Best Practices of National Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA) Distinguished Principals

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Social Justice Leadership: Best Practices of National ESEA Distinguished Principals

Amielia Sietta Mitchell

Abstract

As the practice of social justice in traditional schools becomes embedded in the discourse of educational settings (Theoharis, 2007), school leaders are increasingly being required to practice social justice leadership by identifying and initiating practices that engage students from diverse and underserved backgrounds. The purpose of this study was to identify the leadership practices of six former and current principals who have led National ESEA Distinguished Schools (formerly National Title I Distinguished Schools) in the United States. These principals work with diverse student populations that typically struggle to make academic gains and meet state standards. As such, this study sought to delve into the leadership practices of Title I principals. By understanding the leadership practices in which these principals engaged, and how consistent these practices are with the principles of social justice, a model of social justice leadership can be postulated for consideration. A qualitative research methodology, in-depth phenomenological interviews (Seidman, 2013) was used. Open-ended questions were posed during the semi-structured interviews of the principals. The findings in this study provide details on what actions six Title I principals from districts across the United States took to lead their schools to National ESEA Distinguished School status. These social justice leaders address the social structures of oppression, privilege, and opportunity that can deprive marginalized student groups from access to educational opportunity. Principals reported that the actions they took to ensure equity and fairness were around creating safe and orderly learning environments, professional learning communities, and professional development for staff.
Social Justice Leadership: Best Practices of National ESEA Distinguished Principals

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General Audience Abstract

This study will provide insight into the leadership practices of Title I principals and how they successfully led Title I schools and gained national recognition. The National Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Distinguished Schools (formerly National Title I Distinguished Schools) Programs recognizes schools for their growth in student academic achievement. The purpose of this study was to identify the leadership practices of these principals and to understand how consistent these practices are with the principles of social justice leadership. The target population of the study was principals from six Title I schools who obtained National Distinguished ESEA School status. These principals work with diverse student populations that typically struggle to make academic gains and meet state standards. Each principal participated in a 60-minute, semi-structured interview. The purpose of the interview was to uncover and encapsulate a person’s experience (Seidman, 2013). The analysis of the experiences of these leaders provided a lens that other school leaders might consider to improve their leadership practice. The data analysis indicated that these social justice leaders address the social structures of oppression, privilege, and opportunity that can deprive marginalized student groups of access to educational opportunity. Principals reported that the actions they took to ensure equity and fairness were around creating safe and orderly learning environments, professional learning communities, and professional development for staff. Findings from the study indicated more research is needed on the practices of social justice leadership.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, William Mitchell, who supported me mentally and physically through this process. Your words of encouragement and willingness to support my goal while pursuing this degree was amazing. You stood by me as I tried to balance the principalship, course work, research demands, and family responsibilities. I am grateful for the support and love you provided me and for taking this journey with me.
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When I began my doctoral program, I was nervous because I was working full-time as a principal in a challenging school. I spent long hours at work and this doctoral program would add to my time away from home. I was not sure how I would find time to attend classes, study, research, and write this dissertation. I want to thank my amazing family for enduring years of my graduate study. I am grateful for the support, love and encouragement I received from my amazing husband, William, and my daughters Stephanie and Tiffany. Thank you for picking up the slack and keeping me motivated. To my mother, Geneva Dokes, and my aunt, Dr. Lottie Adams, who have always led by example and supported me in my pursuit of higher education. Thank you for your love and being on my team. To my sister, Lisa Hale, who spent hours reading my draft and making suggestions, thank you!

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Chapter 1

Background of the Study

*Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.* Martin Luther King, Jr.

Public schools are expected to educate all students who enter the building. Student demographics continue to change as the nation becomes more diverse. In the fall of 2016, 50.6 million students attended public schools, of which 35.4 million students were in pre-kindergarten through grade eight and 15.1 million were in grades nine through 12, according to a 2019 report from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The NCES report also noted the percentage of students attending high poverty schools was higher for Hispanic students (45%) followed by Black students (44%), American Indian/Alaskan Native (38%) Pacific Islander (24%), Asian (14%) and White students (14%). In 2017-2018, 7.0 million students, between the ages of 3 and 21, received special education services (NCES, 2019). According to this report, 9.6% of students in all public schools were English Language Learners (ELLs); however, there is a vast differential in the percentages of ELLs across the country. For example, the percentage of ELLs in West Virginia is as low as 0.9% while in California it is as high as 20.2%.

The Children’s Defense Fund (2017) reported that one in five children under 6 were poor and lived in poverty and that 70% of these children were children of color. Poverty places stress on families and impedes a child’s development, which creates opportunity gaps that can last a lifetime. Children growing up in poverty compared to children who did not grow up in poverty are more likely to be poor at age 30 (Wagmiller and Adelman, 2009). Poverty is quite complex and future leaders need to understand its cause and how it impacts other social justice issues (Lyman & Villani, 2002). According to the Children’s Defense Fund (2017), in 2015, 75% of Black and Hispanic fourth and eighth grade public school students in poverty could not read at
their grade level. And it affects graduation rates, as well—during the 2016-2017 school year, 72% American Indian/Alaskan Native students, 78% of Black students, and 80% of Hispanic students graduated from public schools, compared to 89% of White students. Furthermore, in 2017, the dropout rates for White students (4.3%) were much lower than the dropout rate for Black students (6.5%) and Hispanic (8.2%).

Education can equip children with the skills and opportunities necessary to gain social, economic, and political capital in society (Children’s Defense Fund, 2017). Education can serve as the catalyst to improve the disparity in wealth and economic opportunities between individuals living in poverty or from disadvantaged backgrounds and those from higher socioeconomic classes, and can also improve employment opportunities, status, and overall well-being (Weems, 2013). These disparities in wealth and economic opportunity reinforce class division and impact student outcomes in school (Lyman & Villani, 2002). Schools must find ways to ensure that social justice practices are utilized in schools to close opportunity gaps for all students.

Statement of the Problem

Schools are becoming more culturally and racially diverse, and by 2020 almost half of all high school graduates will be students of color (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). As the populations of minority students and ELLs increase, the achievement gap of at-risk subgroups also grows larger (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Schools struggle to educate diverse student populations, as seen in the large discrepancies among the academic success of White students and students from low socioeconomic statuses, racially diverse backgrounds and homes where the primary language is not English. Schools often fail to educate students effectively, as evidenced by the reading and math performance on standardized tests.
The education of students from diverse cultural backgrounds poses an increasingly critical challenge, which many school leaders are working to address. School leaders are aware of the achievement gap between White students and students of color and the subsequent consequences of the reading and math data in relationship to federal accountability systems. However, school leaders commonly lack a systematic view of how schools can successfully educate a diverse student population (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

There are several challenges that often hinder school leaders in delivering educational programming that meet the needs of their students; however, some school leaders implement successful school practices that close gaps and raise student achievement. An analysis of this body of literature is discussed in the literature review.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to identify the leadership practices and actions of principals who successfully led Title I schools and gained national recognition. The National ESEA Distinguished Schools program recognizes schools that have compelling growth in their student academics. Each state selects up to two schools per year for this recognition, which is based on closing the achievement gap between student groups, outstanding student performance for two or more years, or excellence in serving special populations of students (e.g., homeless, migrant, ELLs) ([https://www.eseanetwork.org/ds](https://www.eseanetwork.org/ds), 2019). These principals work in schools with student populations that traditionally struggle to make academic gains and meet state standards. Principals for this study were identified because of their success in leading successful Title I schools. Ideally, by understanding their experiences we can explore those leadership practices necessary to help other principals develop the skills to provide equitable opportunities for the students they serve.
Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was developed from reconceptualizing and combining the social justice work of West (2004) and Starratt (1994). The Beachum and McCray (2010) framework combines the best of both in their Tripartite Framework of Social Justice in Education Leadership.

