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EXAMINING THE INFLUENCE OF DISPOSITIONS AND PRACTICES  
ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT OF ELEMENTARY  
PRINCIPALS IN TITLE I SCHOOLS

by

Traci Lightfoot M.Ed.

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Traci Lightfoot, M.Ed.

APPROVED BY

---

Antonio Corrales, Ed.D., Chair

---

Michelle Peters, Ed.D., Committee Member

---

Jennifer Grace, Ph.D., Committee Member

---

Randall O'Brien, Ed.D., Committee Member

RECEIVED/APPROVED BY THE COLLEGE OF EDUCATION:

---

Joan Y. Pedro, PhD, Associate Dean

---

Mark D. Shermis, PhD, Dean

### **Dedication**

I dedicate this to my grandmother Lessie Mae Greggs. Thank for you instilling strength and commitment, while providing a strong role model as a businesswoman of your time. The impressions left at an early age live on in me. The unwavering love for me from you and Percy Lee is felt still. I miss you. Until we meet again, I will always love you.

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## ABSTRACT

### EXAMINING THE INFLUENCE OF DISPOSITIONS AND PRACTICES ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT OF ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS IN TITLE I SCHOOLS

Traci Lightfoot  
University of Houston-Clear Lake 2023

Dissertation Chair: Antonio Corrales, Ed.D.

This qualitative phenomenological study examined the influence of leadership dispositions and practices on student achievement in Title I schools. Because of the many duties principals are asked to undertake, it is often difficult for principals to assume the role of instructional leadership. The role of principal has expanded to engage an explicit focus on increasing student achievement through equitable outcomes (DeMatthews et al., 2020). Despite education reforms of the past few decades, more low income children tend to underachieve and drop out of school than do their middle- and high-income peers (Maxwell, 2016). According to Mestry (2017), ineffective leaders are often unskilled and unprepared and are placed in or continue a cycle of having low-performing schools. Since Title I schools predominantly cater to poor students, often the harmful effect of poverty on the school climate is particularly more pronounced compared to the non-Title I

schools (Roy, 2019). Educational leaders and staffs in Title I schools need to believe that they can make a difference in their students' lives as well as make the students believe that they have the capability to become successful in school and life (Benson, 2003). Therefore, a gap may exist for principals to utilize distinct actions across multiple leadership domains to effectively manage the operations and promote high quality instruction that increases academic achievement in high poverty schools..

However, defining and clarifying the principal's impact on campus performance continues to remain challenging (Hutton, 2019). A growing concern among educators is whether emerging leaders are equipped to face these complexities in public schooling and advance the rights and education of all students (Alex, 2023; Spring, 2011).

A deeper understanding of poverty and the value of invested adults in student's future success in life, can be a valuable resource in challenging communities to promote sustainable progress in closing the achievement gap.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Public schools are complex educational systems. Nearly 12 million children under 18 lived in poverty in 2020 making them critical clientele of the public school system in the United States (Kerrigan, 2018). The formal education experience of children of poverty are usually characterized by higher rates of school failure, developmental challenges and delays, high absenteeism and tardiness, and low scores and graduation rates when compared to their middle-class peers (Fontes, 2003). Learning institutions nationwide are faced with the complexities of under resourced communities that introduce the challenge to educate a majority of students who come from poverty (Bacon, 2008). Title I schools cater mostly to the poor population of the United States with the majority of students coming from families with low socioeconomic backgrounds (Neuberger & Riddle, 2015).

Over the past 20 years, legislation has emphasized that student achievement is one measure of leadership effectiveness (Pannell & McBrayer, 2022). The school principal is a critical component involved in the collecting and sharing of data toward a growth cycle of school improvement and reform, especially in high poverty schools (Fullan, 2007; Reeves, 2003). Improved academic achievement is influenced by principal leadership performance (Oyugi & Gogo, 2019). Khanyl and Naidoo (2020) examined the relationship between principal leadership and improved student learning. Their findings suggested that the school principalship is one of the most influential factors in student achievement behind a teacher. There have not been any documented instances of troubled schools being turned around without intervention by a powerful leader (Krasnoff, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004).

Hutton (2019) reported that researchers have attempted to unpack the characteristics of high-performing schools by examining evaluation tools, principal preparation programs, state guidelines, and principal supervisor perception. Hence, the ability to quantify the effectiveness of principal performance has been a continued challenge (Hutton, 2019). The search for research-based methods of school improvement would be served by examining leadership styles and practices for their effect on student achievement. The present study contributes to previous research related to instructional leadership as an important variable for the success in student achievement in Title I schools.

### **Research Problem**

The roles and responsibilities of the principalship are challenging and in constant evolution. The evolution of federal policy known as The NCLB Act is significant because it placed focus on boosting the performance of certain student populations, such as English-language learners, students with disabilities, and minority children of poverty in K-12 that the ESEA initiated (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Title 1 funding is a source of funding that supports initiatives to close the achievement gap in high poverty schools around the country. However, the problem is that not all schools are finding positive results in using the additional funds to find appropriate success.

Once assuming this role, many principals feel ill-prepared due to lack of the foundational leadership skills for managing the numerous demands of successfully leading a campus evidenced by lagging student performance (Hermann et al., 2019). Alkaabi and Almaamari (2020) explained that principals were once classified as building managers. Federal legislation placing pressure on public education to close achievement gaps and increase equitable outcomes among all student groups and higher standards for student achievement has led effective school and school improvement research to suggest

that in order for schools to be effective, principals must become instructional leaders (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

The evidence indicated that poor children from financially disadvantaged homes beginning school academically and behaviorally behind their more affluent peers, creating barriers to equality that creates widening achievement gap (Duncan et al., 2013). Closing the achievement gap existing among students identified as low socioeconomic prompting higher numbers of literate and capable citizens that will keep the country competitive is the goal of public education.

While teacher efficacy (confidence in one's ability to impact student performance) is considered the primary factor for improving student outcomes, school leadership is the second most influential factor (Pannell & McBrayer, 2022). Findings of this study are expected to contribute to the body of knowledge needed to assist principals in becoming more effective leaders in increasing student achievement for those children living in poverty.

Principals of schools in the days before accountability and standards can no longer function as building managers managing tasks, adhering to district rules, carrying out regulations and avoiding mistakes (Neumerski et al., 2018). Gupton (2003) reported that a "new" principal has emerged as a result of the accountability and standards movement. Branch and colleagues (2013) studied the relative effect of teachers and principals in schools. Using techniques that measure "value added" to student outcomes, and applying the calculation to the whole school, the data revealed that teachers affect only their own students while principals affect all students in the school (Branch et. al., 2013).

A major impact of ESSA is how it has changed the way most principals and teachers approach instruction in the classroom. A principal's leadership style influences

the culture of learning on a campus in order to meet the state's accountability criteria. Research shows that a principal's strategic actions can impact a variety of teacher characteristics, from job satisfaction and efficacy to engagement levels and academic emphasis (Bird, Wang, Watson, & Murray, 2009). Since accountability currently consists of closing the achievement gap among sub-populations, research is now leaning towards identifying school factors that affect student achievement within the scope of a school leaders control (McGuigan & Hoy, 2006).

By contrast, Fullan (2007) reported schools with low performing students have scripted curricula, content scope and sequence, and test preparation practices that do not reflect professional learning that leads to academic growth. As a result of ESSA, principals in Texas public schools are rated based on students' scores from the Texas Education Agency's (TEA) ELA and mathematics assessments. Under the head of school leadership, observed in International Baccalaureate schools, teacher's productivity will be a contributing factor for student achievement, because the effectiveness of the principal can make a real difference in the classroom (Mendels & Mitgang, 2013). The accountability system has caused leaders of schools that were once considered acceptable and high performing to track the performance of all student groups. Conversely, the system prompts school leaders in high poverty schools and economically deprived neighborhoods to examine a broader range of influences to ensure that the academic achievement gap is closed in all tested areas in spite of all barriers.

Researchers agreed that teachers of high achieving and high-gain schools expect their school leaders to be more active participants in teacher learning and development versus becoming the expert. This is especially true in elementary schools where principals and teachers are required to be highly knowledgeable generalists, skilled in all content they teach (Bamburg & Andrews, 1991; Lowenhaupt & McNeill, 2018).

Principals today must be particularly positioned to support and drive the implementation of rigorous instructional standards in schools. The search for research-based methods of school improvement would be served by examining leadership dispositions and practices of principals in high poverty schools for their effect on student achievement that is measured by a high stakes accountability system.

It is important to study the practices and strategies of a leader and train principals since their main role consists of serving as an instructional leader and enhancing student performance. Because of the many duties principals are asked to undertake, it is often difficult for principals to assume the role of instructional leadership. According to Masumoto and Brown-Welty (2009), a gap may exist for principals to span across numerous leadership domains with distinct actions to close the achievement gap between the performance of minority children of low socioeconomic backgrounds and their nonminority counterparts from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. School leaders are more likely to report greater incidence of behavior difficulties and increased levels of anxiety and depression among students from poverty backgrounds, presenting increased obstacles to raising positive student outcomes (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007).

### **Significance of the Study**

The research suggested that school leadership matters. Making an intentional shift from being a traditional building manager to an instructional leader has made all the difference. Instructional leadership focuses on targeted instructional strategies, purposeful professional development, and continued leadership development for both teachers and instructional correlates with expanded student learning and student achievement (Marzano, 2003).

Instructional leaders make more informed instructional decisions and model informed dispositions to address marginalized communities. A framework for Tiered II

leadership development highlights strategies that have the potential to focus principals of schools serving populations of poverty. Allee-Herndon and Roberts (2019) highlighted the impact that poverty has on students and their ability to succeed in the classroom. Their findings stated that poverty clearly affects students in a number of ways. Its effects can be seen in poor health stemming from malnutrition, homelessness, lack of food, and lack of access to medical treatment. Jenson reports that poor children often live in unstable households affecting their mental capabilities when under constant stress. Their physiology puts students in a constant survival state when adrenal glands become overtaxed, and thinking capacity shuts down to varying extents (Jenson, 2009).

This study discusses the challenges educational institutions are faced with when educating students of poverty. Bacon (2008) contended schools were traditionally designed to serve the middle class who have the tools to provide the types of experiences that increase the chances of success in school. Families of poverty lack tangible resources like computers and access to the internet, access to which is necessary learning. In addition, high-poverty schools are underfunded and have limited access to resources to support students in need. Schools need to stay engaged and recognize that these families are struggling to overcome the complex socioeconomic challenges to keep their children in school. Even with the increasing changes in complex student demographics, there are schools that are finding success in closing the achievement gap even in high poverty environments. This study will help understand how elementary principals interpret their leadership dispositions and practices that enable their schools to move the academic needle toward improving student outcomes in Title 1 schools.



## **Research Purpose and Questions**

The purpose of this study was to examine how principals' perceptions of leadership dispositions and practices influence student achievement in Title 1 schools.

The study addressed the following research questions:

How do principals in Title I elementary schools perceive their beliefs about poverty influencing outcomes to increase student achievement?

How do principals in Title I elementary schools describe strategies used to foster common vision through collaboration and promote positive culture to increase student achievement?

What characteristics of leaders do principals in Title I elementary schools perceive are important to build trust with teachers to increase student achievement?

What leadership practices do principals in Title I elementary schools employ that are perceived to increase student achievement?

## **Definitions of Key Terms**

*Achievement Gap*: Achievement gap is the disparity of educational outcome between groups of students (Mcmaster & Cook, 2018).

*Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965*: President Lyndon Baines Johnson introduced a bill in 1965 with the vision to provide "full educational opportunity" to every student across the nation. The act allocated grants to provide resources and scholarships to poor students through state educational institutions to improve the educational outcome for all (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

*ESSA*: Legislation passed by Congress in 2015 called *Every Student Succeeds Act* to replace *NCLB of 2001*. ESSA pared back the federal role in K-12 education that spawned NCLB policy born to improve outcomes for all students (Zinskie & Rea, 2016).

*Hidden rules:* Knowledge of the unspoken cues from a group, culture, or race of people (Payne, 2008).

*Leadership Model:* Kouzes and Posner (2012) defined a collection of practices and behaviors; (a) challenging the process, (b) inspiring a shared vision, (c) enabling others to act, (d) modeling the way, and (e) encouraging the heart; which serve as guidance for leaders to accomplish their achievements as components of transformational leadership (Taylor, 2002).

*Leadership style:* Omalayo (2007) defined leadership as a process of social influence. The style of the leader is utilized to seek the voluntary participation of subordinates in order to reach organization goals.

*No Child Left Behind (NCLB):* A reauthorization of ESEA in 2002 by President G.W. Bush that uses state-mandated high-stakes testing as the measure of achievement and holds public schools accountable for the performance of the students (Lahaye & Jenkins, 2015).

*Poverty:* An annual family income of approximately \$23,850 or less for a family of four (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023).

*Relationships/Role models:* Having frequent access to adult(s) who are appropriate, nurturing to children, and who do not engage in self-destructive behavior (Payne, 2008).

*School Accountability-* the process of evaluating school performance on the basis of student performance measures-is increasingly prevalent around the world (Figlio & Loeb, 2011).

*Socioeconomic status (SES):* Socioeconomic status refers to the access a person has to resources including financial, cultural, social, and human capital (National Center for Health, 2012).

*Title I:* Additional funding given to schools with a high number of low-income students to assist students in meeting high academic standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

### **Conclusion**

This chapter provided an overview of the need for the study, significance of the problem, research purpose and questions, and key definitions pertaining to this study. History has recorded the significance of the roles and responsibilities of the job of principals that demands accountability to shape equitable outcomes for all students. This study is designed to augment the existing body of research by examining the perceptions of what is required of principals in high poverty elementary schools in this high stakes testing age and exposing any gaps that exist for sustainable school improvement systems. Chapter II will focus on Title I funded schooling, the impact of poverty on student achievement, and the importance of principal dispositions and practices in urban schools.

## CHAPTER II:

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The school principal is the leader of an educational organization and, according to the current trend, is defined by his/her purposefulness and positive impact on the achievement of the students (Ramalho et al., 2010). With the increased accountability demands and the expectation that schools prepare all students to be college and career ready, it is critical for school principals to be able to lead their schools in a manner that will inspire, intellectually stimulate, and elevate school cultures so teachers are equipped to meet the multiple challenges facing public education (Bass & Avolio, 1990; U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

Title I schools are often hard to staff due to lack of student achievement, parental support, administrative support, and student behaviors (Ingersoll, 2004). One of the constant issues in education is how fast teachers are leaving the profession (Zhang & Zeller, 2016). In addition, many teachers choose to leave schools serving large concentrations of poor, low-performing, and non-White students (Hanushek, 2016; Hess & Leal, 2001). Though Title I schools receive funding that can be utilized in ways they deem most effective, school leaders and districts are faced with the mounting challenge of closing the achievement gap in which some see success and many do not. More recent reforms over the past few decades have expanded the role of the principal to a more explicit focus on instruction, school improvement, and equity for all students (DeMatthews et al., 2020).

Today's school leaders must strike a balance to be proficient in their roles since they are responsible for ensuring that all students have access to an equitable education, and that all teachers have access to improving their managerial and pedagogical skills to increase student performance. Hallinger and Heck (1996) stated that a school leader's

impact on student learning is mainly mediated through other people; staff, teachers, and students; in addition to school climate and systems. Fullan (2001) stated that school leaders play a crucial role in strengthening school personnel and the community of schools. It is necessary for a principal in Title I schools to be knowledgeable and effective in meeting the demands of the state's accountability system and possess an understanding of the under resourced communities they serve. The principal can play a key role in fostering a productive learning environment in the school by providing encouragement to the students, support to the teachers, and by building a trusting relationship with the key stakeholders (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012).

The goal of this literature was to analyze the relationship between principals' understanding of students and families of poverty and how they influence their dispositions and practices around schooling. The chapter begins by discussing legislation and the foundations of Title I funding in public schools. The chapter then moves to the analysis of children from poverty. Then this review explores how leadership of the principal directly relates to the state and federal accountability to measure success of students by high stakes testing. This literature review is focused on principals' perceptions of leadership dispositions and practices that influence student achievement in Title 1 schools.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical foundation of this study is built upon the theory of Kouzes and Posner's Exemplary Leadership Model (2002). Kouzes and Posner refined the understanding of transformational leadership that had been previously defined as characteristics of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Avolio, 1993). The research questions for this study came from the assumption that leadership is not a position but rather a collection of

practices and dispositions. The emphasis of this model is that these practices produce leader-follower trust that is central for transformational leadership. These practices include challenging the process, inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to act, modeling the way, and encouraging the heart that guides school leaders to do extraordinary things that inspires people to get work done (Posner & Kouzes, 1993). For this reason, the leadership practices and dispositions of principals in Title I schools were examined as the variables of interest in this study.

