized to aid in school reform. Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made by the researcher:

1. Due to the limited research on students' perceptions from a rural school environment, it is recommended that further research is conducted on students' perceptions from both a rural and an urban school environment with the students from similar socioeconomic statuses. It will provide a view of whether they have similar perceptions and funding challenges.

2. It is recommended that further research is conducted with more than one rural school district that simulates Kennard County School District, but from a similar geographic location and a different geographic location, in order to

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compare students' perceptions of their school environment and to address the issues or concerns that students may have.

3. It is recommended that research on funding be supplied to rural schools from the local, state, and federal programs so that students are afforded the necessary technological equipment in order to complete daily school assignments and for them to be able to compete in the global society.

4. One of the main concerns of students that surfaced in the results was the lack of technology and computers that were in poor condition and that did not work. Students also said that due to the condition and the lack of computers, often they were unable to complete daily assignments, because many of them did not have computers to use at home. Due to the limited funding that the rural school receives, and the low socioeconomic status of the majority of the students within the school, it is recommended that stakeholders (to include administration, faculty, staff, parents, and students) form partnerships with community and area businesses, area schools, and area colleges and universities that can design ways to employ and/or share instructional resources that will satisfy and provide even more engaging and challenging instruction within the district. Resources include but are not limited to different types of technology and include resources such as Smartboards for classrooms and laptop computers for student checkout.

5. In the study, the results revealed that some students felt that some students did not attend school because of peer pressure. Therefore, it is recommended that administration, faculty, and staff work with students at WKCHS, parents, the

attendance clerk, and the truancy officer to solicit strategies that will address

peer pressure in order to promote positive school attendance.

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APPENDIX A

CURRICULUM VITAE

EDUCATION

2009 Doctor of Philosophy, Curriculum and Instruction
    Dissertation Title: Perceptions of School from Students in a Rural School
    Environment
    Mississippi State University

2002 Educational Specialist, Educational Leadership and Administration
    Mississippi State University

2000 Master of Education, Elementary Education
    Mississippi State University

1996 Bachelor of Science (Cum Laude), Elementary Education
    Mississippi State University

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

2004–Present Principal: West Kennard County High School, Kennard County School
    District, Kennard County. Responsibilities include serving as the instructional
    leader while managing the day-to-day operations of the high school for grades 7–
    12; promoting an environment of excellence in student achievement; encouraging
    and developing positive interactions with and among the stakeholders; overseeing
    and aiding with developing effective curriculum and instruction, student
    discipline, staffing, class scheduling, and the scheduling of faculty duties,
    activities, parental involvement activities, and sports; organizing and facilitating
    the After School Tutoring Program and the Extended Year Summer School
    Program. Also responsible for creating, maintaining, and compiling reports and
    data, inventory, fixed assets, repairs, and all other pertinent interests that relate to
    the school environment.

2003–2004 Assistant Principal: West Kennard County High School, Kennard County
    School District, Kennard County. Responsibilities included assisting with the
    managing of the day-to-day operations of a high school environment as well as
    serving as the instructional leader.

2001–2004 PEAK Teacher: Overstreet Elementary School and Sudduth Elementary,
    Starkville Public School System. Starkville, MS. Responsibilities included
    constructing appropriate and challenging curriculum and instruction for
    intellectually gifted students.

2001–2003 National Youth Sports Program. Educational Specialist. Holmes Cultural
    Diversity Center. Mississippi State University. Provided age-appropriate

curriculum, instruction, speakers, and activities to educate youth on drug awareness and drugs' effects on the human body.

1996–2001   Teacher: Overstreet Elementary School, Starkville Public School System. Starkville, MS. Responsibilities included facilitating and providing skills and strategies in reading, mathematics, language arts concepts, math computations, social studies, science, and social awareness needed during the daily operations of teaching third-grade students.

1987–1992   Teacher Assistant: Overstreet Elementary Schools, Starkville School System, Starkville, MS. Responsibilities included reinforcing skills and strategies in reading, language arts concepts, math, computations, social studies, and science while assisting the teacher in the daily operations of teaching a first-grade class.

1988–1988   Director: Day Care Center Director. Second Baptist Day Care Center, Starkville, MS. Responsibilities included overseeing and conducting the daily operations of the center, the students, and the employees.

EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

2001–2002   Educational Leadership Cohort VI Mississippi State University, Mississippi State, MS 39762. Courses in Educational Leadership and Administration.

1995   Reading Practicum Early Childhood and Reading Strategies Practicum.

1995   Early Childhood Education Practicum. Starkville Public Schools Overstreet Elementary and Sudduth Elementary.

HONORS/AWARDS

2003   Wal-Mart Teacher of the Year at the Starkville, MS Wal-Mart Store #112 Highway 12, Starkville, MS.

2001   National Board Certified Teacher. National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Overstreet Elementary School. SSD.