West (2004) outlined three moral pillars of democracy: Socratic questioning, prophetic justice, and tragicomic hope. Socratic questioning is disciplined questioning that can be used to explore complex concepts, principles, theories, issues, or problems. Prophetic justice involves genuine empathy, compassion, and responsiveness to justice toward the oppressed. Tragicomic hope is the ability to retain a sense of joy and preserve hope when life is most difficult. There is an emphasis on continuous reflection and working toward, equity, equality, and fairness in various social areas. Similarly, Starratt (1994) suggested a Conceptual Framework for Ethics in Education for practicing administrators, which included the following ethics: (1) ethic of critique, (2) ethic of justice, and (3) ethic of caring (Furman, 2004). The ethic of critique has to do with questioning why things are the way they are. Thus, administrators can reflect upon social justice issues of equity, access, inclusion, and distribution of resources. Critique involves challenging the status quo by participating in social discourse to ensure that marginalized student populations are heard, and inequities exposed (Starratt, 1994). The ethic of justice provides an opportunity for administrators to address challenges to equity by determining what is just and fair for the individual and for the school community. The ethic of caring addresses values such as loyalty, trust, compassion, and empathy (Beachum and McCray, 2010, p. 213). Furman (2012) noted that the ethic of caring is a balance between the ethic of justice and critique with an
emphasis on relationships and individual needs, calling for administrators to show care, concern, and connections with stakeholders to solve moral dilemmas.

Beachum and McCray’s (2010) Tripartite Framework of Social Justice in Education Leadership combines both models for educational leadership, as outlined in Table 1. They designed their framework using the categories of active inquiry, equitable insight, and pragmatic optimism.

**Table 1**

*Tripartite Framework of Social Justice in Educational Leadership*

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<td>Socratic questioning</td>
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<td>Prophetic justice</td>
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**Active inquiry.** This first leg of the Tripartite Framework combines Socratic questioning and the ethic of critique. Socratic questioning is the application of rigorous critique or questioning to explore complex ideas and uncover assumptions. West (2004) noted that Socratic questioning could be used for the continuous self-examination and critique of institutions, intellectual integrity, and moral consistency. The ethic of critique is a close analysis of who benefits, who is dominating, and who has privilege. Combining these two concepts, active inquiry therefore requires school leaders to question and reflect upon their school practices and how those practices impact student achievement. Leaders ask questions and examine patterns of underrepresentation of minority students in gifted programs and overrepresentation of minority
students in special education programs. They ask questions about equity, labeling, stereotyping, tracking, and disparate funding programs of marginalized student groups.

Equitable insight. Equitable insight is about justice, addressing needs, and recognizing the leader’s responsibility to act. It fuses West’s (2004) prophetic justice and Starratt’s (1994) ethic of justice together. Dyson (2005) noted that there is a mutual relationship between immediate and ultimate responsibility. Immediate responsibility involves leaders acting to address issues and problems of justice in their current learning environments. These leaders believe their job is to provide an orderly and safe school community for their students. Effective school leaders believe the ultimate responsibility is to make sure every student has what they need to learn and grow. Equitable insight requires leaders to take decisive actions to create an environment that fosters student creativity and meets the critical needs of the school community. Equitable insight demands that social justice is viewed along a continuum of immediate and ultimate responsibility, with the goal of eradicating inequity in schools and society (Beachum & McCray, 2010, p. 214).

Pragmatic optimism. Pragmatic optimism combines West’s (2004) tragicomic hope and Starratt’s (1994) ethic of caring. It is through a sense of practical hope that the leader can inspire, encourage, and empower their staff and students through positive interactions and healthy relationships. Practical optimism is about resiliency and a sense of advocacy. Relationships with staff and students are very important and encourage hope, action, and advocacy to create social changes. Leaders who possess pragmatic optimism have a sense of inspiration and dedication to the education of all students. They focus on developing resiliency and advocacy within their staff. Their goal is to serve as role models and enable others to act (Beachum & McCray, 2010). Fullan (2014) noted that leaders must understand and develop five
core themes to be successful: understanding change, moral purpose, relationship building,
coherence making, and knowledge creation.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study were:

1. What are the leadership practices of principals in National ESEA Distinguished
   Schools (formerly National Title I Distinguished Schools)?
   a. How did the participants become Title I principals?
   b. How did the Title I principals lead their schools to achieve National ESEA
      Distinguished School status?
   c. In what social justice practices did the Title I principal engage?

Definition of Terms

- Achievement Gap: It is the difference in student performance of the lowest performing
  groups and the highest achieving group in mathematics and reading as is determined by
  state assessments (U.S. Department of Education).

- Active Inquiry: The practice of leaders questioning and reflecting on school practices that
  impact student achievement. Leaders question and examine patterns around equity,
  labeling, stereotyping, tracking, and disparity of marginalized student groups (Beachum
  & McCray, 2010).

- Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP): The accountability measurement for ESEA (formerly
  No Child Left Behind). It is the measure “to meet the State’s student academic
  achievement standards, while working toward the goal of narrowing the achievement
  gaps in the State, local educational agencies, and schools” (NCLB, 2001, p. 22).
• Diversity: It includes all the ways people differ. It is all inclusive and recognizes and values everyone and every group.

• English Language Learners (ELLs): These students are from non-English speaking backgrounds and require specialized instruction to learn English (U.S. Department of Education).

• Equitable Insight: Equitable insight is about justice, addressing the needs of all students, and recognizing the leader’s responsibility to act (Beachum & McCray, 2010).

• Equity: Is the guarantee of fair treatment, access and opportunities for all regardless of their race, genders, language, sexual orientation, disability, ethnicity, religion and family background or family income by eliminating barriers that prevent access and opportunity.

• Leadership Style: This is “the nexus of all those behaviors and practices that school principals use to influence the behavior of others” (Brauckmann & Pashiardis, 2011).

• No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), 2002: Federal legislation designed to provide federal funds to educate disadvantaged students to close the achievement gap, enhance the academic performance of all students and meet state standards as measured by AYP (NCLB, 2001).

• Practical Optimism: A sense of practical hope that the leader can inspire, encourage, and empower their staff and students through positive interactions and healthy relationships (Beachum & McCray, 2010).

• Social Justice: A “deliberate intervention that requires the moral use of force” and is linked to educational leadership practices (Theoharis, 2007).

• Social Justice Leadership: Leadership that seeks to provide all groups with the support and intervention needed to be successful in society (Turban, 2010).
• Title I School: “A school that serves an eligible school attendance area in which not less than 40 percent of the children are from low-income families, or not less than 40 percent of the children enrolled in the school are from such families” (NCLB, 2001, p. 47).