Louis and Wahlstrom (2011) described the leadership of the principal as a key factor in the support of student achievement. As outlined in the literature, the history of the principal has been influenced by time and experience as the educational paradigm has evolved. Gareis and Tschannen-Moran (2007) reported that schools cannot succeed without good principal's leadership.

Leaders seek to empower others by sharing information and data, seeking their input into solving problems, and collaborating along the way, therefore building trust (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). Ultimately, effective leaders trust others to support the work of the organization and impress upon them the fact that they do make a difference. Both horizontal and vertical forms of capacity exist. As Fullan (2007) noted, "Capacity building involves developing the collective ability—dispositions, skills, knowledge, motivation, and resources—to act together to bring about positive change" (p. 4).

### **Literature Gap**

Educational research and literature have placed great emphasis on the leadership of the principal and the school climate (LaRoche, 2014; Pulleyn, 2012). Their research asserted that there is an undeniable relationship between the school climate and the leadership of the principal in middle and elementary schools. According to Nahavandi (2002), a person's leadership style may affect overall organizational effectiveness and or

performance. Branch et al. (2013) found a strong correlation between the effectiveness of a leader and his or her leadership style. Lowe (2010) performed a study on the leadership practices of the principal and the school climate in high-poverty Title I elementary schools that made adequate yearly progress (AYP) for 3 years. There is a gap in the literature that examines principal understanding of the impoverished communities in which they serve that shapes positive school climate that ultimately impacts student achievement.

### **Title I Schools**

A review of historical events, including state and federal law, provided a foundation that recognizes the need for a free public education that invests in generations to become a literate work force for the larger society. In 1965, President Johnson believed that “full educational opportunity” should be “our first national goal.” The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, 2018) was part of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society which created a clear role for the federal government in K-12 policy. Title I schools cater mostly to the poor population of the United States (Neuberger & Riddle, 2015). For the past 5 decades, the underachievement of economically disadvantaged students is the most persistent problem of the US education system (Barton & Coley, 2010).

The majority of the students in Title I schools come from families with a low socioeconomic background (Neuberger & Riddle, 2015). Students coming from poor households need to overcome barriers to equality in education that often have a detrimental effect and keep them out of their schools (Hess & Leal, 2001), and thus result in an achievement gap. Branch et al. (2013) reported that the leadership of the principals was one of the crucial contributing factors for the progress of the turnaround in seven low-performing Title I schools they studied. According to Hagel (2014), the school

principal impacts student achievement significantly by the way he or she manages a school and helps to establish a positive school climate. Historically, achieving school success with students of color had not been a priority of public schooling until the last 50 years. In fact, ensuring that all students are successful is federally mandated.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, was enacted, in part, to force the closure of the achievement gap between the disadvantaged and minority students that live below the poverty line. Despite multiple perspectives or problems that may exist with the No Child Left Behind Act, it is a legislative response to the pervasive failure of schools and districts to provide a high-quality education that ensures the equitable outcomes for all students. Thus, with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, states are now mandated to establish accountability systems that require schools to close the achievement gap or, in other words, to educate everyone's child. However, educating everyone's child has not historically been the dominant national norm. Most schools have been doing an adequate job of providing a quality education for White middle-class students, but this has not been the case for students of color, especially those living in poverty.

In fact, there is an abundance of data and research that show that students of poverty and of color are performing at lower achievement levels than their White middle-class counterparts (Dyson, 2011; Hartas, 2011; Hopson & Lee, 2011; Jensen, 2013; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Rijlaarsdam et al., 2013). Multiple studies have found hardship in personal life and social conditions of its pupils may negatively influence the school climate and lead to lower student achievement and dropping out of school at higher numbers (Hanushek, 2016; Hopson & Lee, 2011; Ullucci & Howard, 2015).

To date, the reform movement era from the late 1960s through the '80s has produced research that has linked effective leadership to school improvement (Branch et



al., 2013; Jensen, 2013; Kouzes & Posner, 2002). Notably, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 was one of the most significant changes in federal education policy assuming that government take a controversial but distinct place in educational policy. Ojifusa (2015) stated that though ESSA constrained the power of federal outreach in K-12 schooling, the government raised expectations for every state and all local educational agencies and provided additional funding for children who needed intensive improvement with their academic progress. According to Figlio and Loeb (2011), school accountability is a process utilized to evaluate the performance of a school based upon student performance outcomes.

### **The Significance of Legislation**

The NCLB Act was significant because it placed focus on boosting the performance of certain student populations, such as English-language learners, students with disabilities, and minority children of poverty in K-12 that the ESEA initiated (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). McGuinn (2016) reported the common vision sought to advance American competitiveness and close the achievement gap between poor minority students and their more advanced peers.

According to the U.S. Department of Education's *Numbers and Types of Public Elementary and Secondary Schools from the Common Core of Data School Year 2010-11*, 48,990 schools of 66,646 that received Title I funds utilized a school-wide model to increase student achievement. Hence, the ESEA's effectiveness in closing student achievement gaps has been questionable. Under NCLB, accountability has hinged entirely on standardized test scores, a single number that has been used to determine whether students graduate or teachers keep their jobs. Garcia and Thornton (2015) said the problem is that a single test score is like a blinking check engine light on the dashboard. This light can tell us something is wrong with our car, but not how to fix what

is wrong (Garcia & Thornton, 2015). This is also true of test scores. The scores can tell educators that there is a problem, but it does not indicate how to fix it. According to Garcia and Thornton, NCLB did not look at the students holistically, and this is a prime reason for failure to improve all students academically.

Although achieving desired outcomes is crucial to improving education, and funding is necessary to provide for the programs needed, the processes that make those outcomes possible are equally important (Cascio & Reber, 2013; Garcia & Thornton, 2015). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the poverty rate in America was an estimated 11.8% (Kerrigan, 2018). Studies have shown that poor children from financially disadvantaged homes begin school academically and behaviorally behind their more affluent peers, and a gap continues to widen over the years (Duncan et al., 2013).

### **Effects of Poverty on Student Achievement**

Poverty is relative and exists in all races all over the world but children growing up in poverty present challenges for all educators. The literature is used to understand the challenges and reasons why many children of poverty achieve poorly in school and identify the conditions to improve teaching and learning to promote academic improvement in high poverty educational settings. Neuberger and Riddle (2015) reported an estimated 16.1% of children lived in poverty in 2020, marking an increase from 14.4% in 2019. Schools are assisted with federally funded dollars under Title I in which 85% or more of students receive free or reduced lunch to meet the educational needs of those living under the poverty line in the United States. In school year 2017-18, about 37% of public charter schools were high-poverty schools, compared with 25% of traditional public schools. In contrast, the percentages of schools that were low-poverty, mid-low poverty, and mid-high poverty were higher among traditional public schools, 18%, 27%, and 25%, respectively (Neuberger & Riddle, 2015).

Representing one of the most rapidly growing populations in public education, students living in poverty exhibit a higher degree of school failure, present developmental delays and difficulties, earn lower test scores, and are victim to lower graduation rates. According to Mattingly et al. (2012), poverty determination is based on the U.S. Office of Management and Budget income thresholds. The poverty line for a family of four (two adults, two children), was \$22,811 in 2011 and increased to \$28,000 by 2019 (Mattingly et al., 2012). Children have been the age group most likely to live below the poverty line, with young children being particularly vulnerable (Mattingly et al., 2012). Children of poverty enter education behind their peers. The underachievement of impoverished children has remained a persistent problem that is commonly referred to as closing the achievement gap in the American education system (Barton & Coley, 2010).

A great number of students in Title I schools come from low socioeconomic backgrounds and present special challenges to teachers in multiple ways (Neuberger & Riddle, 2015). Berzin (2010) found that parental education had a significant effect on academic achievement. As an example, the mother's education level had a 20% higher affect than the father's education level on the academic outcomes of adolescents (Berzin, 2010).

Parent education attainment level is a factor attributed to the disparity of impoverished children entering school behind their peers. The U.S. Department of Education (2019) reported that although just over half of children under 18 lived in households in which one parent had completed at least a college degree (an associate degree or higher), almost half lived in households in which no parent had a college degree. Specifically, 9% lived in households in which no parent had completed high school, 19% lived in households in which the highest level of education was high school completion. The poverty rate for children under age 18 was highest for those living in

mother-only households (37%). Of the 15 states that had poverty rates higher than the national average, the majority (12) were in the South; Texas was one of them (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Books, newspapers, and reading material are often absent in homes of impoverished learners. Households headed by women are more likely to experience poverty than those headed by men, according to Capra (2009). A child born to a high school dropout has one in 17 chances of earning a bachelor's degree (Hanushek, 2016). Berzin (2010) suggested that under resourced students lack inherent motivation and possess a low ceiling of aspiration. He further stated that the realities of the poor are based on day-to-day survival based in a short-term existence to maintain the lifestyles to which they are accustomed, in lieu of higher education pursuit (Berzin, 2010).

Children raised in poverty often start their life with a barrier toward success in life. Students from poor households face overwhelming challenges in their daily life compared to their counterparts who are not raised in poverty (Rijlaarsdam et al., 2013). Beegle's (2003) work discovered people who grew up in poverty but realized success through education attainment. The NCES (McFarland et al., 2019) data are congruent with multiple studies that support the theory that education is the best route out of a life of poverty (Hanushek, 2016; Hopson & Lee, 2011; Lacour & Tissington, 2011). The poverty rate for children under age 18 was highest for those households in which there was no parent that completed high school (43%) and lowest for those in households that either parent held a bachelor's or higher degree (4%) (McFarland et al., 2019).

Capra (2009) shared that children of poverty have increased environmental stressors that negatively impact students. Due to high numbers of children falling within these categories, devastating effects on childhood development and education exist (Bennett, 2008). Existing under the poverty level creates psychological effects that are stressful and damaging to a developing child growing into adulthood. The influences

growing into adulthood when basic needs of survival are not met along with complex family and community dynamics at play, create high levels of anxiety, resentment, and anger (Clifford et al., 2015; Wandell, 2012). Children from low socioeconomic backgrounds often demonstrate lagging academic performance. According to Bacon (2008), it is environmental deprivation of basic needs that creates the culture of poverty prompting the experiences of school failure, gangs, drugs, and violence. Poor neighborhoods are usually pervaded by crime, lack of education, unemployment, and lack of social support (Dyson, 2011). The environment at the home in under resourced communities is often not supportive of education. Lack of encouragement from parents, other family members, or friends to take school and benefits associated with it seriously is common for these children (Frempong et al., 2012). Many of the poor students come from single parent households where the parents cannot afford the time to support their children's education. As a result, the much-needed parental support is often nonexistent for them (Dyson, 2011). Students from impoverished neighborhoods also lack role models to look up to. This social and emotional stress creates instability, which in turn undermines their performance in school (Dyson, 2011). The plethora of issues influencing children of poverty manifest psychologically, physically, and socially.

The presence of local, state, and federal programs which emphasize child-centered services and programs services highlight family life patterns and life-styles of the under resourced contradict stimulating positive child development and contribute to lack of school readiness and inhibit a child's ability to succeed both academically and socially in the school environment (Hopson & Lee, 2011).

The literature goes into depth to examine why school can be an unsatisfactory experience for many students of poverty. Payne (2008) contends the generationally impoverished have their own culture, contrasting it as profoundly different from what

would be identified as the middle class. Professional individuals seek financial stability, home ownership, and provide for the wants as well as needs of their children as reported in the research on active parent involvement. These are value systems of the middle class (Rijlaarsdam et al., 2013). Moreover, middle class parents are assertive in regard to health and wellness. When looking at the wealthy, the focus on fitness is high compared to the other two economic categories. Conversely, parents who are poor are likely to be less healthy, both emotionally and physically, than those who are not poor (Adler et al., 1993). Additionally, lack of trust and limited experiences provided in the home contributes to high absenteeism, tardiness, and dropout rates exceeding those of middle-class students (Fontes, 2003).

Parental irritability and depressive symptoms are associated with more conflictual interactions with adolescents, leading to less satisfactory emotional, social, and cognitive development (Wandell, 2012, Jenson, 2009). Furthermore, Wandell (2012) noted that poor parental mental health is associated with impaired parent-child interactions and less provision of learning experiences in the home (Ferguson et al., 2007). Raised in these circumstances, high risk factors increase the likelihood that impoverished children will develop mental and physical health issues. Additionally, Frempong et al. (2012) reported negative feelings partnered with multiple stressors can lead to violence and drug, alcohol, and physical abuse.

Children of poverty suffer from access to a quality education. The number of students receiving free/reduced lunch serves as a measure for students of low-socioeconomic (SES) status because in order to qualify for free/reduced lunch, certain financial requirements must be satisfied based on the federal poverty level. Schools must meet accountability standards in spite of a campus' demographics, student socioeconomic status, and lack of materials and resources to provide intensive instructional interventions

for scholars. Schools (student results) must perform in ways that are measurable and visible to all. The ESEA Act was created to increase fairness and equity in student opportunities and achievement (McLaughlin, 1975). Neumerski (2013) agreed that the act served as a catalyst of change in public American education and addressed poverty and a commitment to an equal education for all.

### **Impact of School Leadership**

Public schools in the US are under intense pressure to increase student achievement. From the inception of early school improvement programs, the achievement gap continues to be a persistent issue in US education (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Center for Public Education, 2016; The Education Trust, 2010; Lowe, 2010; Neuberger & Riddle, 2015). The importance of the school principal is at the center.

Extensive research about student achievement identified poverty as one of the major factors that limits success for low socioeconomic students (Dyson, 2011). A body of research has documented the difference in the success of high-achieving Title I schools is the effective leadership of the principal (Branch et al., 2013). Because principals greatly influence school “conditions” through developing organizational structures, shaping school culture, and developing school-wide policy and practice, the impact of an individual leader on the school’s climate and student achievement level is an important focus (Branch et al., 2013; Grissom et al. 2019).

Despite the fact that poverty has a negative influence on student achievement, there are high achieving Title I schools as well. A report by the Education Trust (2010) identified over 3,000 such schools in the nation. The Education Trust reported that there are 3,592 high-performing, high-poverty schools; 2,305 high-performing, high-minority; and 1,320 high-performing, high-poverty and high-minority schools in the United States serving over 2 million students. The effective school research pointed toward the crucial

role of the principal in establishing a school climate for the high academic performance of the students (McKinney et al., 2015). Shouppe and Pate (2010) conducted research in middle schools and asserted that there is an undeniable relationship between the school climate and the leadership of the principal.

Given the multiple roles and responsibilities of today's school principal and the role the principal plays in leading school improvement, various research has been conducted on the characteristics, skills, and practices of effective school principals. According to Figlio and Kenny (2009), school-based accountability emerged in the 1980s to measure school performance in public education. Ball (2001) stated that accountability can consist of internal and external factors that are informed by the priorities, constraints, and climate set by the policy environment. Allen (2015) reported that given the current focus on school accountability, the study of school leadership is a needed area of focus by researchers. Considering increased pressure for school improvement in an accountability age, transformational leadership is one of the most prominent contemporary theories regarding leadership (Sergiovanni, 2007).

Schools in the improvement process often examine the various leadership factors that play a significant role in school effectiveness (Bruggencate et al., 2012). Transformational leadership arose as a new leadership design when James V. Downton first introduced the term in 1973 (Ugochukwu, 2021). According to Ugochukwu (2021), James Burns expanded this novel theory in 1978 by proposing that articulated vision and personality were traits that individuals would be encouraged to follow. Burns' (1978) work provided a solid footing with the earliest conception of transformational leadership as a person's ability to engage others for the purpose of building motivation. A transformational leader's focus is typically on long-term outcomes, uniting teachers in the pursuit of goals that inspires staff to align to their vision (Burns, 1978).



Principals of schools in the days before accountability and standards can no longer function as building managers managing tasks, adhering to district rules, carrying out regulations, and avoiding mistakes (Neumerski et al., 2018). Gupton (2003) reported that a “new” principal has emerged as a result of the accountability and standards movement. Branch and colleagues (2013) studied the relative effect of teachers and principals in schools. Using techniques that measured “value added” to student outcomes, and applying the calculation to the whole school, the data revealed that teachers affect only their own students while principals affect all students in the school (Branch et al., 2013).

A major impact of ESSA is how it has changed the way most principals and teachers approach instruction in the classroom. Student achievement is the main core of accountability (Albritten et al., 2004). Today’s principals are held accountable for being instructional leaders who are knowledgeable about the current accountability system. Changing the principal’s role to instructional leader is needed to improve student achievement and meet new and rigorous state accountability standards. By contrast, Fullan (2007) reported schools with low performing students have scripted curricula, content scope and sequence, and test preparation practices that do not reflect professional learning that leads to academic growth.