2001   Honor Member of the Kappa Delta Pi International Honor Society in Education Chapter of Kappa Delta Phi Mississippi State University.

1996   Who;s Who Among Students in American Universities and Colleges: Mississippi State University.

1995–1996   President's Scholar: Mississippi State University. Graduated Cum Laude. May 1996.

1992–1995	Dean's Scholar: Mississippi State University.
1995	Phi Delta Kappa Memorial Scholarship Recipient: Mississippi State University Chapter.
1992–1996	Black Awareness Academic Achievement Award: Holmes Cultural Diversity Center.
1995	Gamma Beta Phi Honor Society.
1992	Phi Eta Sigma Honor Society.

AFFILIATIONS

2005–Present	Johnie E. Cooks, Sr. Foundation. President. Nonprofit.
2002–Present	National Association of Educators Member. Kennard County School District.
2002–2005	Peter's Rock Community Development Foundation (PRCDF) Member. Nonprofit.
1996–2004	Science Fair Coordinator. Organizing and coordinating all facets of the Annual Science Fair. Included obtaining judges, presenting Science Fair Information Workshop. Overstreet Elementary School. Starkville Public School District.
2002–Present	Mississippi Association of Educators Member: Oktibbeha County School District.
2001–2002	Mississippi Association of Educators President and Member: Starkville Association.
1999–2000	Mississippi Association of Educators Vice President and Member. Starkville Association of 2000–2001.
1994–2000	Mississippi Reading Council: Mississippi State University Member.
1993–Present	Parent Teacher Association. Starkville Public Schools. Member.
1993–1995	Parent Representative: Parent Teacher Association. Starkville Public Schools.

APPENDIX B

SURVEY

Demographics and Student Survey

Please complete this short survey by answering each item appropriately. Read each question carefully, and place an (X) beside your response to each question. Your answers will remain confidential.

I. Demographics Survey

1. What is your age?
   A) _____ 11–12
   B) _____ 13–14
   C) _____ 15–16
   D) _____ 17–21

2. What is your gender?
   A) _____ M   B) _____ F

3. What is your ethnic background?
   A) ___ African American
   B) ___ White (Caucasian)

4. Please identify your grade level by marking beside your current grade level.
   A) ___ 7th Grade
   B) ___ 8th Grade
   C) ___ 9th Grade
   D) ___ 10th Grade
   E) ___ 11th Grade
   F) ___ 12th Grade

II. Transition to High School

1) Did the school staff help to make your transition to this school easy?
   A) Yes
   B) No

2) How was it for you to make the change from elementary to high school?
   A) Extremely Difficult
   B) Difficult (But I adjusted quickly)
   C) Somewhat Difficult
   D) Easy

3) How well prepared were you for high school?
   A) Well Prepared
   B) Somewhat Prepared
   C) I was not prepared for high school.

III. Learning Experiences

1) What kinds of activities help you to learn best in class?
   A) Completing activity or work sheets
   B) Working in small groups with other students
   C) To have your teacher lecture and give notes while you write them down
   D) Talking and discussing the "lesson" with the teacher and other students
   E) Completing assignments on the computer

2) I do not learn in class when:
   A) I have to do all of the work by myself.
   B) When I must work in a group with others.
   C) When I have to read.

3) What do your teachers do to help you learn?
   A) Encourage you to do your best.
   B) Re-teach and explain what you don't understand the first time.
   C) Encourage you to ask questions if you don't understand.
   D) My teachers do not help me to learn.

4) Do you have opportunities in class to work with computers or other kinds of technology?
   A) Yes
   B) No

IV. Student's Success

1) What is your definition of being successful in school?
   A) To get good grades
   B) To "act right in class"
   C) Preparing you to go to college
   D) Preparing you to get a job after high school

2) Are you successful in school?
   A) Yes
   B) No

3) Is it easy or difficult for you to be successful in school?
   A) Easy
   B) Difficult

4) Do your teachers let you know that you are successful in their class?

A) Yes
B) No

V. School Safety

1) Do you feel safe at school?
   A) Yes
   B) No

2) Are there any unsafe places in school?
   A) Yes
   B) No

3) Do you feel that your school building is safe?
   A) Yes
   B) No

4) Are you afraid or intimidated by other students at your school?
   A) Yes
   B) No

5) Are you afraid or intimidated of teachers or any other staff member who works at your school?
   A) Yes
   B) No

6) I feel safe when the principal and/or the police officer monitor the school building and the campus during the day.
   A) Yes
   B) No