Limitations

This phenomenological study is based on interviews with six Title I principals from across the United States. The purpose was to understand the participant’s lived experience from their perspective (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Therefore, the experiences of others who may possess different perspectives regarding the phenomenon were not considered. Moreover, a relatively small number of principals were interviewed, so while the results of this study may prove beneficial to other principals, they are not generalizable in the statistical sense.

Delimitations

This study identified the leadership practices of former and current principals who have led National ESEA Distinguished Schools. The participants were selected from the 2015 and 2018 awardees that represented schools from pre-kindergarten through sixth grade. From this sampling, 23 principals emerged as possible participants for this study. Given the purpose of this research, only elementary schools were selected. Therefore, data was not gathered regarding other grade levels or schools that are not identified as Title I.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

*Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable ... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals.*

*Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*

This literature review explores various studies that examine a growing body of research on social justice leadership. It provides a foundation for understanding where and how social justice fits within the current state of school leadership and reform. This literature review is organized into five parts. The first section begins with a discussion of how social justice leadership has been defined by various scholars. Next is a discussion of the principal’s role in schools. The third section of the literature focuses on the principal as the social justice leader and includes essential characteristics, leadership styles, and challenges to implementing social justice leadership. The fourth section of this literature review provides several models for implementing social justice leadership. The final section is a discussion of Title I and the National ESEA Distinguished Schools program.

**Understanding Social Justice Leadership**

The difficulty in understanding social justice leadership first begins with the term itself (Novak, 2000). In one of the earliest definitions, Rasinski (1987) defined social justice as a belief or value-based attitude concerning the imbalance of opportunities of some social groups compared with other groups. Ten years later Bell (1997) suggested that:

“The goal of social justice is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs,” (p. 3) while, “the process for attaining the goal of
social justice …should be democratic and participatory, inclusive and affirming of human agency and human capacities collaboratively to create change” (p. 4).

As such, scholars have broadly defined social justice as efforts to eliminate inequalities such as poverty, sexism, racism, and disability (Marshall & Gerstle-Pepin, 2005). While scholars have not agreed-upon precise definition of the term “social justice leadership,” what follows is a discussion of some of the standard definitions of social justice leadership that have been proposed by scholars.

Goldfarb and Grinbert (2002) concluded that social justice is equity, equality, and fairness in multiple social areas and an inherent human right. Bogotch (2002), on the other hand, characterized social justice as a concept based on the experiences of the participants and believed that its meaning is challenging and dynamic. He argued there is no fixed meaning without being engaged in educational practices. Furman and Gruenewald (2004) built upon Bogotch’s (2002) work and suggested that there are several definitions of social justice and believe they have a “shared, although imprecise, meaning during certain periods of time” (p. 50). These scholars also identified another set of shared meanings that focus on the “desired outcomes of these social/critical-humanist perspectives in schools” (p. 51). Other researchers share this perspective and use student under-achievement as an indicator of social justice practice, believing that the inequalities have resulted from unequal power relations (Furman & Gruenewald, 2004)

Dantley and Tillman (2010) suggested that a social justice leader questions the procedures and policies in schools which continue social inequalities due to racial background, sexual orientation, disability, and other factors that have historically resulted in marginalization. For them, the work of social justice leadership is about addressing and resolving inequalities and marginalization that impact student success (Theoharis, 2007). In general, social justice
leadership is about creating more equitable schools (Dantley & Tillman, 2010). This requires persistence and a long-term perspective, as DeMatthews and Mawhinney (2014) have noted:

The gritty experiences of social justice work, particularly under the most difficult circumstances, do not always result in positive outcomes, at least not in the short term. The fact that persistent historical and structural marginalization not only exists but is pervasive in education underscores the fact that eliminating inequities is an ongoing struggle rather than a singular battle fought and won over the course of a school year (p. 846).

Furman (2012) noted that many leading scholars of social justice believe the focus should be on the experiences and inequities experienced by marginalized groups, and on improving educational outcomes of these groups. Ultimately, social justice requires leaders who successfully resolve inequities and marginalization and are activists for social justice through school reforms that seek to improve academic achievement for all students. For this study, social justice leaders are defined as school principals who believe they can create educational opportunities for all students by creating supportive, high-quality instructional environments that support the academic achievement for all their students. This includes addressing the social structures of oppression, privilege, and opportunity that impact marginalized student groups.

**The Role of the School Principal**

A school principal is the primary leader in a school. Hughes and Ubben (1989) addressed the principal’s role in this manner: “No enterprise will operate for long without a competent Chief Executive; the plethora of ‘effective schools’ research has made it abundantly clear, effective schools are the results of the activities of effective principals” (p. 3). With the authorization of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002, the role and expectations of the
principal changed from manager to instructional leader (Rigby, 2016). As managers, the principals were responsible for the overall operations of their school; however, as instructional leaders they are primarily responsible for student achievement. Instructional leadership theory grew out of work done in poor urban elementary schools (Edmonds, 1979) as students in these schools succeeded under effective instructional leadership that limited disruptions and required faculty and staff to maintain high expectations for teaching and learning. In the 1990s, principals were considered change experts and later became accountability leaders with the introduction of (NCLB). Principals worked to maintain positive relationships with teachers, students, parents, and community leaders. Their focus was on creating a school climate and culture that promoted student achievement (MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009).

As the role of the principal has evolved to focus more on efficacy and relationship building, the goals of the school have also changed. According to Elmore (2003), since the mid-20th century, the goal of the school has been to focus on the education, learning, and achievements of all students. Portin, Knapp, Alejano, and Marzolf (2006) noted that schools today and those in the past had different social and academic expectations and environments. Dantley and Tillman (2010) have developed the following definition on the principal role in schools:

These principals advocate, lead, and keep at the center of their practice and vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States. This definition centers on addressing and eliminating marginalization in schools. In doing so, inclusive schooling practices for students with disabilities, ELLs, and other students traditionally segregated in schools are also necessitated by this definition (p. 222).
Blackmore (2009) identified the principal as a key factor in leading schools. The principal sets the vision and mission for the work around student achievement and leads a culture and climate conducive to student success. The role of the principal is constantly evolving and is often hard to define. In the past, the role of principals focused on creating a vision and mission, developing school structures, and performing a plethora of administrative duties. The goal of most principals is to improve classroom instructional practices; however, they are often consumed with managerial tasks which take up a large amount of their time.

Simkin, Charner, and Suss (2010) asked school personnel to rank in order of importance 21 education issues. Principal leadership was second to teacher quality as the most important education issue. Principals make an indirect impact on student achievement by addressing pedagogy, providing professional development, and developing a positive school environment for learning (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010).

Green (2010, 2013) suggested that the principal’s role was to set an atmosphere of high expectations with an emphasis on teaching and learning and noted that school climate was something that must be experienced by the school community as opposed to managerial task. School principals must meet the needs of all students by providing a positive and safe learning community. The principal ideally works as an activist to create an environment where all students are successful by eliminating gaps and increasing opportunities for all students to succeed.