As a result of ESSA, principals in Texas public schools are rated based on students’ scores from the Texas Education Agency’s (TEA, 2021b) ELA and mathematics assessments. Under the head of school leadership, observed in International Baccalaureate schools, teacher’s productivity will be a contributing factor for student achievement, because the effectiveness of the principal can make a real difference in the classroom (Mendels & Mitgang, 2013). The accountability system has caused leaders of schools that were once considered acceptable and high performing to track the

performance of all student groups. Conversely, the system prompts school leaders in high poverty schools and economically deprived neighborhoods to examine a broader range of influences to ensure that the academic achievement gap is closed in all tested areas in spite of all barriers.

Bamburg and Andrews (1991) agreed that teachers of high achieving and high-gain schools expect their school leaders to be more active participants in teacher learning and development versus becoming the expert. This is especially true in elementary schools where principals and teachers are required to be highly knowledgeable generalists, skilled in all content they teach (Lowenhaupt & McNeill, 2018). As developers and designers of professional learning activities and school schedules, overseers of resources evaluators, and leaders of campus culture, principals are particularly positioned to support and drive the implementation of rigorous instructional standards in schools. Accountability expectations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have impacted the crucial role of the principalship (Liljenberg & Andersson, 2020). The search for research-based methods of school improvement would be served by examining leadership styles and practices of principals in high poverty schools for their effect on student achievement that is measured by a high stakes accountability system.

Normore (2007) described “school leaders” as individuals who know how to support teacher professional experiences with their attitudes and behaviors provide cooperation and improvement in their practices and increase student achievement. As a result of extensive research on the practices and skills of effective leaders across professions, Kouzes and Posner (2002) have identified five practices and 10 corresponding commitments of effective leaders. The following sections will discuss each of the five practices in greater detail, providing insight into how the leadership practices identified by Kouzes and Posner (2002) relate to the role of the school principal.

### **Step 1: Modeling the Way**

Roy (2019) reported that in modeling the way, leaders go first, demonstrating commitment by example. Such leaders express themselves using their own words and actions, rather than relying on the words of others. Through modeling the way, effective leaders cultivate a culture in which people are committed and loyal as well as take pride in the organization and its work (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). In knowing oneself, a principal must have a solid understanding of her/his beliefs and values so that s/he can draw upon those as s/he works with and leads others (Roy, 2019). Transformational leaders who model the way demonstrate a commitment to the vision and goals of their schools by their own walk, by building their credibility with consistency between words and deeds (Northouse, 2022; Allen, 2015). Such principals spend time with teachers and students, paying attention to them and responding to their needs (Kouzes & Posner, 1993, 2002). Shannon and Bylsma (2007) found that highly effective principals are extremely visible throughout the school building, demonstrating the importance of the teaching and learning process and activities taking place under their direction. Finally, Shannon and Bylsma found that effective principals listen to others, keep their commitments, and respect others.

### **Step 2: Inspire a Shared Vision**

In developing a vision for school improvement, stakeholders should examine the goals of the school, the data which support the need for improvement, the initiatives that could address the areas for improvement, and the results expected as a result of the improvement initiative (Taylor, 2002). As Kouzes and Posner (2002) indicated, “Envisioning the future is a process that begins with passion, feeling, concern, or an inspiration that something is worth doing” (p. 124). Recognizing they cannot lead an organization to success alone, effective leaders successfully communicate the need for a

team effort in accomplishing a shared vision (Abutineh et al., 2009.) Effective leaders listen to their teams, encourage them to commit to the organization's work, and assist them to feel satisfied as contributing members of the organization (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). Roy (2019) reported that in terms of schools, shared visions should be developed by various stakeholders (i.e., administrators, educators, staff, students, parents, community members) and should inform the direction that schools or school systems take in pursuit of school improvement (Allen et al., 2015). While effective leaders are deeply committed to their beliefs, values, and principles, Kouzes and Posner (2002) further stated they are equally as committed to working with their constituents to develop and foster a shared vision with a positive and hopeful outlook.

Following the development of the vision for improvement, the vision should be communicated to all individuals affiliated with the school (Taylor, 2002).

Communication of the vision to all stakeholders is critical if school improvement is to manifest itself and penetrate the school and/or school system (Bass & Avolio, 1990). When individuals involved in a change effort perceive a sense of personal ownership in the initiative, they often demonstrate a greater level of commitment (Bird et al., 2009; Taylor, 2002).

Developing ownership of the initiative fosters individual commitment; therefore, transformational leaders strive to empower others by involvement and input (Fullan, 2007). Finally, as Taylor (2002) noted, principals must utilize their leadership skills and practices to inspire others to commit to the vision and goals of the school while by energizing and harnessing emotional resources embodied in the members of the school community.

### **Step 3: Challenge the Process**

Leaders who challenge the process are continuously searching for opportunities to improve and innovate, experimenting in their moves with little fear of taking risks (Roy, 2015). Effective principals are proactive and open to new ideas and innovations, yearning to “make something happen” (Abutineh et al., 2009). Transformation principals understand mistakes are a part of a continuum toward success and support their staff members in trying innovative ideas such as new curriculum, instructional strategies, and assessments as they strive to meet the needs of all children (Allen et al., 2015). Ultimately, leaders must build a commitment to the challenge of reaching high expectations, supporting constituents along the way (Abutineh et al., 2009). Principals also need to encourage their students to plug in to the process and take advantage of all learning opportunities, both in and out of school (Kouzes & Posner, 2002).

### **Step 4: Enable Others to Act**

Taylor (2002) stated that effective leaders who enable others to act are committed to fostering collaboration among all constituents and work to strengthen the capacity of others. As Kouzes and Posner (2002) noted, “Collaboration is the critical competency for achieving and sustaining high performance” (p. 242). In fostering collaboration, transformative principals establish a culture of trust, interdependence, and interaction by creating opportunities for various interactions so that individuals can network with one another, sharing their experiences and expertise as well as celebrating their accomplishments (Abutineh et al., 2009). As Kouzes and Posner stated, “Leaders accept and act on the paradox of power: we become most powerful when we give our power away” (p. 284).

### **Summary of Findings**

Leaders seek to empower others by sharing information and data, seeking their input into solving problems, and collaborating along the way, therefore building trust (Abutineh et al., 2009; Bird et al., 2009). As Fullan (2007) noted, “Capacity building involves developing the collective ability—dispositions, skills, knowledge, motivation, and resources—to act together to bring about positive change” (p. 4). Ultimately, effective Title I principals must embrace the notion of trust in others to support the work of the organization and impress upon them the fact that they do make a difference.

Public schools are expected to educate all children by providing equal opportunities. Despite many government initiatives and legislative mandates, the achievement gap between the poor and the non-poor students is still a persistent issue in the United States (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Center for Public Education, 2016; The Education Trust, 2010; Lowe, 2010; Neuberger & Riddle, 2015). Extensive research in the educational arena identified poverty as one of the major inhibiting factors towards the success of these students (Dyson, 2011).

### **Conclusion**

This chapter presented a review of relevant literature relating to the importance of principal dispositions and practices in high-poverty schools and their relevance to student achievement in Title I schools. The following chapter will describe the methodology used by the researcher during the current study. Chapter III includes the operationalization of theoretical constructs, an overview of the research problem, research purpose and questions, research design, population and sampling selection, instrumentation, data collection procedures, data analysis techniques, privacy and ethical considerations, and limitations for this study.

### CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study is to examine how principals' perceptions of leadership dispositions and practices influence student achievement in Title 1 schools. Gray and Ross (2006) stated that a principal is held accountable for leadership actions that, if effective, correlate directly to student achievement. Additionally, this study aimed to gain new insight about leadership dispositions that include interpersonal skills and personal qualities that build trusting relationships and create positive learning environments to influence student outcomes. Phenomenological study allows the researcher to describe the common meaning for several individuals through analysis of their lived experience as insight that can directly affect policies, procedures, systems, structures, and future research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017).

A purposeful sample of 10 elementary school principals serving in Title I schools in a large urban district in Southeast Texas were solicited for this qualitative case study. Responses from the interview transcripts were analyzed using an inductive thematic coding process. This chapter presents an overview of the research problem, operationalization of theoretical constructs, research purpose and questions, research design, population and sampling selection, instrumentation used, data collection procedures, data analysis, privacy and ethical considerations, and the research design limitations of the study.

#### **Overview of the Research Problem**

Public education has a common goal: to produce literate and capable citizens to support the growth and capacity of the US. As previously discussed, the evidence suggests that children of poverty are academically and behaviorally behind their more

affluent peers. The gap continues to widen the older students become (Duncan et al., 2013). There are many government initiatives which require public education to focus on raising achievement for all students, such as ESSA. The connection continues to be made that for that to happen, school leadership must focus on instructional leadership practices (Bevans et al., 2007). These researchers agreed that for all students to experience equitable educational outcomes, the school leader has an expanded role requiring a deep understanding of instructional practice correlated with student achievement.

Schools involved in reform initiatives often examine leadership factors that play a significant role in school effectiveness (Bruggencate et al., 2012). According to Hauserman et al. (2013), the behaviors, skills, and qualities of transformational principals is critical to the success of public schools and understanding how the dynamics of school leadership impact the collective efficacy of a school staff is essential to impacting and sustaining change in schools. However, there are a number of viewpoints about educational leadership and its effect on effective schools and student achievement. With continued achievement gaps present among ethnic groups and low socioeconomic status, there is a need for research that identifies the relationship between transformational leadership and student achievement.

### **Research Purpose and Questions**

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of principals' perceptions of leadership dispositions and practices on student achievement in Title 1 elementary schools. The study addressed the following research questions:

How do principals in Title I elementary schools perceive their beliefs about poverty influencing outcomes to increase student achievement?



How do principals in Title I elementary schools describe strategies used to foster common vision through collaboration and promote positive culture to increase student achievement?

What characteristics of leaders do principals in Title I elementary schools perceive are important to build trust with teachers to increase student achievement?

What leadership practices do principals in Title I elementary schools employ that are perceived to increase student achievement?

### **Research Design**

For this qualitative study, a phenomenological design was used to examine how principals perceive their dispositions and practices influence student achievement in elementary Title I schools. The phenomenological research approach was selected for this qualitative study since the voice of the school principal is considered as the examining phenomenon. A phenomenological approach consists of an in-depth inquiry into a specific and complex phenomenon (the case), set within the context of the real world (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2013). Additionally, during this process, the researcher gains a deeper understanding of the elementary principal's perception by analyzing collected qualitative data related to several variables (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A purposeful sample of elementary principals from Title I schools from a large urban school district located in Southeast Texas was solicited to participate in interviews. Responses from the interview scripts were analyzed using an inductive thematic coding process.

### **Population and Sample**

The study was conducted in the state of Texas in a large urban school district in Southeast Texas. The participating district has 276 schools (eight early childhood, 160 elementary schools, 39 middle schools, 37 high schools, and 32 combined schools). Table

3.1 provides the student demographic data of the participating school district obtained from the *2020-2021 Facts and Figures* report (TEA, 2021a). The largest populations consist of Hispanics (61.8%) and African Americans (22.4%), with a large majority of the students being economically disadvantaged (79.0%).

**Table 3.1**

*District Student Demographic Data*

	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1. Race/Ethnicity		
African American	44,123	22.4
American Indian	345	0.2
Asian	8,660	4.4
Hispanic	121,786	61.8
Pacific Islander	138	0.1
White	19,035	9.7
Two or More Races	2,856	1.5
2. Students by Program		
Economically Disadvantaged	154,511	78.5
At-Risk	103,805	52.7
Special Education	16,238	8.3
Limited English Proficient	65,638	33.3
English as a Second Language	29,439	15.0
Bilingual	35,118	17.8
Gifted/Talented	31,472	16.0

Of the 274 principals in the school district, there are 160 elementary school principals who lead schools consisting of grades pre-kindergarten through fifth grade identified as Title I. Overall, the district serves 50,926 students in Title I elementary schools. For school leadership, there is a total of 274 principals whereas 58.4% of them are Title I elementary level principals. Table 3.2 presents the total number of principals in the entire district and proportion of them that lead elementary schools.

**Table 3.2**

*District Principal Demographic Data*

	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Total Principals	274	100
Elementary Title I	160	58.4
Middle Title I	47	17.1
High Title I	44	16.0
Combined/Other	31	11.3

### **Participant Selection**

A purposeful sample of elementary principals for this study consisted of 10 leaders in one urban Texas school district who have served as a campus leader for at least 2 consecutive years under the new A-F accountability system. I selected this group of 10 principals for a number of reasons. For one, I have a contextual knowledge of the school system where they currently work. There was a convenience which came from their participation in the study. For example, I had easy access to them. The purposive sampling strategy relies on the researcher's judgment when selecting participants of a population for a study and is effective when small numbers of participants serve as the

data source of the experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher will employ sound judgment to select participants that can support the purpose of the study and answer the research questions based on their lived experience. Every school district has a different set of variables which can affect the study results. The principals selected for this study were each leaders of a campus where 60% or more of the student population was identified as one of poverty due to economic status. At least 40% were identified as a minority.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the following data collection activities are foundational to qualitative research: (a) identification of site/individual, (b) establishing rapport, (c) sampling purposely, (d) collecting data, (e) recording information, (f) minimizing field issues, and (g) storing data securely. Prior to data collection, the researcher gained approval from the University of Houston Clear Lake's (UHCL's) Committee for Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS) and the school district in which the study took place (Appendix E). Next, the elementary school principals were contacted via email with information regarding the purpose of the study with a memo of formal introduction, the purpose of the study, and the process for conducting interviews (see Appendix A).

Interviews are often used in qualitative research to prove a firsthand descriptive account of the participants' perception (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) stated interviews can be semi-structured and used to facilitate a more focused investigation. The semi structured interview allows the facilitators to ask thought-provoking and follow-up questions for clarification (Creswell, 2015). Additionally, the researcher can use probing questions to support the data in an interview. One strategy ensuring the accuracy of information consists of using audio recording to

capture the information from the interview in its entirety. The researcher employed a semi-structured interview protocol that allows the researcher to live the participant's experience through information-rich cases from to learn about the issues important to the research purpose of the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

Qualitative data were collected via individual semi-structured interviews with each participating principal conducted via Zoom. The interview protocol consisted of 12 open-ended questions; adapted from a study conducted by Kouzes and Posner (2002) (see Appendix C).

The study examined transformational leadership that represented highly effective leadership practices. The five areas include challenging the process, inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to act, modeling the way, and encouraging the heart (Kouzes & Posner, 1993, 2002). Moreover, during the scripting process, Rev was used to assist with capturing the participant's exact words. Additionally, all participants received the information before the actual interview. Face-to-face and digital methods offered two approaches for the interview to gain insight or additional information. Finally, the researcher repeated questions and ensured the participants were comfortable during the process.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher reviewed and analyzed audio, video, and text data from interviews to explore participant responses (Mihas, 2019). Interview data were collected for the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between beliefs about students of poverty, strategies that promote positive school culture, and principals' perceptions of the characteristics and practices that increase student achievement. This qualitative research design utilized virtual semi-structured interviews that was recorded using the Zoom video recording application to capture participant perspectives. The

researcher charted the participant responses to capture the perspectives of school principals that expressed their own lived experiences, attitudes, behaviors, and unique accounts (Neubauer et al., 2019).

Utilizing Rev as a transcriber, the researcher reviewed all transcripts and interview notes to summarize responses and capture frequency of words and phrases to assign codes in order to describe the content (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Next, the codes generated were categorized to identify patterns or recurring themes that emerged across the different interviews relating to the phenomenon (Creswell, 2015). The researcher gave the data to participants to check for accuracy to support the data analysis of leadership actions and strategies expressed by principals as evidence for impact on student achievement. The participants were reminded that their responses would be kept confidential.

### **Qualitative Validity**

Internal validity and reliability in this qualitative research phenomenological design were conceptualized by trustworthiness, rigor, and quality (Neubauer, 2019). For the purposes of this study, reliability was assured through the charting of common themes based on the participants' responses. Mandal (2018) defined credibility as the believability, or the confidence placed in truth in research findings. The examination of trustworthiness is essential to ensure reliability in a qualitative study (Creswell, 2018).