VI. School Culture/Environment

1) Do you like being at this high school?
   A) Yes
   B) No

2) Do you feel like you are a part of the school?
   A) Yes
   B) No

3) Are students treated fairly at this school?
   A) Yes
   B) No

4) Do students make choices that get them in trouble?
   A) Yes
   B) No

5) Are students recognized for positive behavior/academics?
   A) Yes
   B) No

VII. Peer Pressure

1) What is your definition of "peer pressure"?
   A) To be easily influenced or controlled by another
   B) Being pressured to do something just to fit in with my friends
   C) Using my own thoughts to control my actions

2) Do you think that some students do not attend school or classes because of peer pressure?
   A) Yes
   B) No

3) Do you feel good about coming to school each day?
   A) Yes
   B) No

4) Most of the students at our school treat each other with respect.
   A) Yes
   B) No

5) Some issues or problems that you face at school are:
   A) Bullying or teasing
   B) Harassment by other students
   C) Harassment by teachers
   D) Not feeling safe
   E) Not having the appropriate learning materials
   F) Not having the appropriate technology to do and complete research
   G) My teacher does not give me the help that I need.
   H) I don't enjoy coming to school.
   J) I want to come to school, but problems at home cause me to stay at home.

VIII. Getting Good Grades

1) Is it easy or difficult to get good grades?
   A) Easy
   B) Difficult

2) What grades do you usually get?
    A) All A's
    B) A's and B's
    C) B's and C's
    D) C's and D's
    E) D or Below

3) Do you get feedback from your teachers on your assignments?
    A) Yes
    B) No

4) Do teachers make you redo work that is not acceptable?
    A) Yes
    B) No

5) Do you believe that your teachers give you work/assignments that challenge you?
    A) Yes
    B) No

6) Do you think that it is important to prepare for your classes and tests in order to get good grades?
    A) Yes
    B) No

IX. Student's Perceptions on Instruction Differences

1) Do you behave differently for certain teachers?
    A) Yes
    B) No

2) Do you think that you learn more in some classes than in other classes?
    A) Yes
    B) No

3) Do you get many opportunities to be creative in your classes?
    A) Yes
    B) No

4) Do some teachers need to make class learning experiences more interesting?
    A) Yes
    B) No

5) What type learning activities help you to learn best?
    A) I have to do all of the work by myself.
    B) When I must work in a group with others

C) When I have to read for myself

D) When I do lessons and activities that relate to real-life situations

X. Perspectives on Challenging Work

1) What do you do when the school work is difficult for you?
   A) Ask your teacher for help in understanding the material
   B) Get help from your friend
   C) Re-read for a better understanding
   D) Just don't do it

2) Which subject is the most difficult for you?
   A) Reading
   B) Mathematics
   C) Algebra
   D) Geometry
   E) Science
   F) Biology
   G) History

3) Should the teacher help you when the work is difficult?
   A) Yes
   B) No

4) Which type of class work do you prefer, easy or difficult?
   A) Easy
   B) Difficult

5) Is the school library a challenging and fun place to learn?
   A) Yes
   B) No

XI. Student's Future Plans

1) What do you plan to do after high school in terms of further schooling, work, or a career?
   A) Go to college
   B) Attend trade school
   C) Find a job right out of high school
   D) Military (Army, Navy, Air Force, or Any of the Armed Forces)
   E) I have no plans at this time.

2) Do you feel that this school is preparing you well to accomplish your goals?
   A) Yes
   B) No

3) Do your teachers encourage students to go to college?
   A) Yes
   B) No

4) Do you think that college will help you to have a better life?
   A) Yes
   B) No

5) Do you have family and friends who have graduated from college?
   A) Yes
   B) No

APPENDIX C

IRB APPROVAL

Mississippi State
UNIVERSITY

May 19, 2005

Helen Kennard
1653 Steadman Lane
Starkville, MS 39759

Re: IRB Docket #05-141: Perceptions of School from Students in a Rural School Environment

Dear Ms. Kennard:

The above referenced project was reviewed and approved via expedited review for a period of May 19, 2005 through May 15, 2006 in accordance with 45 CFR 46.110 #7. Please note the expiration date for approval of this project is May 15, 2006. If additional time is needed to complete the project, you will need to submit a Continuing Review Request form 30 days prior to the date of expiration. Any modifications made to this project must be submitted for approval prior to implementation. Forms for both Continuing Review and Modifications are located on our website at http://www.msstate.edu/dept/compliance.

Any failure to adhere to the approved protocol could result in suspension or termination of your project. Please note that the IRB reserves the right, at anytime, to observe you and any associated researchers as they conduct the project and audit research records associated with this project.

Please refer to your docket number (#05-141) when contacting our office regarding this project.

We wish you the very best of luck in your research and look forward to working with you again. If you have questions or concerns, please contact me at 325-3294 or at tarwood@research.msstate.edu.

Sincerely,

Tracy S. Arwood
Director

cc: Dwight Hare