**Principals as Social Justice Leaders**

The principal’s role is essential in promoting social justice issues because their job is to provide opportunities and to mitigate the impact of social injustices on their students (Capper & Young, 2014). It is critical that principals have a vision for addressing social justice issues of
gender, race, disability, sexism, and other historically marginalized conditions in their leadership practices (Theoharis, 2007, 2009).

Social justice principals often exhibit different goals and priorities. McKenzie, Chrisman, Hernandez, Fierro, Capper, Dantley, and Scheurich, (2008) identified the following goals to achieve social justice: (1) raise student achievement for all, (2) teach students to be good citizens, and (3) provide heterogeneous and inclusive classrooms for students to learn and grow. Each of the goals is discussed in the next section.

One of the primary goals of principals is raising student achievement. With the inception of NCLB in 2001, the increased attention to standards, instruction, and student performance on assessments have made these issues a priority for principals. Their focus is on creating a school culture and climate that promotes student achievement (MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009). Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003) analyzed 30 years of research on effective leadership of schools and found that leaders who possess the requisite knowledge, skills, and effective strategies can improve student achievement; however, when leaders are unaware and unprepared to utilize the necessary leadership skills, student achievement suffers. The ability of effective principals to lead and support teachers is associated with gains in student achievement in as little as a single school year (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013). The principal’s leadership has a profound impact on teaching and learning.

Another goal of a social justice principal is preparing students to become productive citizens, since social justice is also related to student identity, happiness, and community engagement (Ylimaki, 2012). While academic achievement and school accountability initiatives encompass most of the principal’s time, principals who focus on social justice understand that a focus on social justice can contribute to achievement and accountability, as well as their role in
impacting social changes. Ubben, Hughes, and Norris (2011) noted that leaders must address the whole child by focusing on the academic, social, and emotional needs of students. School principals and staff must engage in dialogue to confront the impact of race, social class, language, ethnicity, culture, religion, gender, and disability on equity and access to education for their students.

Finally, social justice principals ensure that students learn in heterogeneous, inclusive classrooms. The challenge for educators is to create schools and classroom cultures where all students, regardless of their background, feel welcomed and respected and given the opportunity to learn.

Characteristics of Social Justice Principals

Several studies have illuminated some of the professional and personal characteristics of social justice principals (Frattura & Capper, 2007; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003; Theoharis, 2009). Common themes that emerge from the literature on professional and personal characteristics of social justice principals include principal visibility, having an ethical and moral purpose, having an activist orientation, believing equity is essential, and maintaining high expectations for student learning and achievement. I will discuss these themes in the next section.

Visibility. Social justice principals are visible, accessible, and responsive to the students, families, and staff of their school community. The high level of visibility allows principals to understand the inequities that persist in their school and to provide solutions (Bogotch, 2002; Dantley & Tillman, 2010). They can use their technical expertise and instructional leadership practices to solve problems and address concerns. Gorski (2013) suggested that staff members often do not understand the social issues present in schools and may take the idea of equity for granted, making assumptions about students and families. Social justice leaders must therefore
model behavior and help school staff understand and focus their time on improving educational opportunities for all students by closing gaps.

**Ethical and moral purpose.** Several studies have identified ethical and moral purpose as a guiding principle for social justice principals (Brown, Irby, & Yang, 2008; Johnson-Bailey, Baumgartner & Bowles, 2010, Scheurich & Skrla, 2003; Stevens, 2007). For example, Scheurich and Skrla (2003) noted that leaders with a strong moral purpose were committed to providing an equitable education to the students they served. They found that these leaders share three characteristics: (1) excellence and equity as central elements to an ethical and moral core, (2) belief in excellence and equity for all, and (3) a determination to achieve excellence and equity for their students (Weems, 2013). Stevenson (2007) noted that these leaders are committed to inclusion and equity and have a sense of moral purpose.

Dantley and Tillman (2010) reviewed several studies where there was an emphasis on dismantling racism and oppression of marginalized groups for positive educational outcomes by incorporating equity, justice, moral value, and care into their practice. They noted that “Leadership for social justice interrogates the policies and procedures that shape schools and at the same time perpetuates social inequalities and marginalization due to race, class, gender, and other markers of differences” (Dantley & Tillman, 2010, p. 31). Social justice leaders “believe they have a moral obligation to address the marginalization of historically disenfranchised groups” (Rivera-McCutchen, 2014, p. 749). Marshall and Oliva (2010) described social justice leadership as leaders who respond with “moral outrage” as student learners continue to be denied access to opportunities and experience inequities. Thus, in many ways social justice leadership is grounded in moral obligation or purpose (Theoharis, 2009).
Educational leaders of social justice must understand that students are entitled to a fair opportunity to pursue high academic achievement. So, principals must work to meet the individual and collective needs of students by shaping and adjusting school practices. They do this by ensuring equitable distribution of resources and by providing a safe and secure environment and access to equitable opportunities. Teachers who had positive perceptions of their principals’ ethical leadership have indicated that ethics and moral purpose were important characteristics of principals (Brown, Irby, & Yang, 2008)

**Activist component.** Johnson-Bailey, Baumgartner, and Bowles (2010) also noted an activist component is evident in social justice principals. The activist component helps principals understand the need to pursue injustices in their schools. These leaders continually advocate on behalf of their students to ensure that injustices are alleviated for systematically oppressed groups of students. Social justice is about human rights and ensuring that equity, equality, and fairness is afforded to all students. For this reason, social justice efforts often strive to address poverty, racism, heterosexism, sexism, poverty, disability, and other cultural and social inequalities (Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin, 2005). An activist in the field of education must continue to foster a school culture and climate that nurtures children and families and ensures they feel a sense of belonging (Dantley & Tillman, 2010). Social justice principals aspire to create “caring communities where relationships matter” (Marshall & Olivia, 2010). Therefore, rejecting traditional paradigms and creating an inclusive community is essential for educating marginalized populations (Theoharis, 2009) and practicing social justice leadership from an activist lens.

**Equity.** The concepts of equity and social justice are closely linked and frequently interchangeable when discussing closing the opportunity gap for students from disadvantaged
and marginalized student populations (Wang, 2012). Using equity to define social justice is challenging because equity is a complex term with multiple meanings (Wang, 2012). It is often used to justify various positions and belief systems around student achievement and how equity is measured. Some believe equity is about equal access or opportunity to services, while others argue it is about the fairness of outcomes. A key principle of justice is about equality as sameness and opportunity (Wang, 2012). Rawls (1971) introduced the concept of “justice and fairness” and the shift in philosophy from the individual needs to the needs of the greater society. According to Rawls (1971) the two central principles of justice are liberty and equal distribution of resources.

**High expectations.** Social justice principals believe that high expectations are essential for teaching and learning. Scheurich (1998) found that the principal’s personal beliefs play an important role and noted that principals with high expectations have five common beliefs. According to Scheurich (1998), these principals believe: (1) All students can learn at high levels, (2) a child-centered school is essential, (3) children should be cared for and treated with love and respect, (4) a child’s cultural and racial background should be valued, and (5) the school serves the community. Organizations with these core beliefs can influence a school’s ability to be high performing academically.