When collecting data and implementing data analysis, the participant interviews narrated as personal truths were recorded and transcribed to ensure trustworthiness. Questions were presented in a sequential order that flowed logically to create a story about the participants' perception of principal dispositions and practices in Title I schools. Creswell (2018) reported ways that trustworthiness of a research study can be established. The researcher implemented the verification strategies of member checking

and peer examination to ensure the study's credibility in data collection. Member checking serves as a check and balance between the researcher and informant to ensure the true validity of the data collection (Creswell, 2018). Additionally, the researcher employed a colleague with content knowledge and background of the context of the research study as a peer examiner to ensure validity and reliability (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Transferability consists of research findings being applicable to other contexts and situations so they become meaningful to an outsider, according to Korstjens and Moser (2018). The researcher intends to share these findings with a variety of school systems that may benefit from this study to extend to other Title I leaders for professional learning and development. By describing a phenomenon in sufficient detail, the extent to which conclusions drawn are transferable to other times, settings, situations, and people can be evaluated (Neubauer, 2019).

Last, all research should also have dependability, since dependability is a significant factor in establishing trustworthiness. Korstjens and Moser (2018) noted that in qualitative research, dependability is related to the stability of the research findings over a period of time. If the study participants respond to the open-ended research questions in vivid detail, the study naturally becomes more dependable (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Other researchers can review the data gathered in this research study and arrive at similar interpretations of the findings.

### **Privacy and Ethical Considerations**

Prior to the collection of any data, the researcher secured approval from the UHCL's CPHS and the participating school district's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Beneficence was applied as an ethical principle considered in this study to ensure privacy of identity and confidentiality of the data through the use of pseudonyms (Creswell,

2018). The individual names of the participants were not used, nor the name of the school district in which this study was conducted. Informed consent was provided to all targeted participants with detailed information related to the purpose of the study, the interview process, and efforts to ensure confidentiality (see Appendix B). Signed informed consent documents which make the rewards and risks of participation clear in this study were collected prior to study participation.

Participants received an email prior to the interviews detailing the timeline for the study and notifying them that their participation was voluntary (see Appendix A). Once consent had been granted and interviews had been scheduled, participants were sent a Zoom link with a cover letter via email. The data collected were stored on a hard drive and flash drive that were password protected. The researcher will maintain the data for 5 years, as required by the CPHS and district guidelines. After the deadline has passed, the researcher will destroy all electronic data files associated with this study.

### **Research Design Limitations**

The limitations for this qualitative case study include the following: (a) participants reside in one state, (b) participants in this study represent a small number, and (c) interview data was contingent upon participants being honest. Finally, the potential bias in answers from interviewees has the possibility to limit this research, so the researcher needed to select participants without being biased, and chose those aligned to the research questions of the purpose of this study. Consequently, the findings and results from this study will not be generalizable to all school systems. Participants in the study were limited to principals from one state due to proximity and access for the researcher.



## **Conclusion**

This study was designed to augment the existing body of research by examining the perceptions of what is required of principals in high poverty elementary schools in this high stakes testing age and expose any gaps that existed for sustainable school improvement systems. Semi structured interview responses provided the narrative to determine common themes from elementary principal experiences and perceptions in Title I schools. Chapter IV will provide a detailed presentation of data collection and data analysis from this research study.

## CHAPTER IV:

### FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how principals' perceptions of leadership dispositions and practices influence student achievement in Title 1 schools. Multiple studies have found that a principal is held accountable for leadership actions that, if effective, correlate directly to student achievement (Fussarelli & Militello, 2012; Liljenberg & Andersson, 2020;). The present study will add to the knowledge base by providing information about leadership dispositions that include interpersonal skills and personal qualities that build trusting relationships and create positive learning environments to influence student outcomes (Bird et al., 2009; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). To gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of principals who serve in Title I elementary schools, a phenomenological approach was used for this study. The interview questions were used to provide a more comprehensive understanding of leadership dispositions and practices influence that student achievement in Title 1 schools. The study addressed the following research questions:

How do principals in Title I elementary schools perceive their beliefs about poverty influencing outcomes to increase student achievement?

How do principals in Title I elementary schools describe strategies used to foster common vision through collaboration and promote positive culture to increase student achievement?

What characteristics of leaders do principals in Title I elementary schools perceive are important to build trust with teachers to increase student achievement?

What leadership practices do principals in Title I elementary schools employ that are perceived to increase student achievement?

An inductive coding process allowed me to analyze the interview data from principals serving in high poverty elementary schools to identify critical themes and patterns that emerged as influencing healthy school cultures and teacher performance that improve academic student outcomes. This chapter presents the findings of the qualitative analysis and addresses each of the qualitative research questions that guided this study.

### **Research Design**

For this study, a qualitative design was used to examine how principals perceive their dispositions and practices influence student achievement in elementary Title I schools. The qualitative research approach was selected for this case study since the voice of the school principal is considered as the examining phenomenon (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). The purpose of this study design was to gain new perspectives to add to the literature about leadership dispositions that include personal qualities and professional practices that build trusting relationships and create positive learning environments that influence increased student achievement. Open-ended interview questions were given to 10 participants. The 10 participants were purposefully selected from Title I schools in a large urban school district located in Southeast Texas. The interviews were digitally audio recorded and transcribed. An opportunity to review transcripts and provide follow-up clarifications of responses was given to all interviewees. Themes and patterns that emerged from the interview script responses were analyzed using an inductive thematic coding process.

### **Setting**

The study focused on 10 elementary campuses in an urban district in the Southeastern part of Texas. To maintain confidentiality of the district, the district will be represented by the pseudonym Diverse Unified School District. The participating district has 276 schools (eight early childhood, 160 elementary schools, 39 middle schools, 37

high schools, and 32 combined schools). Table 4.1 provides the student demographic data of the participating school district obtained from the *2020-2021 Facts and Figures* report (TEA, 2021a). The demographics of the students in the district consisted of 61.8% Hispanic/Latino, 22.4% Black/African Americans, 9.7% White, and 3% other ethnicities with more than 100 different languages spoken by students' families in the district. Seventy-nine percent of the students within Diverse Unified School District are economically disadvantaged.

**Table 4.1***District Student Demographic Data*

	<b>Frequency (n)</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
<b>1. Race/Ethnicity</b>		
<b>African American</b>	44,123	22.4
<b>American Indian</b>	345	0.2
<b>Asian</b>	8,660	4.4
<b>Hispanic</b>	121,786	61.8
<b>Pacific Islander</b>	138	0.1
<b>White</b>	19,035	9.7
<b>Two or More Races</b>	2,856	1.5
<b>2. Students by Program</b>		
<b>Economically Disadvantaged</b>	154,511	78.5
<b>At-Risk</b>	103,805	52.7
<b>Special Education</b>	16,238	8.3
<b>Limited English Proficient</b>	65,638	33.3
<b>English as a Second Language</b>	29,439	15.0
<b>Bilingual</b>	35,118	17.8
<b>Gifted/Talented</b>	31,472	16.0

Of the 276 principals in the school district, there were 160 elementary school principals who led schools consisting of grades pre-kindergarten through fifth grade identified as Title I. Overall, the district served 50,926 students in Title I elementary schools. For school leadership, 58% of them were Title I elementary level principals. Table 4.2 presents the total number of principals in the entire district and proportion of them that lead elementary schools.

**Table 4.2***District Principal Demographic Data*

	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Total Principals	276	100
Elementary Title I	160	58.4
Middle Title I	47	17.1
High Title I	44	16.0
Combined/Other	25	.09

**Description of the Participants**

The participants that met the following criteria were chosen to be part of this study. The participants had to be elementary school principals who worked in a large urban school district in Southeast Texas and led an elementary Title I school. The criteria for participating in this study was to have a minimum of 2 years' experience as the principal of a elementary Title I school and the school was not rated a 'D' or 'F' by the state accountability system. All the principals that fit these criteria were invited to participate in the study. I was able to solicit 10 respondents via email that were then asked to participate in individual interviews. To further protect their identity, pseudonyms were given to them and their schools in addition to the district. The pseudonyms for the 10 principals selected for the study were Ginny, Betty, Phyllis, Randy, Cindy, Natalie, Emily, Cassie, Leslie, and Tamara. The principals were chosen based on their response to the invitation. Table 4.3 provides a breakdown for all the participating principals by demographic categories and years of experience.

### Participants Profile

Principals from elementary Title I schools were selected for the semi structured interviews. Each participant agreed to interviews conducted via Zoom. Pseudonyms were used for each participant to ensure anonymity and trustworthiness.

**Table 4.3**

*Overview of Principal Profile*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Years as Principal</b>
<b>Ginny</b>	Female	31-50	Hispanic/Latino	4
<b>Betty</b>	Female	31-50	African American	4
<b>Phyllis</b>	Female	51-70	African American	3
<b>Randy</b>	Male	31-50	White	6
<b>Cindy</b>	Female	31-50	Hispanic/Latino	9
<b>Natalie</b>	Female	31-50	African American	5
<b>Emily</b>	Female	31-50	African American	3
<b>Cassie</b>	Female	51-70	African American	5
<b>Leslie</b>	Female	51-70	African American	8
<b>Tamara</b>	Female	31-50	African American	8

Nine of the 10 participants were female with one male ranging from 3 to 9 years of principalship experience. Each of the schools led by these principals were both high-poverty and high-minority that served student populations of at least 75% poverty and 50% minority. One of the 10 principals' ethnicity was different from the student makeup of the school.

Ginny is a 4th-year principal who was an ESL teacher in elementary schools. All 4 of her years of principalship have been at the same school in the Diverse Unified

School District. Ginny studied English as a Second Language for ESL students before moving into school administration.

Betty is a 4th-year principal that began her teaching career in elementary schools but also taught seventh and eighth grade in middle school. After transitioning from teaching for 7 years to an instructional specialist for 2 years, Betty served as a middle school assistant principal for 2 years before becoming a principal for the last 4 years.

Phyllis is a principal having served 3 years in the role. Serving as a tenth and eleventh grade math teacher for 11 years brought Phyllis to the role of secondary math instructional coach for 6 years. She served as a high school assistant principal at two schools before becoming an elementary school principal.

Randy works for Diverse Unified School District and has been a principal for 6 years. He entered the role as an elementary school assistant principal and taught elementary school in grades 2 through 5. He also was a sixth grade middle school teacher for 2 years before being promoted to assistant principal.

Cindy is a 9th-year principal who has been working in education for 16 years. Cindy began as a third grade bilingual teacher then transitioned to the role of assistant principal for 2 years before she became a principal where she has served in the same school in that capacity.

Natalie began her career as a middle school educator teaching sixth through eighth grade English Language Arts. An instructional coach between fourth and eighth grades for 4 years brought her to the assistant principal role of prekindergarten through Grade 5. Natalie has served as an elementary school principal for 5 years at the same campus where she was an assistant principal for 2 years.



Emily has been a principal for 3 years after serving as an assistant principal in Diverse Unified School District for 1 year. She served as a school principal for 3 years in another state where she had a 13-year teaching career.

Cassie began her career in education as a secondary teacher in multiple grade levels over the years. She served as an instructional coach for 5 years before becoming a middle school assistant principal. Cassie has served as an elementary school principal of two different schools for a total of 5 years.

Leslie has been principal of the same school for 8 years. She began her career as a second grade elementary school teacher. She became an assistant principal at the same school then was promoted to the role of dean at a middle school in the district serving for 6 years prior to the principalship role.

Tamara has been a principal of two elementary schools for a total of 8 years. She was a teacher in fourth and fifth grades for 2 years before becoming an instructional specialist. Serving in multiple school settings in that role for 11 years before becoming an elementary school assistant principal, Tamara served in that role for 4 years before becoming a school principal.

### **Data Analysis**

This study examined the influence of principals' perceptions of leadership dispositions and practices on student achievement in Title 1 elementary schools. The data were generated through the analysis of the participants' individual interviews. To ensure trustworthiness while collecting data and during data analysis, the participant semistructured interviews were recorded and transcribed. To ensure validity and reliability, member checking and peer review are verification procedures that ensured the study's credibility. The data collected during the interviews were to be returned to the participants to check for accuracy aligned to their experiences. Though present studies on

Title I schools focus on continued achievement gaps present among ethnic groups and low socioeconomic status, this study was meant to understand the perceptions of principals in Title I schools through their lived experience in serving in impoverished communities. This study sought to understand how they perceived their personal beliefs shaped their dispositions and how they played a role in transformational leadership practices that increased student achievement.

### **Emerging Themes**

The context of this study focused on the perceptions of school principals about their dispositions and practices that influence student achievement in elementary Title I schools. The interviews consisted of 12 open-ended questions that looked at practices in elementary schools serving populations of impoverished students and how the principals' beliefs about education shaped their dispositions toward increasing student achievement. Each participant provided their insights through their lived experiences to share the actions and practices important to improve student outcomes in Title I schools. The themes that emerged from the interviews offered a perspective around an inspired vision, responsiveness to change, communication, collaboration, systems, and processes.

Research question 1 focused on the belief systems that principals had toward access to a quality education for students that shaped their decisions as a leader toward the work. Research question 2 focused on how campus systems and processes fostered common vision and promote positive culture in their schools. Research question 3 focused around consensus building and voice to build trust among their staff. Research question 4 focused on systems and processes that promote equitable outcomes for students in high poverty schools. The consistent themes that emerged throughout the study were (a) principal beliefs and convictions, (b) community-informed decision making, (c) systems and processes, (d) collaboration and consensus building, (e) response

to change, (f) celebration, (g) professional learning communities, and (h) instructional leadership. The following sections provide a discussion for each question and summarize the participant responses.

### **Research Question 1**

Research Question 1 was, How do principals in Title I elementary schools perceive their beliefs about poverty influence outcomes to increase student achievement? The inductive coding analysis developed two themes of responses that relate access to education influences beliefs about poverty and success in life: (a) principal beliefs and convictions and (b) community understanding.

#### **Principal Beliefs and Convictions**

Participants in this study were asked if they believed access to a quality education was important for overall success in life. Cindy expressed that she came from impoverished beginnings.

Coming from a low socioeconomic background myself and a single parent household who had a second-grade education, the key to breaking the cycle is access to a quality education. I lived in poverty, but through the great education I received I was able to overcome barriers and ensure my own children do not. As a principal, I ensure that achievement gaps are closed especially in elementary since it is the foundation for secondary education.

Phyllis, Cassie, Leslie, and Tamara went on to share personal experiences with support systems. Phyllis described poverty from her lens.

When people do not have enough money to take care of everyday necessities, it is extremely hard to focus on long-term goals and educations. Maslow's hierarchy succinctly states that the most basic needs for people must be met, and then people can move to the more advanced needs which is [*sic*] education and long-term plans. So,

quality education will help an impoverished community strive for a better life, but the educational environment must assist the whole child and community with basic needs to allow the child's mind to open to other long-term goals that education can provide.

Poverty may include the extent to which individuals go without resources. However, many view poverty as just a financial resource limitation. Five of the participants in this study saw it as one of multiple resources like emotional, mental, and physical, which play significant roles in the success of people. When students of poverty lack one or multiple sources at the very basic level of survival, other needs within human development may be compromised. Half of the participants understood this through their own personal experience.

### ***Support Systems Were Important to Cassie***

As far as my understanding, it's personal for me . . . making it kind of shaped me. I am that child that came from poverty in that Third Ward area, so a lot of things I feel because I know what I was able to do and the people around me were able to do, it's like I believe it. I know they can. It's not a guess; can they do it? I actually am a product, so I believe it and I know it.

Cassie went on to say, "coming from a place of need . . . sometimes the kids not having parents or not having someone to believe in them, I know in that type of area that I have to be that person and also train my staff to be that person."

Leslie described her personal connections.

I always look at that and me growing up in a high-impoverished community, which is Sunnyside, Texas; even though my family provided, but that's just a community that we grew up in, just understanding what they go through on a day-to-day basis. It really helps me be relatable to them in a sense, I guess, because I understand it's not like, "Oh my God, I don't know what you're going through . . . I don't understand why you

can't do this. I do understand I get what you face because not that I've lived through it, but I grew up around it.”

Support systems are also important resources that all humans need as they develop through stages of life. They go beyond financial needs but provide help and knowledge bases as well (Payne, 2019). Participants could relate to the learners in their schools by their own experiences and make connections to the differences made in their own lives.

Relating her personal experience, Leslie elaborated on her perspectives about schooling in underresourced communities.

So I think it helps me with planning for them [students], especially when I talk about opportunities, like exposing them to certain things whether it's a field trip or if we have people come in to talk to them about other opportunities that are out there. I always look at that and say, "How will this benefit them later? What can they do with this? What can they take with this and move forward?" And then even discipline-wise, are you snatching food because you don't know if you're going to eat again later. You kind of have to know your families and know your community, and that helps you.

Tamara spoke on support systems in her life as well.

As a child, financially we didn't have much but I had a family who loved me and pushed me beyond my limits. I also had great teachers; they expressed the importance of education, listened. And now as an adult who grew up in poverty I'm successful on my job and in life so far. I had teachers who were great and believed in me, and as a result, I went to college. I joined different organizations and networked with people from a variety of different backgrounds and states. I absolutely believe that education helped me overcome because of the people that I was affiliated with. I had great teachers, I had family support, and they guided me in the right direction.