**Leadership Styles of Social Justice Principals**

Brauckmann and Pashiardis (2011) outlined five leadership styles as a model for principals to use to embody social justice leadership. The five styles — instructional, personnel development, entrepreneurial, participative, and structuring — provide a framework to support student achievement and address the needs of marginalized student populations. What follows is
a brief overview of the five leadership styles and how principals use them to move from theory to practice.

**Instructional.** The instructional style is centered on improving teaching and learning (Brauckmann & Pashiardis, 2011). School leaders with this leadership style set high expectations, aim to define learning objectives, align teaching and learning, and monitor and evaluate the instructional practices (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). Theoharis and Brooks (2013) noted that these school leaders are motivated and committed to closing the gaps and raising the bar for all students, especially those who are members of marginalized populations. These leaders think outside the box to find new ways for students to fully access the curriculum regardless of their cultural background. Furthermore, these principals find opportunities for all students to feel a sense of belonging by addressing the linguistic, cultural, socioeconomic, and learning diversity in the school community (Brauckmann & Pashiardis, 2011).

**Personnel development.** Professional development is the cornerstone of the personnel development style (Brauckmann & Pashiardis, 2011). Effective principals provide ongoing professional development for staff by creating a vision and goals for staff individually and collectively to improve teaching and learning. Relevant structures are put in place to build trust and team building, which in turn builds staff capacity to tackle the work. Developing teachers to support the school’s goals is crucial in supporting students who struggle academically (Stevenson, 2007). It is also important to develop professional development around equity and issues associated with social justice (Theoharis, 2009).

**Entrepreneurial.** The entrepreneurial style identifies community resources that support the implementation of the school mission and vision (Brauckmann & Pashiardis, 2011). For example, school administrators with this style would develop a school culture that invites parent
involvement, community, and outside agencies to partner with the school. Principals can create a network of partnerships with local organizations and business, which can help provide resources for school support and activities. The use of community resources can also contribute to creating a school climate of “belonging.” (Theoharis, 2009; Theoharis & Brooks, 2013).

**Participative.** Participative style is centered around organizational management activities with a focus on people and on the school culture and climate (Brauckmann & Pashiardis, 2011). The participative principal recognizes the importance of relationships and interacting with others in making decisions. A principal with this style of leadership would access the collective expertise and leadership skills of the staff to make formal and informal decisions. This leadership style is about collaboration and developing a collaborative culture in which all stakeholders have an opportunity to give input into the work and direction of the school.

**Structuring.** This leadership style provides clarity around the vision and mission of the school. Clarity provides direction and focus for a clear vision and agenda (Brauckmann & Pashiardis, 2011). Obtaining clarity of purpose provides meaning and purpose for the staff (Davies & Davies, 2010). This style requires the principal to take risks to change current policies and strategies. Structuring requires a clear understanding of the factors that impact student achievement as well as a clear vision for equity and excellence (Theoharis, 2009). The primary focus of this type of school leader is to improve teaching and learning, set high expectations, and monitor and evaluate instructional practices (Nettles & Herrington, 2007, Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2003; Zembylas, 2010). Structural principals use their resources to raise the bar to improve teaching and learning of all students and especially those from
marginalized student populations (Theoharis & Brooks, 2013). This type of leader often challenges the status quo to provide new opportunities for students to access the curriculum.

**Challenges to Implementing Social Justice Practices**

There are several challenges that influence principals who try to lead from a social justice paradigm. Common themes from the research include: the persistence of deficit thinking (Kose, 2009; Theoharis, 2007; Weems, 2013); preserving the status quo (Garza, 2008; Theoharis, 2007; Weems, 2013); negative effects of accountability policies (Furman, 2012; Furman & Gruenewald, 2004; Marshall, 2004; Weems, 2013); lack of preparation in education leadership programs (Theoharis, 2007; Weems, 2013); and the professional and personal costs of implementing social justice practices (Theoharis, 2007; Weems, 2013). The research related to these challenges is discussed in the next section.

**Deficit thinking.** The deficit discourse is a racial frame that identifies students of color as lacking. It blames the student’s community for the state of their school and ignores students as resources. This thinking often leads to excessive discipline and a lack of opportunities for students of color. Gorski (2013) has suggested that the challenge of poverty is purely philosophical rather than practical. He believes that many problems have arisen because educators designed interventions with a deficit lens — “A lens that grays out the gross inequalities” (Gorski, 2013). Such inequalities include lack of educational opportunities, but also basic human needs such as health care, housing, etc. Gorski (2014) identified deficit approaches to intervention as often superficial in nature, such as canned food drives, coats for winter, and providing blankets for the homeless, and suggested that these small acts do not change the conditions of inequalities in our schools. The persistence of deficit thinking
perpetuates the oppression of traditionally marginalized student populations (Kose, 2009; Theoharis, 2007).

**Preserving the status quo.** Goldfarb and Grinberg (2002) suggested that social justice leaders must interrupt the “status quo” (p. 115). However, making changes that are generally accepted and expected in a school setting is not easy for school leaders. When changes are made conflict often occurs. March and Simon (1993) have argued that when conflict is perceived, leaders are motivated to find ways to reduce that conflict because it is difficult to stabilize internal conflict in an organization. It requires the leader to focus their efforts toward resolving both individual and intergroup conflict within the organization. There are times when there is ambiguity about decision making, doubt, or a lack of trust and it becomes easy to maintain the status quo (Tschannen-Moran, 2014).

Bazerman and Moore (2012) have suggested it is easier to stay with the status quo rather than try something new, particularly when it is difficult to decide on a course of action. But a focus on maintaining the status quo can often prevent leaders from looking for new or alternative solutions to conflicts or problems. Tschannen-Moran (2014) noted, “Schools are likely to flounder in their attempts to provide constructive educational environments and meet the challenging goals … because the energy needed to solve the complex problem of educating a diverse group of students is diverted toward self-protection” (p. 24). Chiu and Walker (2007) believe that the interconnection between disadvantaged groups obstructs educational and social progress. Resistance becomes an important issue, when principals endeavor to disrupt the status quo, especially when their actions are in direct conflict with local constituents and the belief systems of traditionally privileged groups of stakeholders (Theoharis, 2007).
**Negative effects of accountability policies.** Leithwood and Riehl (2005) argued that the relationship between social justice leadership and accountability policies can produce negative consequences for traditionally marginalized student populations, because of increased focus on student scores on standardized tests. School leaders face a tremendous amount of pressure to develop school plans with a single, narrow focus on increasing test scores for marginalized student groups and students that fall in certain gap groups. This focus often leads to reducing teaching and learning to basic reading and math skills to improve test scores (Larson & Mauradha, 2002). Karpinski and Lugg (2006) argued that the added pressure of accountability distracts leaders from issues related to social justice to more managerial issues.

**Lack of preparation in education leadership programs.** Principal preparation is an important factor in improving student achievement. Young, Madsen, and Young (2010) found that principals were unprepared to lead diverse schools, develop policy in response to diversity issues, or even participate in the meaningful discourse around diversity. Vogel (2010) suggested that principals must be ready to address diversity issues related to equity and culture. A strong leadership preparation program should provide opportunities for principals to reflect on their leadership practices and how values, beliefs, attitudes, and experiences impact their leadership practices with diverse populations.