Participants shared their personal experiences about the presence of family, community, and teachers that provided emotional support through positive relationship in their lives. Their connection through experience provided understanding and shaped their convictions guiding their viewpoints about the communities they serve. Tamara's influences left positive marks in her life that she could clearly articulate as important if they were not present.

When discussing the challenges that students of poverty faced, five of 10 participants shared their viewpoints extensively from a place of connection in multiple ways. Cassie and Tamara both expressed connection to teachers in their experience. Cassie stated:

I believe that you need to train your staff and that you need to be that person in these students' lives. Because . . . well, a lot of times, depending on the teacher, they may not come from that. They may not believe that the child can actually do it. Being able to relate to them, a lot of times we have to remind teachers in areas the way these kids don't know that they need it. We have to teach the teachers to let kids know they need it. So a lot of times working with my teachers, I tell them, "Not only is your job at this type of school is to teach, because you can teach." But they will get up there, and their (students) are not engaged. So a lot of it is them having to know that they have to nurture the kids. They have to get the kids' buy-in. So it does take a little bit more work with the engagement when you're at an inner city school, but that's a part of teaching. You have to actually have the skill to nurture those kids and bring them in.

Tamara spoke on teachers as well.

I can relate as a principal. My decisions would probably be different if I had not had the experiences that I had growing up, having really good teachers in my life. So because of this, I observe my students, I listened to them and I looked beyond the surface

of what they walk through the doors with daily. Relatability may not be natural for some teachers though.

Tamara expressed specifically the importance of having teachers as role models in her life and the difference they made to influence her decisions and outlook towards life. Her responses reflected a personal acknowledgement that her insights or sensitivities through her lived experience is not reflective in all people within the profession, specifically teachers. Misconceptions, often negative in nature have negative effects upon students in education. A pathway to build the teacher and student relationship is to help teachers to understand and even change their perceptions of students of low income (Ullucci & Howard, 2015).

Additionally, Natalie spoke through experience.

We know that children from poverty lack some of the resources that kids may from middle class. So you have to create. You have to put in a lot more work. But I do feel like those students can be successful with the right teachers in front of them.

Natalie and Emily both expressed that teachers that really truly care about students and are willing to go above and beyond to help with their social and emotional needs, become the resources in the community that children may need to be successful. The experiences shared voiced a belief in their success from primary caregivers and from supports in the community. A common thread communicated was the influence of positive teachers in their lives.

When asked about access to a quality education, Ginny responded, “Having a quality education is crucial to solve poverty. Education supports a child’s social, emotional, and cognitive skills. If students learn these skills, they have a better chance of earning higher incomes and breaking the poverty cycle.” Betty stated,

Having access to quality education in my opinion is the solution to poverty since education opens doors that can change your circumstances. These circumstances can be environmental, career, and economic status. I believe that you must have some degree of education for success in life. Most careers require an advanced degree even if you've demonstrated a remarkable work ethic. Therefore, I believe that if you want to climb the ladder of success in the workplace and in life you must be well educated, especially if you're a minority.

Betty talked about a quality education changing circumstances. Her beliefs about the need for quality education specifically spoke from a place of being necessary for a chance at success as a minority and the notion of starting from behind. Randy added,

Education is certainly setting our students up for success and as a result can be the solution to poverty. Poverty is not just financial, but it can also impact the way you think and problem solve. A good education can lead to better health beliefs and knowledge, ability to make better life choices, better skills, and give students the knowledge they need for self-advocacy. Education improves literacy, supports development of effective habits, and improves overall cognitive ability.

Randy elaborated more on the necessity of a quality education by providing details, speaking to enhanced decision making and brain development. These benefits increase abilities toward making sound decisions and providing awareness of self-advocacy that developed people need for viability. Eight of the participants held strong convictions in the belief that a quality education is the solution to poverty and opens doors to opportunities that wouldn't ordinarily be available. Setting students up for success in life was a common conviction that guided their beliefs on education.



## **Community Understanding**

Though none the participants experienced life in poverty as a shared experience, all 10 responded descriptively on their views on access to a quality education as solution to breaking the cycle of poverty and a pathway for a successful life. When asked how their belief systems on education impact their decisions as principals, multiple participants responded passionately and descriptively. Randy stated,

As a leader specifically who has only served in impoverished community, it has such a huge impact on your decision making as a leader. A principal serving an impoverished community must always consider basic needs, not just basic needs of students but families in the community. How can you be a resource to your community? A true leader understands that a school is a building block of the community, so you are always seeking ways to engage, educate, and serve your entire community.

Randy's insights offered came from a place of learned experience versus that of the lived one. His years of working in Title I schools taught him that understanding the community and the needs present guided his decisions about how best to serve students in his school.

Emily went on to share about needs of the community:

Understanding impoverished communities shapes the leadership decisions made by the principal. Principals need to understand the needs of the communities when making decisions. Principals must understand the students' culture, family background, problems that the families face, and their economic status. This will help the principal decide how to serve the community.

Betty spoke on needs of the community in this way:

All my leadership decisions lie in my understanding of impoverished communities which is why I make it a priority to afford my families opportunities and school experiences that are comparable to other more affluent communities. For example, many of my students have never gone outside of Houston, may never visit the museum, may never attend prom, or attend a school with a high performing culture. Therefore, I bring all these opportunities to my students and make it a goal for all of them to be able to attend magnet schools outside of their environment once they leave my campus so that they have a choice of their trajectory in life; this pathway starts at school.

Participant perception supports research that has found financial disparity exists even within public schooling with the Title I dollars districts receive and fails to compensate adequately beyond the countless resources that affluent students receive within home life. Districts serving affluent students end up spending more on wealthier students versus districts with high numbers serving poorer communities because they draw more experienced teachers, who cost more than teachers in high poverty schools. Additionally, magnet programs that often serve wealthier student populations drive up spending because they often receive extra funding to support specialized programming (Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Mathewson, 2020).

Tamara's responses aligned to exposure and opportunity in regard to community needs as well.

I think the equity piece is absolutely important for all students. The only way that you'll know if students are able to succeed is if you're providing them with same things that students that maybe have a little bit more financially. If you afford them the same experiences who knows what the outcomes will be for those students if both are allowed the same equitable supports.

While speaking with participants regarding community needs, two of the principals elaborated about community from perspectives of known characteristics they perceive exist in under resourced communities. The school as a resource for community was seen through a different lens by Phyllis.

Impoverished communities usually have groups of individuals that see their lifestyle as never changing and it's impossible to move themselves to better. They become stagnant on changes for themselves or their children. The school's system is a social babysitter for them to place their children so that they do not have to take care of their every need. Drugs and alcoholism are staples that perpetuate the cycle of poverty. Therefore, as a principal in this kind of community, access to the dream that higher education makes a difference, must be indwelled into the adults, high school students down to the youngest. Activities (health care, food, adult education-GED, job fairs, school robotics competitions, etc.) are necessary to open the communities' minds that education is not just reading, writing, and arithmetic. It's so much more.

Participant insight based on their observations in their schools reflect the effects of family dynamics seen in generational poverty. "Some families and communities, particularly in poverty stricken areas, do not value or understand formal education" (Lacour & Tissington, 2011, p. 526).

Phyllis was the only participant that expressed views of providing multiple resources by public schools as a handicapping condition. However, she did express the need for persistence in providing multiple resources to change minds in underresourced communities. Leslie provided her thoughts in a different light.

I just think I must have a different understanding than many. I think it's that when you can understand what they are facing and what students of poverty have to possibly deal with, then I think you approach it differently than you do of a student or students that

are not in poverty. So I don't think it's an attitude. I think it's just an understanding or approach that's different.

Leslie went on to elaborate,

I think it has a lot to do with the level of support that they get at home, what they're facing at home. I also think it has a huge impact on experiences, because like I said, again, it's nothing like experiencing things in those, into whatever that is. So I think it plays a huge part, when you look back at things that poor students face, whether they are when they go home and they become the adults, watching younger siblings and doing things that they shouldn't have to worry about as kids that they're worried about. It's, the adult things that they're worried about as children.

Participants demonstrated an understanding of having adult resources that are available and perform appropriately in caretaking roles are valuable and necessary as support systems integral to child development within families. Leslie's connection could have been by personal experience, lived experience, or both that provides insight about the needs of the students that enter her doors.

When discussing the observations of characteristics present in impoverished communities Cassie expounded,

You don't have a uniform? Here's a uniform. You don't have school supplies? Most of the kids in my schools that I work in I've never seen them buy school supplies, and I'm okay with that. I'm okay with that. A lot of it is because, if the girl next to me doesn't have school supplies and this kid over here doesn't have school supplies, then it's normal that I don't have school supplies versus I'm a kid in a different type of area and I come from a home where it's not normal. But coming from an inner district such as the district I'm in now, it's normal not to have school supplies, so it's normal for the school

just to pick it up. You hardly rarely see kids bringing in a lunch kit in my district. It's just a norm.

However, Natalie offered an alternative viewpoint regarding community needs. I believe that in some ways it's different in that the needs that you're focusing on for improvement are different. I believe that my needs as a Title 1 campus to grow my community as a whole would be my focus on that specific need. Whereas someone who didn't have that, and maybe their community is a little bit more financially stable, but there may be other issues that they may have to pour their attention into. I think the need is different, but I think it is still a need, whether it's a low performance school or not, there still is a need that exists. It just may be different types of needs.

A deep understanding the community was essential for all the participants. Consideration of the needs of students and families was expressed as necessary in order to make decisions that impact the learners in their schools. The ability of the school to be a resource was expressed by all participants; however, the perspectives in that community engagement took on different points of view.

## **Research Question 2**

Research Question 2, How do principals in Title I elementary schools describe strategies used to foster common vision through collaboration and promote positive culture to increase student achievement? The inductive coding analysis developed two themes of responses: (a) systems and processes and (b) consensus building and collaboration.

### **Systems and Processes**

In response to the question about strategies used to promote common vision in the school, participants talked about the school-wide systems they have in place at their schools. All 10 of the participants engaged professional learning communities in their

schools as a critical component for collaboration for student progress and professional learning. Nine of the 10 principals dedicated time weekly in their master schedules to the process. When asked what strategies and support have been provided to teachers to ensure effective planning, Betty, Natalie, Ginny, and Tamara listed school-wide systems. Betty listed the following processes that promote common vision that take place in her school: Weekly PLC meetings, Bi-Weekly AT-Bats, Daily walk-throughs with on-the-spot feedback, mentor assignments, and monthly faculty meetings. Natalie provided a list in response as well:

Targeted Small Group Instruction, consistent Planning and PLC Structures to ensure Quality Tier I Instruction, Response to Intervention Systems, Socio-Emotional Systems, PBIS Systems, and Treatment Agreements for all members of the school community. Data Driven Decision-Making Systems and Leadership Mission and Vision Work are essential to improve student outcomes at our school.

All four principals expressed the idea that meeting regularly through the PLC process allows teachers to gain more skills in teaching by application to the work.

Ginny shared that teachers participate in professional learning communities (PLC) where they collaborate to discuss effective strategies and analyze data in to order to plan lesson. “The principal and appraisers provide coaching and feedback to teachers. Teachers participate in at-bats where they able to observe lessons that include effective strategies.” Ginny elaborated more on the types of professional learning experiences that she felt important beyond student product information.

To support equitable outcomes for all students, we have focused on training the teachers on

1. Getting to know each student to understand their culture to avoid gender and culture bias,

2. Providing lessons that allow the students to have a cultural or gender connection,
3. Holding high expectations for all students regardless of race or gender,
4. Accommodating students with disabilities,
5. Creating a welcoming environment in which students are not afraid to express themselves,
6. Implementing differentiated instruction to meet the academic needs of individual students.

A focus on the unique needs of specific populations and the increased need for experiences that support social emotional learning was shared, in addition to instructional systems, by three of the participants. Ginny expressed intentional processes her school implements that take in account cultural imbalances and or biases that inherently exist in schools.

When asked what processes promote common vision at her campus, Tamara also offered thoughts on what professional learning experiences might look like at her school.

So, again in terms of instruction, we have PLCs. We bring in people from the district office to come in and train. One of the things that we've done a lot on, and I guess this ties into instruction, is we've had trainings a lot on building relationships with students. Again, the SEL (social emotional learning), because after the pandemic, actually both teachers and students came in and it was just different. Everybody needed SEL. So that worked for adults and students.

Seven of the participants shared similar systems to support equitable outcomes in their schools.

Betty, Natalie, and Leslie emphasized the importance of high expectations around the school-wide processes.

We have a culture of high expectations, and we don't make excuses for where we are and what we have or don't have. Therefore, we move with urgency, teach from bell-to-bell, and do our best to provide our scholars with the same educational experiences that their counterparts are privy to and provide fair opportunities to resources so that each student can get what they need.

Leslie questioned, what is it that I need to do so that I can help out my teachers so that we can be where we need to be as far as whether that's, "Hey, you guys need to be ..." And I guess I really wouldn't be a really a compliance piece, but expectation piece. When I know that whatever the expectations are for me in the trainings, on what the expectation is for us, even if we look at test scores, what is the expectation? This is the goal that we think you should be at or things like that.

Clearly messaging the vision and goal of the work is observed as important by Leslie's response. The interviewer could observe Leslie's personal energy that could generate enthusiasm from followers by her genuine response. Transformational leaders passionately believe they can make a difference by creating an image of what their school can become. Correspondingly, Natalie shared,

I always say that when the students walk through our doors, whatever problems they face at home we have little to no control, but we can control what we do about their learning within the school walls. We cannot use those barriers as excuses as to why students can't learn. Therefore, I operate on solution-based conversations with the staff that doesn't allow for excuses.

High expectations for student learning with a *no excuse* attitude is an idea repeated by a commitment to school-wide processes. A respect for cultural differences and disabilities shaped the professional learning experiences for staff as well. A sense of



pity for the plight of the poor was not identified but rather an empowering voice of hope on what could be was observed by the participants.

### **Collaboration and Consensus Building**

Collaboration within a professional learning community about teaching and learning was a constant theme throughout the study. Additionally, setting clear expectations around the work from the principal was a recurring theme that emerged when collaborative practices were discussed. This was especially highlighted when asked about involvement in planning as a process. Tamara, Cassie, Randy, Leslie, and Emily elaborated on the processes that focus around teacher effective planning to improve student outcomes. Tamara shared,

Our priorities of practice this year have been checking for understanding and student engagement. So lots of training around those things, implementing universal prompts to push students' thinking. Teachers must allow all students to speak in my school. Therefore, there was a big push on engaging all students, not just those who knew the answers to things. So in terms of a lot of turning and talking, a lot of use of the whiteboard so students could respond, Pear Deck so we can make sure that everyone was responding. So in terms of the planning piece, a lot of that was done in PLCs to make sure that we were working on making progress towards checking for understanding and student engagement.

Being clear about the instructional expectations and the investment in professional learning to develop teacher proficiency with expectations is viewed as important in their schools. Tamara shared that student voice within the learning is a critical expectation within instruction at her Title I school. She and her leadership team invest intensive time and effort in classrooms, planning, and professional learning through PLCs to increase student engagement as a vital piece to improve achievement.

Cassie elaborated on the following:

As far as planning, I don't think I have mastered yet, believe it or not, but something I'm learning this year, and it's taking me a while to learn, there's a difference between planning and being prepared. So I think we have lesson plans that are there. We have, "This is how you're going to check for understanding. You're going to have this." Things are laid out. So as far as planning, you can have everything planned out, but if you're not prepared, you miss the whole thing. So that's something we're focusing on this year at my school because we're going to scripted lesson plans. You can have scripted lesson plans, but if you're not prepared to deliver it, if you're not front-loading the misconceptions, you miss the whole thing. So planning is the big part, but it's definitely not the end. I think it goes with preparing, but they're totally different.

Randy noted, "Regarding academics—we create goals at the beginning of the year and revisit those goals to see if we are on track." Cassie reflected on her journey as a learner and a leader with the planning process while Randy repeated the importance of campus goal setting and clarity around consistent alignment to them.

Cassie and her team are evolving by the investment they must make in preparation for the professional learning they provide teachers. Their actions shared transformational leadership that shows by example that they lead by the values they advocate.

Emily spoke more about planning.

So the biggest thing around effective planning is being intentional about our professional learning communities, really setting aside an expectation around the prework that goes into being prepared for a professional learning community, then coming to the table at that time, weekly. And sometimes it's a matter of a teacher sitting down with an administrator, looking at a lesson in depth, and really helping the teacher internalize what

the lesson means, looking at the task, dissecting it so that we know that they truly understand what the lesson is asking them to do with students and what the expectations for students should be at the end of that lesson, how can they demonstrate learning.

Correspondently, Leslie spoke about building consensus aligned to campus goals as a leader.

I want them to know what my thoughts are, what my vision is, because I think that's important that they know what I see as a big picture because sometimes you do, when you are a teacher, you see your world and what you want to do because we all function in our little boxes. We like say, "Hey, yeah, you got that going on, but I know what I want?" But I think as a leader, I try to help them see the big picture or the bigger box to see how your little box plays an important factor in the big box. So I think that's my job is to help them see the bigger picture. So I do have a direct impact on that because of course they're hearing what my vision is and what I see and how can my vision of what I want or the expectations for our campus and where I see us going, your input play a role or a key role into that for us to make this become a reality for our campus or for our students.

Emily and Leslie emphasized consensus through intentional planning within the professional learning community in their schools. They believed empowering teacher voice directly from the principal while being an integral part of the collaborative conversations is needed to keep the vision in clear focus among their staff inspires shared vision.

Betty made note of what many of the participants detailed when asked about consensus building, "teachers are stakeholders in the planning process and their input is crucial to the success of our campus since they're on the front line every day." When asked if systems were in place for when campus expectations are not adhered to, Randy

explained, “Teachers are trained in the handbook at the beginning of the year and they sign off that they understand policies and procedures.” Monitoring the communicated expectations was viewed as important to Phyllis. She said, “The systems to inspect should have a rubric to show the level of competence. When clear expectation are given and shared, then the faculty can feel free to work in an environment where the objective can be fairly obtained.” Tamara elaborated on monitoring, support, and accountability activities that are led by the principal. She expressed,

It's so important for the principal to be the one who communicates expectations, and then your leadership team can be the ones to assist with follow through and making sure that it's happening. So usually when staff does not adhere to the expectations, there's questions around do you need support to help you reach the expectations? It's one thing, skill versus will. I mean, if there's a lack of skill, then those things can be coached. But if there's a lack of will and you're just doing it to be defiant, then of course the communication looks a little different in terms of you may have to receive a memo for not adhering to expectations. We always start with support first just to make sure because maybe they don't clearly understand what the expectation is.

Betty described what accountability looked like in her school environment. She shared,

Staff receive their handbook prior to the start of the school year in August and the expectations are reviewed through dialogue and role play. In addition to the handbook, expectations are reiterated in the principal's weekly newsletter. However, the biggest indicator of staff adherence to the expectations which is the most powerful is through how the actions of the principal and the administrative team. We simply practice what we preach and hold others and each other accountable for doing the same.

Participants invest in the collaborative process with their staffs with open communication expressing it to be the center of positive school culture. Investment in planning as an important process was commonly referred to in principals' responses.

Randy, Phyllis, Tamara, Betty, and Cindy expressed that collective agreements alone do not maintain high expectations in high poverty schools. Their actions described transformational leader moves that set example and build commitment to the work by daily acts that create progress. However, they all expressed high levels of accountability by monitoring are present to move with momentum toward meaningful change.

### **Research Question 3**

Research Question 3 was What characteristics of leaders do principals in Title I elementary schools perceive are important to build trust with teachers to increase student achievement? The inductive coding analysis developed two themes of responses: (a) response to change and (b) celebration.

#### **Response to Change**

Parent-teacher organizations/associations (PTO/PTA) have been a long-time collaboration intended to facilitate parent participation in schools. Additionally, Shared Decision Making Committees (SDMC) serve as advisory groups that assist principals in decision making. Many school districts encourage or require schools to engage the community in identifying and implementing activities with the goal of advancing student learning. Tamara said,

At my campus, we are very, very big on surveys. Surveys are utilized often. We just create them through Google Forms. We utilize surveys often to capture feedback from the staff. Additionally, we have SDMC meetings, but because those are not held as frequently, they're only held quarterly, we have to find other ways to gain input. PLCs are

a great way because we have those weekly. Faculty meetings are also ways to allow voice and decision making.

Betty, Tamara, Randy, and Leslie noted processes that are in place at their campuses like the SDMC, PTO and other campus committees (safety, career pathways, lead teachers, etc.) where groups of campus stakeholders come together to plan and provide input for the school. The processes mentioned involve people in the decisions that directly impact their job performance. They believe leader-follower trust is fostered through individual teacher investment toward the whole.

Randy stated,

There's an SDMC that meets monthly to discuss changes in the school and budget. However, when it is a big decision that has to be made, I call a faculty meeting, explain the need, and send out a survey to get their responses on how they feel we should proceed.

Leslie elaborated more on the role of the School Decision Making Committee (SDMC) in her school.

So just like I spoke about earlier, we have our site-based management meetings, our SDMCs, where we have community members come in, business partners come in, and we talk about the expectations for our campus and where we want to go, what we're doing. I also find it very valuable because they're also able to tell me what their vision is of our school or what do they see, what is their perception of our school, and that helps me continue to build upon that and to maybe tweak or maybe if it's not something favorable to help to change. So I believe that that is a key. I'm also one of the principals that go to our civic club meetings in our community. I think that is very powerful. I always update them on what's happening at the campus, the dynamics, how it has changed.

Though consistent, scheduled meetings are a noted challenge in some cases, these committees provide input that informs changes at four of the participants' campuses.

Leslie detailed her thoughts and actions regarding school decision making through committee.

I want to hear what others are thinking because they can have a different point of view that may be to our advantage to how we continue to serve our students. So the processes involve other people and not just me. This is a group effort because we're all serving these students. And so I think it's important to hear and to learn and to understand from more than just my point of view or even just myself and my leadership team. We need to hear from others because especially from the teachers, they're in the work with those kids. And so that is important. So the first step or process or the most important is involving others in those decisions.

When it came to school-wide campus expectations, Tamara went beyond the leadership team by utilizing the Shared Decision Making Committee.

So one of the things that we do in SDMC is we come up with campus nonnegotiables. Those campus nonnegotiables are then shared with the staff at the beginning of the year. We look at them as a team, as a school, as a campus, and we look at it and see, okay, well what is it that makes sense and what is it that can be replaced with something that's a little bit more effective? We utilize checklists as a quick way to identify whether or not those expectations are being met. The leadership team, we conduct calibration walks together to make sure systems are being implemented and/or followed with fidelity.

Again, clarity around school-wide expectations was voiced by Tamara. She described the marriage between external stakeholders and the school administrative team

being in sync with school-wide systems and the importance for monitoring and tracking to ensure campus alignment to nonnegotiable practices was indeed occurring.

Ginny, Betty, Emily, Natalie, and Leslie had comparable experiences with staff input through collaboration of professional learning communities, surveys, and their visibility as the principal. Ginny said,

Any time there are decisions to be made, I hold a meeting with the teachers and staff, and they fill out a survey to voice their decision. During PLC or meetings, teachers also voice their opinions, and we take into account their opinions when making decisions.

Betty also noted that her presence as a principal comes with an open-door policy.

Staff input is solicited mostly during our weekly PLC meetings while voice/input is standard on my campus through my open-door policy. Staff are comfortable voicing their concerns and ideas on an ongoing basis. This feedback shapes the decision-making process on campus.

Three of the participants shared other opportunities that were created in their schools that allowed for voice and input. Emily hosted conversations with the principal every 6 weeks. Time is set aside to hear from teachers at their school. These opportunities fostered collaboration and empowered followers, enabling teachers to be active participants in the decisions made for students and the betterment of the school.

Just like principals have coffee with the principals to hear parents' voices, I would have popcorn with the principal or pizza with the principal for teachers to come in. And that would be an opportunity, during their lunchtime or planning time, it varied for, them to come in, again, strictly optional, for them to answer questions. Those questions sometimes would be, "What are your major concerns right now? How can I support you better as the principal? What are you struggling with?" And it didn't have to be



academically, it could be around school systems, it could be around attendance, social emotional support for students, but giving them a voice to express how I could help them.

Professional learning communities is an arena mentioned in which teachers practice autonomy through their voice. A theme of collaboration and communication flowing both ways between staff and principal is heard through the importance of PLCs in their schools. Ginny added additional ways she involves multiple stakeholders at her campus.

For students to be successful, teachers, parents/guardians, and leaders must work together in making school decisions. As a leader, it is critical to learn how to promote buy-in and to acknowledge the work of the teachers and the staff. This will allow everyone to work towards the same goal. Principals must ensure that students are being celebrated for their success. For example, we have planned fun activities to celebrate students that have made academic progress. For example, this school year we had Houston Police Officers play dodgeball with the students that passed the mock STAAR.

Leslie gathered input beyond professional learning communities in another way. She explained,

In addition to our PLCs, I meet monthly with just the teacher leaders because sometimes they can share with me some things that may be happening among their team that they may not want to share in front of their teams. So that we can come together and figure out and problem solve what's happening with that particular cluster or team so that we can problem solve and figure out what we can do to make sure everybody's on track.

Conversely, Ginny and Leslie used opposite ends to engage: fun school and community engagement and structured monthly teacher leader meetings to involve all stakeholders towards building school community. These characteristics reflected

transformational leadership that strove to create atmospheres of trust and help everyone to feel powerful, capable, and heard. Leslie went on to elaborate:

So that is just really a policy that I have in place that they know that they can come and talk to me because it's important to me. I want to know what I can do to help everyone be successful on that job, which in turn is going to help our students be successful. Which in turn is going to help our school community. And so not only just these organized meetings and things like that. There's a system in place where they know they can come and say, "Ms. Leslie, I really need to talk to you." They don't have to make an appointment.

Tamara summed up responding to change as a constant. She expressed it must be communicated from the leader consistently.

Constant reminders are for when there are things that are new or that there's a sense of urgency, those constant reminders are provided during subject area PLCs, during faculty meetings, and sometimes even over the PA [that] we make announcements regarding those things.

In addition to formal committees and internal stakeholder voices heard through participation in professional learning communities, participants expressed an overall open door access to them as a principal. Participation in decision making and being a part of the work in schools by teachers, parents, and the community was viewed as a critical component of a school culture where trusting relationships are built in two way communication.

### **Celebration**

When asked if there was any correlation between staff collaboration and recognition of success, Tamara stated,

When staff comes together to make it happen for the student, student outcomes should be celebrated. So I believe in addition to rewarding staff for a job well done, students should also be shown appreciation for their accomplishments because the job never stops. And as leaders, we should prioritize celebrating student and staff success. Again, buy-in is important and making people feel like what they're doing is worthy of celebrating is equally as important.

Cindy spoke on her role as pivotal in her school.

As the instructional leader I need to be everyone's cheerleader! We have a great culture on campus and I attribute celebrating their [teacher] success impacts their willingness to perform. I am also able to retain highly effective teachers on campus. I work with them to create plans together, provide the resources needed, coach when needed, and reward through incentives throughout the year, like shirts, candy, and breakfast.

The importance of celebration was not only mentioned regarding teachers, celebration of students was shared in detail by most participants. Betty expressed her views in this way:

Staff should be involved in the celebration of student outcomes; however, it's crucial that the principal leads these efforts to promote a culture of high expectations for the campus from the top. This could be the principal announcing student achievement on the intercom, the principal stopping by to congratulate students at the honor roll, student of the month, or perfect attendance celebrations. This could be creating space in the school where students are celebrated such as a bulletin board, having lunch with students that scored at the Master's level, and also acknowledging student growth.

Emily excitedly spoke in great detail about her school's systems. The entire school is organized by houses by which incentives are earned more by team than individuals that promotes pride and ownership.

So one of the things, we have basically a house champion every six weeks. So we announce who the house champion is and there's a big celebration. Every child in that house gets rewarded with some type of treat. For example, the animal for House of Unity is a zebra, so they got zebra capes when they won as house champions. Teachers also get rewarded when their house wins. And then when we do other things, for example, field day, we competed by house. So it's a healthy system that allows accountability, a little bit of healthy competition, and just communication around what the expectations are for our social emotional goals, and even academically, for our student of the month, we put which house they represent and we announce that. They get house points for getting student of the month. Honor roll, you get points for that. And then there's also a financial incentive behind that because we give Lion Cub cash and they get money that they can use in the Lion Cub Roar Store . . . Usually, we do it once a week.

The participants were eager to share a myriad of celebratory systems that occurred in their schools that recognize a variety of accomplishments. By influencing teacher motivation, the disposition of leaders that attach rewards and recognition to job performance understand they are the most prominent personality in the school. Transformational leaders inspire followers to perform better (Bird et al., 2009).

Phyllis believed there to be a strong correlation between staff collaboration and celebration and expressed that it should be intentional in all Title I schools.

The staff must plan effectively to produce environments of student success to celebrate. Therefore, the principal must have the forethought to build in staff collaboration time to brainstorm ideas of such events for the students. At the beginning of

the school year, the planning must start to have an overall picture of what to expect and the timeline. The principal must bring to the table a budget to support the ideas and events. During the year, time must be given to implement the events and celebrations. Lastly, at the end of the year, the principal must celebrate the staffs' collaborations as well.

Three of the participants spoke on the Student of the Month as a way to honor student success at their schools. Emily described it in this way:

Another system I think was already mentioned, but it is acknowledging student of the month. So we have, from each grade level, every classroom, we recognize the student of the month. They get a yard sign to take home and we take pictures of them, put it all over social media. They get a certificate to take home and share with their parents. It's really been, I think, a positive thing because, when we are walking kids to the car with their yard sign, parents are excited. They're looking and saying, "Where are we going to put this?"

Emily's description of acknowledgment of students assigned directly to parents is impactful for community empowerment as much as staff. Tamara described celebrating student and teacher success as well.

It's actually a bonding time for us all in our school! So one of the things that we have is we have student celebrations after formative assessments. Every month in faculty meeting, I reward teachers, too. Whether it is for technology improvement, if they've done well on formative assessments, any teachers that have gone above and beyond in terms of planning literacy nights, in terms of planning our STEM celebrations, in terms of planning our math nights, all of those people are rewarded for anything extra that they do.

The disposition of transformational leaders acts from the understanding that positive culture inside the school is created when parents feel part of something significant outside the school as well. Emily and Tamara expressed that when staff comes together to make it happen for the student, student outcomes are positively impacted.

#### **Research Question 4**

Research Question 4 was *What leadership practices do principals in Title I elementary schools employ to increase student achievement?* The inductive coding analysis developed two themes of responses: (a) professional learning communities and (b) instructional leadership.

#### **Professional Learning Communities**

Principals saw the validity and importance of campus leaders and teachers involved in the planning process and professional learning activities together. Phyllis provided her views on what planning for teaching and learning looks like in her school.

At the beginning of the school year during the preservice, teachers are divided into common PLCs, department meetings, grade level meetings, extra curriculum meetings, special interest meetings, etc. to brainstorm ideas for the school year. During these various meetings, teachers will voice needs, concerns, decision-making, and ideas for students' involvements. Once an overall scope and sequence is calendared out, then the teachers will meet throughout the year to move the plans forward and adjust as needed. The power of making educational plans and decisions is given to the teachers by the principal. It is a faith-based premise that the principal can trust the teachers to make critical decisions to change the learning environment.

Leslie expressed,

I think the key to that is our professional learning communities, our PLCs. I think when you have not only just your teacher leaders in there, but you have that whole team

of teachers in there and you're hearing and you're understanding, I think that is the key in supporting them, hearing them and letting them know that they have that support, and then finding ways together how we can further assist them or ways that we can do what we're doing better in order to meet the needs of our students. So having that professional learning community, I think it's key with knowing that what the expectations are, how we can support it happening and being successful at it, and we're doing it together. It's not just me. You get that buy-in from the teachers because they feel like they've been part of that process of making those type of decisions. But the main thing is that when they know that you're listening, they feel supported because they said, "Okay, I have a seat at this table. This is how I'm being supported."

Participants provided detailed accounts of professional learning through communities that collaborate around the work is central to academic growth for students at their schools. Their direct involvement with teachers as a forum to listen to their voices and give voice within the work to their vision and understanding helps to build trust. The participant collaboration process sounded more like team talk than staff talk.

Emily talked about the benefits of working collaboratively through professional learning communities at her school. She mentioned,

So PLC time is really important. It's with an administrator, planning. We have, this year, made a schedule change to where we were not only having grade-level PLCs, but content-area PLCs because, again, we only had one reading teacher in third grade, one in fourth, one in fifth, same thing for the lower grades, so wanting them to have an opportunity to plan with other people in their content area.

Emily went to elaborate more on the importance of professional learning communities within the culture of her campus.

I think, giving teachers the space to be comfortable with asking questions, be comfortable with saying, “I need help with this,” and receiving that help. So that was part of the transition or the start of it. We're not going to communicate an expectation and not give you support around it if you need that support, and then moving to a place where we've given you the support, and if it's happening, great, how do we expand that? How do we make it better? How do we make it stronger?