School leadership development programs should include an explicit focus on leadership for social justice. Hawley and James (2010) surveyed 62 universities across the United States on the “courses resources, and strategies used to teach educational leaders how to support students from diverse races and ethnicities achieve at high levels” (p.1). They concluded that school leadership programs typically failed to address the skills needed to address inequities in schools, leaving candidates with an appearance of preparation but a lack of appropriate knowledge and
preparation. Principal candidates are often unprepared to address inequities around race, gender, poverty, language minorities, or students with disabilities. They leave principal preparation programs without the skills, strategies, or rationale needed to address the unique needs of their students and most college faculties provide no professional development in social justice (Marshall, 2004) because many instructors in these programs also lack the skills and level of expertise to address social justice concerns (Hawley & James, 2010). It is essential that school leadership programs teach aspiring leaders the key components to becoming critically conscious, culturally competent, and inclusive.

**Personal and professional cost of implementing social justice.** School leaders who challenge the current discourse around school leadership and accountability based on the ideas around social justice often face resistance from their communities. Garza (2008) survived persistent efforts by community members to defame and force him out of the school district when he made changes to the education system that addressed social inequities. Theoharis (2007) has also noted that school leaders face opposition when they attempt to change the status quo. Principals are often faced with local community pressures and attitudes around sexual orientation, religious beliefs, race, and gender that hinder them from making decisions that address inequities for marginalized communities. And they often face negative consequences in their professional and personal lives when they resist community pressure. Rapp (2002) expressed pessimism that school leaders would not be able to maintain a social justice commitment because the price is too high. Despite the barriers listed above, social justice principals are engaged in discourse to find and implement models of social justice leadership that will impact the academic achievement of their students.

**Models of Social Justice Leadership**
Research around social justice leadership mostly focuses on theory and not on models or practice, though scholars in the field are calling for more research on practices and models of social justice leadership (Kose, 2009; Theoharis, 2008; Weems, 2013). In one study that did focus on practice, Theoharis (2009) examined social justice leadership practices of school leaders serving racially, socioeconomically, and linguistically diverse student populations and identified the following practices that social justice leaders used to improve student achievement: (1) providing an inclusive and welcoming school culture, (2) developing collaborative teams to analyze and address data through an equity lens, (3) developing a team of administrators to help with the work, and (4) holding high expectations for student achievement (Theoharis, 2008).

Theoharis (2009) provided a framework for understanding how social justice leadership occurs in public schools. The four components to the framework are listed in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. The four components of Theoharis’ (2009) framework](image)

The conceptual framework developed by (Theoharis, 2009) is based on his research of social justice principals “committed to creating more just and equitable schools” (p. 1). The four components and the seven keys are listed in Table 2.
Table 2


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Components and Keys</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Social Justice Leader (p. 13).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key 1. Acquire broad, reconceptualized consciousness/knowledge/skill base.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key 2. Possess core leadership traits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging Justice and Facing Barriers (p. 14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key 3. Advance inclusion, access, and opportunity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key 4. Improve the core learning context—both teaching and the curriculum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key 5. Create a climate of belonging.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key 6. Raise student achievement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing Resistance (p. 16).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key 7. Sustain oneself professionally and personally.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


The specific components associated with the keys above are essential for student achievement (Theoharis, 2009). Social justice leaders are expected to work through this process in closing the access and opportunity gap for all their students, independent of their background. Researchers have developed different models and theories around social justice practices that close gaps and enhances educational experiences for all students. Table 3 contains a description of those practices.
### Table 3

**Social Justice Leadership Practices**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of Practices</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Eliminates pullout and segregated programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Learns about, understands, values diversity, and cultural respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Provide professional development opportunities from a framework that addresses concerns around race, gender, and disability etc..</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Improve curriculum and teaching delivery to ensure access to diverse students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ensures that access and opportunities are provided for all students both academically and socially.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Addresses the problems collaboratively to ensure success for every child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Explores and uses data through an equity lens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The administrator aligns himself or herself with other activist administrators to continue the work</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The strategies above are employed to confront the current and historic practices of marginalization of student groups and their families. These social justice practices address the current injustices in closing the achievement gap for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

**Inclusive leadership.** Social inclusion is a core concept of the social justice agenda (Ryan, 2006). According to Ryan (2006), leadership for inclusion includes all stakeholders—educators, parents, and students, among others. It promotes opportunities for dialogue, collaboration, and building relationships to address inclusive practices to address the diverse values, beliefs, and culture of the school community. Inclusive leadership can be complex in diverse schools; however, Ryan, (2006) suggested that successful leaders exhibit inclusive
practices including identifying and educating the school community, advocating for inclusion, enhancing student learning opportunities, and engaging in a whole school approach to inclusive decision and policy making. Udvari-Solner & Kluth (1997) use this definition of inclusion:

Inclusive schooling propels a critique of contemporary school culture and thus encourages practitioners to reinvent what can be and should be to realize more humane, just, and democratic learning communities. Inequalities in treatment and educational opportunities are brought to the forefront, thereby fostering attention to human rights, respect for differences, and value of diversity. (p. 142)

**Disrupting injustices.** Social justice principals work to create more just and equitable schools by disrupting injustices. Theoharis (2010) identified four ways that school leaders can disrupt injustices: (1) eliminate school structures that segregate, marginalize, and hinder achievement; (2) remove unprofessional faculty and staff, (3) reject a school climate that does not connect to the racial and cultural differences it serves, and (4) eradicate disparate and low student achievement.

Theoharis (2010) conducted a study of school educators who demonstrated success with both their White students and their students from other racially and socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, and limited English learners. He identified concrete strategies that these principals used to create a successful school environment where all their students achieved academic success regardless of their diverse background. Table 4 identifies strategies school leaders used to disrupt social injustice practices in their schools and community.
### Table 4

*Strategies Principals Used to Disrupt Injustice*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies to Disrupt Injustice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Injustice 1: School structures that segregate, marginalize, and hinder achievement</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Eliminate segregated/pullout programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Increase student learning time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Increase rigor and access to opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Increase accountability systems on the achievement of all students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Injustice 2: Unprofessional faculty and staff</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Confronts racism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Provide equity focused staff development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Hires and supervises for justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Empowers staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Injustice 3: Disconnect between the school, community, minority, and low-income families</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Create a warm and welcoming climate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Intentionally reach out to the community and marginalized families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Incorporate social responsibility into the school curriculum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Injustice 4: Disparate and low student achievement</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Develop an action plan to converge of all efforts and strategies to improve student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>achievement.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Adapted from “Disrupting injustice: Principals narrate the strategies they use to improve their schools and advance social justice,” by G. Theoharis, 2010, *Teachers College Record, 112* (1), 331-373.
**Integrated comprehensive services.** Integrated comprehensive services (ICS) have been introduced as a model for social justice practices. Comprehensive services, based on the related concept of integrated services, are an assortment of supports and services around differentiated curriculum and instruction to support the academic and behavioral success of students (Frattura & Capper, 2007). These services provide a foundation for collaborative problem-solving by teams to find solutions to support all students in their academic success. Services are based on student need and students can access them during their school day. Frattura and Capper (2007) identified the four core principles of ICS, as shown in Figure 2.