Teachers becoming vulnerable as learners with their leaders at the table was an idea introduced by Emily. Professional Learning Communities were viewed as a central focus at her school that drives the teaching and learning process. Reflection on how they can leverage the system to make it better for teachers was noted.

When asked if teachers can opt out of participation in professional learning activities and discussions, Emily responded,

I think that part of that was just communication in the newsletter, in our PLCs. “This is what we're looking for.” It's not a got-you, it's clear communication of, “This is the expectation, this is the lock hard way,” establishing what that looks like for teachers, and again, communicating, “This isn't optional. This is part of what we do is, it's part of what we do every day in every classroom.”

An aspect of school-wide expectations mentioned by participants is they are not up to negotiation. Initial communication, repeated reinforcement and support through the PLC process, messages what is important in their schools.

Tamara described instructional collaboration among teachers.

Our priorities of practice this year have been checking for understanding and student engagement. So lots of training around those things, implementing universal prompts to push students' thinking is done through our intentional collaboration within professional learning communities (PLCs). Teachers must allow all students to speak in



my school. Therefore, there was a big push on engaging all students, not just those who knew the answers to things. So in terms of a lot of turning and talking, a lot of use of the whiteboard so students could respond, Pear Deck so we can make sure that everyone was responding. So in terms of the planning piece, a lot of that was done in PLCs to make sure that we were working on making progress towards checking for understanding and student engagement.

Natalie elaborated on the practice of collaboration as a vehicle to manage change.

Collaboration within community has helped me manage change that is . . . Just being able to work collaboratively on various projects, because it gives you just leeway to be able to share a class with other people on our, as the leader, you have to be able to effectively be able to build capacity and be able to distribute those tasks to your team. And so then I would say the ability to work collaboratively with other people on projects, that experience kind of help the ability to lead and other capacities in terms of instruction.

Capacity building was identified as a critical product of participation in professional communities that participants felt meaningful as part of the work. Participants shared the impact of explicit instructional strategies that should be engaged with all students in their schools by providing spaces for multiple internal stakeholders to engage by vertical or cross-curricular departments to increase proficiency with instruction. They also found it powerful to join teachers that would not normally work together in the day-to-day to collaborate to solve problems that continually arise to manage change in their buildings.

## **Instructional Leadership**

All 10 of the participants responded with clarity regarding their role as the principal in the instructional process. Principal time spent within instructional activities was detailed as opposed to time devoted to managing operational duties. The organization of master schedules and intervention was important to plan collaborative lessons and ensure positive mastery levels occurred for all students was mentioned by Phyllis. She indicated that her role as the instructional leader went beyond the title of principal. When asked about processes in her school, Phyllis stated,

I, as the principal, am the education leader on my campus. I have two other administrators (APs) that are a part of the learning process. Therefore, our PLC teams consist of education leader (principal, AP, Instructional Coach) that leads collaborative teams to teach students how to think, process information through evaluation, creatively, and synthesize. I believe it must be done by “doing” not “sitting and getting.” Problem solving is a tool that schools must create and implement for teachers so that students will be free to use their ideas and imagination.

Tamara asked, “How can I ensure our processes are implemented aligned to my vision for them if I am not directly involved?” Betty also expressed that she and the school administration have leadership roles in the planning and decision-making process. “Teachers are stakeholders in the planning process and their input is crucial to the success of our campus since they’re on the front line every day.” Tamara and Betty voiced a repeated theme of direct involvement of the principal and campus leaders in the daily process as important. They saw active participation by teachers versus passive presentation-style learning as valuable for positive school culture.

Cassie talked about the evolution of direct involvement as an instructional leader in detail.

This is my second year at this campus. With that being said, I'm nowhere near where I would want to be. I feel like at my previous school, when you've been there for a while, your APs, your administrators, your teachers start knowing your expectations. That first year, it's okay . . . They're teachers, they're educated people, but if they don't feel like it's going to work or they don't see it working, they're not going to buy in. So I feel like that first couple of years, the principal, you're doing all the heavy lifting because you're setting the expectations for the others who are getting ready to come right up under you. You can't just turn that over to another administrator, they need to see your expectation. They need to see how you want the PLCs. They need to see your same vision for coaching. So I do believe the first couple of years, it's you. You're all in from the assistant principals to the specialists all the down. That means you are in the PLCs running it, until you're able to actually pass that torch.

Emily described her role in the PLC process.

So I participate in the PLCs for the reading content area. Of course, I also step into math, science, all of them, really, but I think I'm more involved with the reading because that's my background, but our leadership team takes the time when it is a grade-level PLC. We all participate, we all provide input, and then we have conversations.

Emily elaborated on what the support and the collaboration cycle looks like in her school.

So I like to meet with the leaders to talk to them about what is our expected outcome of the PLC there and what should happen in the meantime. So as we're visiting classrooms, we're looking for opportunities for support. We're looking for, "Okay, there's a misconception here. How can we bring teachers to the table to address this or strengthen their lesson in some aspect when we see areas of concern as we do our weekly walkthroughs?" So we're constantly at the table. As a principal, I'm talking to them about

how they can support what we are doing to be a cohesive unit because we want to, again, make sure we're all articulating the same expectations in the same message to all of the teachers.

Participants shared descriptively detailed accounts of what PLCs looked like and sounded like at their prospective campuses during the interviews. A repeated theme of communicating the same message and providing consistent opportunities to collaborate spoke to a "one band, one sound" concept.

Phyllis talked about how clear expectations should be provided by the leader and the role should ensure that the faculty is adhering to the expectations agreed upon. She also expressed that the systems to inspect should have a rubric to show the level of competence. Phyllis made this point by saying, "I mean the leadership team must be a part of the team meetings, documentations of what is planned must be in place for all to refer to at any time. This is done by inspecting what you expect."

Building the capacity of teachers as leaders was an important principal move that participants indicated would lead to student improvement. Leslie talked about coaching and development.

I say coaches, meaning these are people that will go into teacher leaders, that go into classrooms, observe a lesson, give you feedback, tell you some ideas that maybe have worked with them in their classrooms and things like that. This has been proven to be very, very helpful for our campus. And as a result of that, I've seen our data grow in our assessments with those particular teachers that have these career teacher leaders and mentors that work with them because they feel comfortable. That gives them another view of what the expectations are for our campus. Because, of course, these teacher leaders are on board with the expectations that I have for the campus as well as what they see as a whole for the campus.

Skilled and capable school administrators that support the principal and vision of the work in schools by engaging teachers in coaching and feedback activities is viewed as a critical part of increasing student achievement in their Title I schools. Phyllis mentioned the use of a rubric as a concrete tool utilized by the administrative team to support school expectations by having clear measures for competency that all understand. Though evaluation was not mentioned by participants, using such measures to guide the level of quality instruction strengthens the coaching and feedback process. Phyllis reinforced the impact of monitoring progress when referring to rubrics as an important tool in instructional improvement process. Tamara added her view on the importance of communication from her seat.

Communication is very, very important, and most of the times I like for that communication, those important things to come from me because there's something about when the principal sets those expectations as opposed to others on the team, it's a sense of urgency. So that's why it's so important for the principal to be the one who communicates those things, and then your leadership team can be the ones to assist with follow through and making sure that it's happening.

The participants referred to leadership teams that include their consistent presence in planning meetings and professional learning sessions. The detail provided by principals expressed active participation with teachers as coaches, aligning activities with predetermined goals for what instructional looks like in classrooms.

### **Summary of Findings**

The findings of how the dispositions and practices of principals at Title I schools influence student achievement revealed that principals held deep convictions about the importance of a quality education as a solution to breaking the poverty cycle and to overall success in life. The findings revealed that principals believed that common vision,

responsiveness to change, open communication, collaboration, and strong systems and processes were influential in shaping positive student outcomes in high poverty schools. However, the participants in this study felt that a strong voice of expectations steeped with a clear understanding of their communities from the school principal inspired positive school culture leading to increased student achievement.

### **Conclusion**

District support is often not a topic initiated as making a positive difference to increase performance in Title I schools. Principals perceived that when little to no autonomy is provided to the principal from district leadership, it hinders their impact on making progress in their schools. Building trust with teachers and community by involving their input by challenging the process was a common characteristic of the participants in this study. The existence of school-wide practices of planning, coaching, and collaboration within professional learning communities became a recurring theme among all the participants.

## CHAPTER V:

### SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

This phenomenological study examined the perceptions of elementary principals in Title I schools on leadership dispositions and practices that influence student achievement. This chapter discusses the findings reported in Chapter IV. In addition, this chapter presents the relationship to the theoretical framework, relationship to research questions, considerations for school districts, recommendations for practice, and implications for future research.

#### **Discussion of Findings**

While teacher efficacy (confidence in one's ability to impact student performance) is considered the primary factor for improving student outcomes, school leadership is the second most influential factor (Pannell & McBrayer, 2022). Findings of this study are expected to contribute to the body of knowledge needed to assist principals in becoming more effective leaders in increasing student achievement for students living in poverty. Prior research and a review of existing literature have verified that there is a strong correlation between the leadership of principals and the school culture (Eshbach & Henderson, 2010; Paul, 2015). According to Hoy (2012), socioeconomic status (SES) has a strong influence on the educational achievement of the students, but it is not something that can be changed easily. Consequently, it is important to find organizational variables that are as effective as the SES in predicting the achievement of the students (Hoy, 2012).

I designed my study to examine how principal dispositions and practices influence academic growth orientation toward student achievement. Based on the

participants' responses, eight categories that emerged throughout the study were (a) principal beliefs and convictions, (b) community informed decision making, (c) systems and processes, (d) collaboration and consensus building, (e) response to change, (f) celebration, (g) professional learning communities, and (h) instructional leadership. Previous researchers have concluded that strong leadership of a principal is a key factor for an effective school and can make a difference in the achievement of its students (Lezotte & Snyder, 2011; McKinney et al., 2015). The themes derived from this research of Title I principals that experienced high academic progress with impoverished students, will help develop a grounded theory that can be shared with others to help increase student performance toward closing achievement gaps.

As a result of the findings, I concluded that K-5 schools must acknowledge the belief systems of principals about the poor shape their ability to effectively influence the environment toward academic improvement in Title I schools. Specifically, if an understanding or a desire to seek an understanding of generational poverty and the belief systems that exist within it, principals' actions and practices are influenced by a deeper conviction that access to quality education breaks the cycle of poverty leading to overall success in life. Therefore, it is important that school districts develop principal development programs that inform aspiring leaders not only of cultural relevance, but the culture of poverty that students and adults bring from their communities with them to the schoolhouse. When a deeper understanding of this exists, decision making and practices are influenced to foster healthy school cultures that lead to increased student achievement. Additionally, the use of leadership aptitude tests that screen for



administrators that create positive teaching and learning environments for both teachers and students in diverse high poverty schools can assist with best ‘fit’ for principals in Title I elementary schools.

### **Relation to Theoretical Framework**

The current study used Kouzes’ and Posner’s Exemplary Leadership model to explore the leadership practices of the school principals. These researchers refined the work of Burns (1978) who first introduced a shift in theory that provided a conceptual foundation for the research on Bass and Avolio (1990) who presented the formal theory of transformational and transactional leadership. The development of the Full Range Leadership Model was refined to identify transformational, laissez-faire, and two components of transactional leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1990, 1993).

The operationalization of the construct of leadership for this study was based Kouzes and Posner (1993) who emphasized leadership as a mutual process by establishing leader-follower trust, central for transformational leadership. Transformational leadership is defined by four leadership characteristics of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Avolio, 1993). Over a span of 20 years, Kouzes and Posner’s (2002) research has suggested that leadership is a collection of observable behaviors and practices as opposed to a position or personality. These practices serve as a guidance for leaders to accomplish their achievements or “to get extraordinary things done” that explains leadership and performance beyond expectations (Abutineh et al., 2009).

The data were analyzed through the lens of the transformational leadership framework as a means to develop high-performing principals who produce high progress schools. Transformational leadership theory improves the structures that enhance organizational performance (Jiang et al., 2017). After extensive research, they identified five best practices that are the most common leadership practices when the leaders are at their personal best. These practices are Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). These practices are found to be the essential elements of transformational leadership (Abutineh et al., 2009).

Kouzes and Posner (2002) stated that leaders inspire a shared vision by speaking with genuine conviction about the higher meaning and purpose of the work. The theme of strong school systems centered around communication and collaboration through professional learning communities was repeated in my study, showing how their long-term interest of creating strong students in elementary school leads to highly literate learners in secondary is realized by enlisting a common vision as a transformational characteristic. Inspiring a shared vision is an exemplary practice the researchers referred to as painting a “big picture” of what the school aspires to accomplish (Campos, 2020; Jiang, 2017)

Multiple types of school-wide systems are employed at the Title I schools led by the participants in the study. Leading with a purpose as another practice of Kouzes and Posner’s Exemplary Leadership model was observed by a commitment to quality Tier I instruction, response to intervention, data conferences, individualized intervention plans,

and multiple forms of intentional lesson planning strategies as school-wide expectations. Repeated mention of the importance of participating directly with planning and communicating the expectations through their example is reflective of Modeling the Way, which Kouzes and Posner (2002) referred to as an exemplary practice. The processes and systems described in this study by participants included seeking challenging opportunities to test skills and abilities which is characteristic of Challenging the Process (Abutineh et al., 2009). Additionally, an importance placed on adherence to collective agreements and policies outlined in their school professional handbooks is reflective of the practice of Modeling the Way. Enabling others to act empowers followers through active participation in PLCs was common language among all participants when professional learning took place at their campuses. The importance of collaboration about students, and open communication involving all internal and external stakeholders to have voice in response to change was essential to build human dignity in their school environments. Participants communicated how important rewards and celebration were to their students and teachers by encouraging the heart. Principals intentionally celebrating achievements promoted a successful working environment by rewarding for attendance, growth, achievement, and contributions to the school, allowing people to feel part of a whole. Based upon the responses of the participants, processes were described in detail that reflect characteristics of transformational leadership.

### **Summary**

The participants of my study believed that access to education can open doors that can change circumstances in life. These circumstances can be environmental, physical,

career, and economic status. Participants also believed that education was a set up for success as it impacts the way one thinks, problem solves, advocates for oneself, and increases the ability to make better life choices.

Two of the 10 participants felt that education was not a predictor of success. However, all 10 of the participants believed strongly that access to quality education and providing various experiences in impoverished communities comparable to affluent communities afforded increased opportunities for success in life.

Conversely, challenges were present that impacted their influence on achievement in their school environments. Four of the 10 participants shared multiple aspects of lack of engagement by parents as a barrier to their success in improving student outcomes in Title I schools. Lack of knowledge or consistent effort with how to help their children at home and poor attendance were perceived as barriers to the impact that can be made in schools. Equitable funding available for neighborhood schools that do not receive programs aligned to special populations schools posed an additional barrier to dedicated efforts in schools with high numbers of impoverished students. The multiple needs that SES requires like tutors, intervention curricula, and additional staffing to support teaching and learning leaves schools under resourced, mirroring the communities they serve. Battling teacher burnout that creates vacancies and a revolving door year after year on their campuses was also mentioned as a barrier. Consistency for students and efficient, productive school systems provide the fertile ground that fosters increased student achievement through healthy school cultures.

## **Connection to Literature**

Poor students usually face hardship and negativity in their personal life compared to affluent counterparts. As a result, the culture of the Title I schools is often impinged by the negativity of their life experience which eventually impedes the education of the students. Hopson and Lee (2011) found a positive influence of school climate and culture on student achievement in poor schools. Maslowski (2001) defined school culture as the norms and values shared by school members that influence their functioning at school. Fullan (2001) found there are strong associations between effective principals and school cultures that support learning. Positive school culture is of high importance in all schools, and even more in the Title I schools because schools can provide the nurturing environment which many of the poor students lack at home. Sergiovanni (2007) reported that when high commitment and high performance are present, they seem to be distinguishing features of schools with healthy cultures and high levels of staff well-being (Sergiovanni, 2007). Based on the collected data, participants communicated the importance of feeling heard, acknowledged, and validated. Participants in this study also described the systems around celebration of student progress and teacher recognition in their schools in great detail. Therefore, understanding the leadership practices and dispositions of the principal, and how they align with the environment created around teaching and learning are tied to each other. This is valuable to help the poor students succeed and close the achievement gap in Title I elementary schools.

“Some families and communities, particularly in poverty stricken areas, do not value or understand formal education” (Lacour & Tissington, 2011, p. 526). Though

being in poverty is rarely about lack of intelligence or ability, many individuals stay in poverty because they cannot see choices or opportunities beyond their circumstance. Moreover, if they do see choices, there are limited or inconsistent models present to teach or navigate pathways or provide resources. However, there are those who exit the cycle of poverty. As an unintentional finding in the data, six of the 10 participants of my study were products of poverty. Four participants descriptively shared their upbringing within poor communities and connected their experiences and the opportunities that led to their present way of life representative of a middle-class lifestyle and value system. The viewpoints shared by the participants reflected one of the four reasons Ruby Payne (2008) claimed that individuals leave poverty: a vision realized of what they want to have or be, a role model who shows them a different way or paints a compelling picture of a different life, or a talent or ability that provides a pathway for them. There was no connection made with the fourth reason by the six participants, a situation so painful that anything else could be a vehicle out of their circumstance (Payne, 2008).

Prior research has examined the leadership practices of school principals using Kouzes and Posner's Exemplary Leadership model (Graybeal, 2015; Hagel, 2014; Hughes, 2013; McKinney et al., 2015; Merritt, 2016; Paul, 2015; Roy, 2019). Literature and studies have given us insight on how the role of the school principal is second only to that of the classroom teacher to impact student achievement (Marzano et al., 2005). Conversely, Mestry (2017) said that feelings of inadequacy and the absence of the necessary leadership skills to lead and manage schools successfully could be a contributing factor in the prevalence of low-performing schools. Conversely, Northouse

(2022) added to the existing research that transformational leaders are intrinsically motivated. The findings of this study provide insight into the imbedded belief systems of school principals, which at the root, inspire a deeper level of commitment to serving in challenging high poverty school settings. These belief systems intrinsically inform dispositions of principals that translate to the moves transformational leaders make to improve academic outcomes in Title I schools.

Hutton (2019) further explained that attempts to unpack the characteristics of a high-performing principal had been made since the 1940s. A research study conducted by Racheal Alex (2023) attempted to do the same, resulting in almost 40 different responses. Participants in the study identified numerous perceived characteristics of a high-performing principal and each response was different. Alex reported that perceived characteristics of a high-performing principal varied from “efficient” to “structured” to “empathetic.” Consequently, the plethora of skills needed in addition to a disposition toward successfully performing in a principal capacity explains why the characteristics of a high-performing principal remain undefined.

### **Implications for Practice**

The collected data from this study demonstrated that through the transformational framework, teachers and members of the school community are not only connected to the mission of the school but are given opportunities to partner with one another through collaborative processes and with the principal to shape decisions in elementary educational settings. These opportunities to have a voice in the actions that respond to change in elementary Title I schools, empower teachers to become authentic stakeholders

as willing professional learners and engaged participants toward common goals. When these conditions exist, schools serving in impoverished communities are able to sustain positive school climate to provide stable, enriched environments that improve learning. The implications, as leaders utilize multiple systems for collaboration and meaningful communication to increase positive academic outcomes, a deeper understanding of poverty can be a valuable resource in challenging communities to promote sustainable progress in closing the achievement gap.

The dispositions and practices of elementary principals should create an environment where the leadership team is actively involved in professional learning and curriculum and instruction activities along with their teachers.

The dispositions and practices of elementary principals should create a safe coaching environment where teachers are receiving consistent instructional support and monitoring to increase academic outcomes.

The dispositions and practices of elementary principals should create an environment where communication and collaborative practices around student-centered decisions are central to a culture created in the school community.

The dispositions and practices of elementary principals should create a climate of open communication where teacher and community input is validated as meaningful voices as systems are being developed, implemented, and evaluated throughout the decision-making process.

The dispositions and practices of elementary principals should create a system where teachers and students receive motivation rewards to increase academic outcomes.



### **Implications for Future Research**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to provide a deeper understanding of how elementary principals interpret their leadership dispositions and practices that enable their schools to improve student outcomes in Title 1 schools. The findings of this study and the similarities to the literature signify how important it is to focus on improving principal competence to increase student achievement in high poverty schools. Findings from the research study point to a set of practical recommendations that can be implemented by future school system leaders including superintendents, district leadership and development personnel, regional service centers, and aspiring principals to develop high-performing principals in high poverty schools. The researcher analyzed the relationship between the exemplary leadership of the principals defined by Kouzes and Posner's model and the characteristics of transformational leadership Title I elementary schools to fill in the gap of prior research and extend the knowledge base in this context.

The theoretical framework on which this study is based provides information about leadership dispositions that include interpersonal skills and personal qualities that build trusting relationships and create positive learning environments to influence student outcomes (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). This framework calls attention to the impact of leadership behavior, style, approaches, and strategies employed by principals toward school improvement in complex educational settings.

When developing high-performing principals, the educational community might benefit from exploring the backgrounds of principals, their understanding of and their belief systems about poverty that influence conditions in Title I schools. This essentially

would be a gap between middle-class values and those of the poor that prompts an improved understanding that shapes common dispositions held toward the work.

The first recommendation that emerged from the findings is the need for district central office leaders to assess the knowledge and beliefs held by aspiring principals toward the poor. There is a growing need for both district leaders and principals to invest more time seeking understanding of the value systems of the poor and how their way of life differs from that of the middle class. Districts would be served to enhance leadership development programming by guiding the hiring process with informed evaluation tools for the work. The Haberman Method (Haberman, 2011) provides resources and pre-screeners that predict which candidates will succeed as school principals serving diverse students in urban poverty.

I would also recommend that Principal Educator Preparation Programs should evaluate their curricula to address the principal role through the lens of unique challenges present to educate youth in urban poverty. College course requirements should align with the understanding and task requirements for applying their knowledge and skills to become an instructional leader to the principal certification exam. Additionally, district leaders, regional service centers, and higher education need to understand and place increased investment in professional development focusing on understanding culture, context, and social relationships central to a leader's ability to get people to work together toward common goals (Peppers, 2015).

Future research should also focus on Title I schools nationwide that includes an expanded sample size. A larger sample may provide more conclusive evidence of belief

systems that exist among principals based on a broader demographic base that demonstrates characteristics of transformational leaders and student achievement. Additional study expanded to explore dispositions and practices of secondary principals would greatly contribute to existing research as well.

Another recommendation for future study is to explore the influence of principal dispositions and practice from the perspective of students and teachers. Students of urban poverty would be able to provide a perspective that speaks to the needs of the learner in school environments and how their perceptions align to that of the adults. Additional study should be conducted including the perceptions of teachers with their own value systems versus the belief systems of impoverished students they serve relating to the topic of school leadership. Educational research often focuses on the theoretical frameworks or adult practitioner, leaving the voice of those they serve out of the story (Snow, 2017). Moreover, collecting data from teachers and principals that work in high poverty urban settings, would provide additional information to analyze leadership perceptions in progressing Title I schools.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

The results of this phenomenological study of elementary principals in Title I schools demonstrated that there is a correlation between the exemplary leadership practices of the principal and the environment that fosters improved student achievement in Title I elementary schools. The outcome of the study may have future implications with respect to how principals can lead Title I elementary schools to improve the educational achievement of the students. The findings add to the limited literature that

exists about leadership dispositions that shape decision making of principals who are finding success in improving student achievement. While there have been numerous studies conducted that focus on teacher quality, there has been little research centered on principal quality.

Alex (2023) concurred with Grissom et al. (2019) that research exists examining how multiple measures influence principal ratings, but defining the high-performing principal remains problematic. Such knowledge helps to develop a framework from perceptions and belief systems of principals that can guide district leaders, Principal Educator Preparation Programs, and novice principals to develop enhanced skills that move the academic needle toward closing the achievement gap in Title I elementary schools.

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APPENDIX A:  
INTERVIEW COVER LETTER



University  
of Houston  
Clear Lake

July 2, 2023

Dear Principal:

As a doctoral student at the University of Houston Clear-Lake, I am conducting a research study to examine perceptions of principals that influence leadership dispositions and practices on student achievement in Title I schools. At this point in the dissertation process, I have completed chapters 1, 2, and 3, and I am now looking to gather the necessary data in order to complete my study. Because you are a principal in the Southeast Region of Texas, you are being solicited to participate in a semi-structured interview. The data obtained from this study will also provide feedback on principal development programs and hiring practices that may produce high-performing principals. This semi-structured interview will take 30-60 minutes to complete. All of your responses will be kept completely confidential. No obvious undue risks will be endured and you may stop your participation at any time. In addition, you will also not benefit directly from your participation in the study.

**Requested Actions:**

- You will receive an email containing the Informed Consent Document for signature. Please complete at your earliest convenience.
- You will receive an email with a list of dates and times to conduct the interview to select an appropriate time for your participation.

Your cooperation is greatly appreciated and your willingness to participate in this study is not only greatly appreciated, but invaluable. Should you have any further questions, please feel free to contact Traci Lightfoot at [glight1069@yahoo.com](mailto:glight1069@yahoo.com).

Thank you!

Sincerely,

Traci Lightfoot

Doctoral Candidate

Educational Leadership



[glight1069@yahoo.com](mailto:glight1069@yahoo.com)

APPENDIX B:  
INFORMED CONSENT



**INFORMED CONSENT: ADULT RESEARCH PARTICIPANT**

You are being asked to participate in the research project described below. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate, or you may decide to stop your participation at any time. Should you refuse to participate in the study or should you withdraw your consent and stop participation in the study, your decision will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you may otherwise be entitled. You are being asked to read the information below carefully and ask questions about anything you don't understand before deciding whether or not to participate.

**Title:** Examining the Influence of Leadership Dispositions and Practices on Student Achievement in Title I Schools

**Student Investigator(s):** Traci Lightfoot

**Faculty Sponsor:** Antonio Corrales, Ed.D.

**Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this study is to examine the influence of principals' perceptions of leadership dispositions and practices on student achievement in Title 1 elementary schools.

**Procedures:** For this qualitative phenomenological study, the researcher will solicit a purposeful sample of at least 10 participants who are principals in Title I elementary schools to participate in a semi-structured interview. Participants will answer open-ended questions about your perceptions and experience regarding qualities and practices that leaders possess to improve student achievement in high poverty schools.

**Expected Duration:** The total anticipated interview time will be 30-60 minutes.

**Risks of Participation:** There are no anticipated risks associated with participation in the study.

### **Benefits to the Subject**

There is no direct benefit received from your participation in this study, but your participation will help the investigator(s) to better understand the influence of leadership dispositions and practice that improves student achievement.

### **Confidentiality of Records**

Every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of your study records. The data collected from the study will be used for educational and publication purposes, however, you will not be identified by name. For federal audit purposes, the participant's documentation for this research project will be maintained and safeguarded by the Principal Investigator for a minimum of five years after completion of the study. After that time, the participant's documentation may be destroyed.

### **Compensation**

There is no financial compensation to be offered for participation in the study.

### **Investigator's Right to Withdraw Participant**

The investigator has the right to withdraw you from this study at any time.

### **Contact Information for Questions or Problems**

If you have additional questions during the course of this study about the research or any related problem, you may contact the Student Researcher, Traci Lightfoot by telephone at 832-489-5994 or by email at [glight1069@yahoo.com](mailto:glight1069@yahoo.com).

## **Signatures**

Your signature below acknowledges your voluntary participation in this research project. Such participation does not release the investigator(s), institution(s), sponsor(s) or granting agency(s) from their professional and ethical responsibility to you. By signing the form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.

The purpose of this study, procedures to be followed, and explanation of risks or benefits have been explained to you. You have been allowed to ask questions and your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. You have been told who to contact if you have additional questions. You have read this consent form and voluntarily agree to participate as a subject in this study. You are free to withdraw your consent at any time by contacting the Principle Investigator or Student Researcher/Faculty Sponsor. You will be given a copy of the consent form you have signed.

**Subject's printed name:**

**Signature of Subject:**

**Date:**

Using language that is understandable and appropriate, I have discussed this project and the items listed above with the subject.

**Printed name and title:**

**Signature of Person Obtaining Consent:**

**Date:**

THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON-CLEAR LAKE (UHCL) COMMITTEE FOR PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS HAS REVIEWED AND APPROVED THIS PROJECT. ANY QUESTIONS REGARDING YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH SUBJECT MAY BE ADDRESSED TO THE UHCL COMMITTEE FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS

(281.283.3015). ALL RESEARCH PROJECTS THAT ARE CARRIED OUT BY INVESTIGATORS AT UHCL ARE GOVERNED BY REQUIREMENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY AND THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT.

(FEDERALWIDE ASSURANCE #FWA00004068

APPENDIX C:  
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND SCRIPT

My name is Traci Lightfoot and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Houston Clear Lake. The purpose of my research is to examine the influence of principals' perceptions of leadership dispositions and practices on student achievement in Title I elementary schools.

As an executive district leader, I have the opportunity to engage with many levels of leadership, but the role of the principal in high poverty schools speaks to my heart. As a former principal, I understand the need for clear school-wide systems and high expectations and alignment in order to close achievement gaps in Title I schools. I am hopeful that my research will offer insight into the belief systems and dispositions of high-progress principals serving in impoverished communities.

Before we begin, I must obtain your consent to conduct this interview. Although we spoke about the interview process, I want to give you a moment to read, sign, and answer any questions you may have before we begin.

I want to assure you that there will be no identifiable information shared from this interview in the research. Your participation in this interview will remain confidential and is voluntary. The recording of this interview is to ensure that I capture your responses accurately so I can fully engage in our conversation.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Please answer questions with as much detail as possible.

1. How many years have you been a principal?
2. Is the campus you serve a Title I Elementary school?
3. To what extent do you believe that access to quality education is a solution to poverty as a principal from your perspective?

4. How does your understanding of impoverished communities shape leadership decisions as a principal?
5. Did any prior experiences prepare you for your principal role? If so, how?
6. What systems and processes have been implemented to support equitable outcomes for all students as principal? Describe.
7. What strategies and support have been implemented to teachers to ensure effective planning and processes from the principal?
8. Specifically, who is involved with the planning? Do you as the principal have direct involvement in the decision making process when it comes to planning? If so, how?
9. What other campus processes or systems are in place besides PLCs that promote a common vision to help improve student outcomes? If present, describe them.
10. Do you think there is a direct correlation between staff collaboration and celebration of student outcomes by the principal? If yes, describe what that looks like.
11. What systems are in place that ensure staff adhere to the expectations and standards agreed upon?
12. What systems are in place to ensure all teachers have voice/input in the decision making process and promote initiative in response to change by the principal? If so, describe them.
13. What systems are in place to determine, track, and evaluate campus or student goals and targets if any?
14. What systems are in place to ensure instructional consistency from class to class to improve student outcomes for all students?
15. Are there any other factors that you perceive influence or challenge your effectiveness with closing the achievement gap as a principal in Title I school you would like to add?

Thank you so much for participating in this interview. Your insight and experience will add tremendous value to my research. Before we conclude, I want to make sure you have my contact information should you have any questions. I also want to know whether I may contact you if I have any questions or need clarification after analyzing the interview.

Again, thank you for your valuable time.

APPENDIX D:  
CITI PROGRAM CERTIFICATE



Completion Date 15-Oct-2023  
Expiration Date 15-Oct-2026  
Record ID 53273259

This is to certify that:

**Traci Lightfoot**

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Not valid for renewal of  
certification through CME.

**Social-Behavioral-Educational Researchers**  
(Curriculum Group)

**Social-Behavioral-Educational Researchers**  
(Course Learner Group)

**1 - Basic Course**  
(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

**University of Houston-Clear Lake**

**CITI**  
Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative



APPENDIX E:  
CPHS APPROVAL



University  
of Houston  
Clear Lake

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs

**Institutional Review Board (IRB)**

**REVIEW ACTION**

<b>DATE:</b>	October 26, 2023
<b>TO:</b>	Antonio Corrales, Ed.D. and Traci Lightfoot
<b>PROPOSAL TITLE:</b>	Examining the Influence of Leadership Dispositions and Practices on Student Achievement in Title I Schools
<b>IRB #</b>	24-017
<b>REMARKS:</b>	Exempt determination based on DHHS Code of Federal Regulations, HHS 45 CFR 46.104

The University of Houston-Clear Lake IRB has reviewed the above-referenced human subject research protocol and consent form(s). This study was determined to be Exempt Research (Category 2).

The research study may now be initiated. Any modifications in the study or to the informed consent procedure must receive review and approval prior to implementation unless the change is necessary for the safety of subjects.

Any adverse events encountered during the study must be reported promptly by calling (281) 283-3015. Written documentation of the adverse event must be received by the IRB via Sponsored Programs within five (5) working days. Any new and significant information that may impact a research participant's safety or willingness to continue in the study must also be reported.

The UHCL IRB is organized and operated according to the US Code of Federal Regulations and operates under Federalwide Assurance No. 00004068.

Sincerely,

Kathryn I. Matthew, Ed.D.  
Institutional Signing Official  
FWA00004068  
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
sponsoredprograms@uhcl.edu