![Figure 2: Core Principles of Integrated Comprehensive Services (Frattura & Capper, 2007)](image)

**Figure 2.** Core Principles of Integrated Comprehensive Services (Frattura & Capper, 2007)

Inclusion is an educational philosophy that requires schools to integrate all their students into age appropriate classrooms regardless of disability or other special needs (Katzman, 2007). As DeMatthew and Mawhinney (2014) have noted, “equitable and inclusive education for all students is a core element of social justice leadership because the pervasive system of segregation has established unequal outcomes for marginalized groups.” However, inclusivity
can be considered political because it impacts the distribution of resources and is connected to politics and equity. These definitions go beyond having students in the same classrooms to providing equitable opportunities for students to grow and learn in a school climate that values diversity, inclusion, and equity. It is about identifying and eliminating the inequalities that occur in schools and acting to resolve them (Bogotch, 2002; Dantley & Tillman, 2010). Principals who are committed to social justice can take risks and disrupt some of these inequalities in schools (Rivera-McCutchen, 2014).

**Title I, Part A (Title I)**

The Title I program seeks to close the educational achievement gap by providing all children with the opportunity to receive a fair and equitable education. The goal of the Title I program is for all students to meet state and local performance standards and for all schools to achieve the Annual Measurable Objectives (AMO) set by their state (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) funds Title I. Nearly 14,000 of the 15,000 school districts in the United States have Title I programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). In the 2015-2016 school year, almost 56,000 public schools in the United States used Title I funds, serving 26 million children with approximately 60% in grades K-5, 21% in grades 6-8, and 19% in grades 9-12 (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). These funds were used to assist students in meeting state standards and to raise academic achievement and close the gaps for student groups.

Title I funds provide additional resources to state and local educational agencies (LEAs) to implement schoolwide programs to support disadvantaged children and help to achieve the rigorous academic standards that are expected of all students. Local school districts use Title I
funds to enhance teaching and learning, provide counseling support, increase parent engagement, and improve school programming. Because of this additional funding, the federal government expects schools to meet accountability requirements to raise student achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). To qualify for Title I funds, a minimum of 40% of the student population must live in poverty or qualify for the free and reduced lunch program (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

National ESEA Distinguished Schools. The National Association of ESEA State Program Administrators (NAESPA) has been selecting examples of superior National Title I Distinguished Schools since 1996. Schools that meet this criterion demonstrate team approaches to teaching and learning with a strong emphasis on professional development for staff. Additionally, these schools develop partnerships among school stakeholders and implement individualized programs to support students. States select schools to be recognized based on one of the three categories below:

- Evidence of closing the achievement gap between student groups
- Exceptional student performance for two or more consecutive years
- Excellence in serving special populations of students (e.g., homeless, migrant, ELL)

Each state can select up to two schools for national recognition each year (ESEA Network, 2018).

Summary

The research on social justice leadership has at this point focused more on theory than practice (Bogotch, 2002, Kose, 2009, Theoharis, 2007). Beachum and McCray (2010) have suggested that researchers must begin to focus on actual practices in the field to keep social justice leadership from becoming another leadership theory that has little or no application for
school leaders (Weems, 2013). Social justice leadership is a leadership style that promotes activism and implements practices that focus on closing the achievement gap (Fraser, 2012). Several researchers have begun to conduct studies of practices that focus on school leadership and administration. Wasonga (2009), Kose (2009), and Theoharis (2007, 2009) all identified the principal as the unit of study. Their research examines the various aspects of principals’ practices, professional development, and perceptions and challenges they face in providing equity for all their students. This work builds upon that of Theoharis (2007), who identified principals who used an equity lens to mainstream their special education students. Kose (2009) studied how principals use professional development to support teachers and help them to infuse social justice practices into their practices. Ultimately, this study enhances the research on social justice leadership by identifying and learning from school leaders who have been successful with marginalized student populations.
Chapter 3

Research Methodology

Research is creating new knowledge. Neil Armstrong

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify the leadership practices of former and current principals who have led National ESEA Distinguished Schools. These principals work with diverse student populations that typically struggle to make academic gains and meet state standards. As Seidman (2013) noted, “while recognizing the limits of our understanding of others, we can work to comprehend them by understanding their actions” (p. ). This study therefore sought to delve into the leadership practices of Title I principals to better understand them and see what lessons could be drawn for others. Ultimately, this study will help to expand the field of school leadership studies by specifically focusing on principals of ESEA Distinguished schools and highlighting the practices of principals who embody social justice leadership. As the practice of social justice in traditional schools becomes embedded in the discourse of educational settings (Theoharis, 2007), school leaders are increasingly becoming required to practice social justice leadership by identifying and initiating practices that engage students from diverse and underserved backgrounds.

Research Questions

The research questions were:

1. What are the leadership practices of principals in National ESEA Distinguished Schools (formerly National Title I Distinguished Schools)?
   a. How did the participants become Title I principals?
   b. How did the Title I principals lead their schools to achieve National ESEA Distinguished School status?
c. In what social justice practices did the Title I principal engage?

**Research Design**

A qualitative research methodology, in-depth with phenomenological interviews (Seidman, 2013) was used to identify the leadership practices of National ESEA Distinguished Schools (formerly National Title I Distinguished Schools) principals. This study lends itself to phenomenological research methods for several reasons. Phenomenology is qualitative research that focuses on a “commonality of a lived experience” within a group and arriving at a description of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). For this reason, researchers conduct interviews with a group of individuals who possess first-hand knowledge of an event or experience (Seidman, 2013).

Phenomenology is the study of the shared meaning among similar experiences or phenomena for several individuals. It describes the experience from the participants point of view (Moustakas, 1994). According to Marshall and Rossman (2011), “Phenomenological approaches seek to explore, describe, and analyze the meaning of individual lived experiences” (p. 19). Baskarada (2014) asserted that a qualitative methodology provides a rich and complex understanding of the social context of this subject. The researcher must bracket out personal experiences before collecting data from the participants involved in the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

Open-ended questions were posed during the semi-structured interviews of the selected participants. Anderson and Holloway (2014) have noted that open-ended questions are rich and explanatory in nature, provide participants with the opportunity to respond in their own words, and evoke meaningful responses that are important to the participants. Furthermore, semi-
structured interviews offer more flexibility, allow the interviewer to prompt for more information, and provide a better understanding of the subject under study (Baskarada, 2014).

This study focused on what and how Title I principals implemented certain practices and strategies in the course of leading National ESEA Distinguished Schools. This qualitative study was intentionally set up to be flexible and open, and to allow for deep exploration of the leadership practices of National ESEA Distinguished principals (Patton, 2015). The phenomenological approach that was utilized in this study allowed the researcher to synthesize gathered data from interview narratives into a central meaning or “essence” of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). The questions posed by the researcher solicited stories that highlighted the leadership practices in which these principals engaged and how consistent these practices are with the principles of social justice leadership. Fundamentally, the research design provided an opportunity to examine each principal’s perspective on how their course of action influenced their school’s recognition as a National ESEA Distinguished School.

**Participant Selection**

Since the purpose of this study was to identify the leadership practices of principals who have been successful in working with students from underserved backgrounds, the leadership practices of principals who have led National ESEA Distinguished Schools were studied. Studying principals from Title I schools ensured that students within the target population were included in the research. Additionally, the requirements that the principals selected currently serve or previously served at a National ESEA Distinguished Schools ensured that principals in this study have been successful at such schools.

Since 1996, NAESPA, formerly the National Title I Association, has been selecting examples of superior, federally funded programs for national recognitions. Each school district
annually receives an invitation to nominate one school within their district for this award. The number of applicants varies from year to year. In 2018, one state reported that out of 132 districts, applications for the National ESEA Distinguished Schools award were received from 42 districts. Each district superintendent selects the applicant to represent their districts as well as the category. A committee is formed by each state’s Department of Education. The committee selects only two applicants to represent the state each year. For example, in the state of Virginia there have only been 14 schools selected for this award since 1996. This is a competitive process and schools must present evidence from the categories established by National ESEA Distinguished School’s Recognition Program.

The National ESEA Distinguished Schools are recognized for exceptional student achievement (ESEA Network, 2018). For a school to qualify for the National ESEA Distinguished School award, it must have a poverty rate of at least 35%, demonstrate high academic achievement (at least 80% of students being proficient in reading and mathematics), and make Adequate Yearly Progress for two consecutive years (ESEA Network, 2018). Up to one hundred schools across the United States are selected for this honor each year. Schools are selected from one of the categories: (1) closing the achievement gap between subgroups, (2) exceptional student performance for two or more consecutive years, or (3) excellence in serving special populations (e.g., homeless, migrant, ELL) or some combination of those categories (ESEA Network, 2018).

For this study, schools that received this recognition between 2015 through 2018 were selected. To narrow the search, additional criteria were used through a purposeful sampling strategy (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015). Purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to select participants that could provide valuable insights that would address the research question.
Principals were identified from the ESEA Distinguished Schools list with a poverty rate of 50% or higher, as designated by the percentage of school children receiving free and reduced meals at school, for grades pre-kindergarten through sixth grade, and with 30% or more ELLs. The data required to employ this sampling strategy are publicly available. From this purposeful sampling, 23 schools and principals emerged as possible participants for this study. These participants have at least two years of experience in their school, which allowed for several years of leadership impact within the school community.

From the generated list of identified schools and principals identified through this sampling, potential participants were contacted primarily by email. The email script (Appendix A) the purpose of the study, the qualifications of the participants, and the participants’ rights and interests for research reviews. Follow-up with these principals occurred through email (Appendix B) to confirm their interest and willingness to participate in this study. Participants that expressed interest were informed about the length of the interviews and the use of pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality in the study. Once a commitment was received, the participants were contacted by the researcher who then set up interviews in person or through video conferencing, specifically Google Meets. The need for confidentiality prevented the researcher from using the participants’ name and school. Therefore, pseudonyms were used for all participants’ names and schools.

**Data Collection**

Data collection for this phenomenological research was conducted through in-depth interviewing. Phenomenological interviews should be open or semi-structured (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Seidman (2013) notes that through in-depth interviewing, researchers develop an understanding of the participant’s lived experiences and can construct meaning from said
experiences. The interviews were scheduled for 90 minutes in length, as 60 minutes may not be long enough (Seidman, 2013).

The purpose of the interview questions were to solicit the participant’s reflections on their experiences as a Title I principal, focusing primarily on the participant’s experiences as the leader of a National ESEA Distinguished School. The interview responses were studied to better understand the participant’s unique experience (Stake, 2010) and to look for overall patterns.

The principals were emailed the interview questions and consent form a week before the scheduled interview. All interviews took place in person or through Google Meets at a time convenient for each participant and all interviews were conducted by the researcher. The participants were informed that the interviews would be recorded, and with approval, the interviews were recorded using two digital audio voice recorders. The interviews were transcribed by the researcher. Audio recording ensured that the information that the participants shared was recorded verbatim. The researcher spent time re-listening to each interview prior to coding and analyzing the collected data. This allowed the researcher to better analyze the data and develop logical conclusions. In addition to recording the interviews, the researcher also took notes using a note-taking outline (Appendix C). Written notes were always kept secure to assure confidentiality and referenced when appropriate.

A semi-structured interview protocol was used with all the participants for consistency. A prepared list of questions was asked of each participant (Appendix D). In addition, questions were asked, as deemed necessary, to probe the participant, to clarify information, to elaborate upon information, or to provide additional information about a situation. These probes are part of the protocol, though each probe was not necessarily used with each participant. There was an attempt to complete the interviews in an hour, but some lasted almost 90 minutes.
**Researcher as Instrument**

As an interviewer, the researcher was the instrument for data collection during the interviews with the participants. To protect the integrity of the data, the researcher established a system to ensure accuracy in the interpretation of the participants recorded ideas. To ensure accuracy the transcripts were reviewed against the audio recording on three separate occasions. Member checking was also used after the data from the audio recording was transcribed. The transcribed data was sent back to the participants for corrections or feedback.

**Data Analysis**

The purpose of the interview was to uncover and encapsulate the leader’s lived experience (Seidman, 2013). The analysis of the experiences of these leaders provided a lens that other school leaders can use to improve their practice. Given the parameters of the study, there was no attempt to generalize in the statistical sense. Instead connections were identified among the leadership practices of the identified group of Title I principals that were interviewed. Given that this group of leaders have proved successful as measured by their selection as members of the Distinguished Title I principal’s cohort, the similarities and patterns that emerged from the interviews created a narrative about social justice leadership.

Analyzing data collected during a qualitative study can be challenging (Creswell, 2013) and consists of several steps. The seven phases described by Marshall and Rossman (2011) were used for data analysis: organizing and immersion in the data, generating categories and themes, coding the data, offering an analytic interpretation, searching for alternative understanding, and writing up the findings. Each of these phases is described briefly here. Organizing the data includes checking for completeness and accuracy, keeping a record of notes, and assigning a unique identifier to each interview. Immersion into the data required time to read and reread
through the data on numerous occasions to become intimately familiar with the participants and identify quotes and themes that emerged. This process helped the researcher to understand each participant’s leadership experience. Specific attributes or characteristics from the Beachum and McCray (2010) framework as it related to active inquiry, equitable insight, and pragmatic optimism were identified during the process of coding the data. Coding took several forms, from identifying keywords and concepts from the literature review to identifying concepts referenced by the participants. Writing down the researcher’s thoughts throughout this process helped to focus the analysis and make the researcher’s thinking visible. This inductive analysis procedure (Patton, 2015) helped the researcher to discover themes, patterns, and categories. Open coding was used to generate theoretical categories from this information and clustering was used to connect the data from the participants’ interviews. This allowed the researcher to create diagrams of relationships and outline the overarching themes from the data. Once the categories and themes were developed, the data were interpreted to develop a coherent meaning of the categories, themes, and patterns that were identified. As Patton (2015) noted, interpretation requires the researcher to make sense of the findings, offer an interpretation, and drawing a conclusion. The final step of consolidating the findings of this study was developing a narrative that included collecting descriptive statistics about the individual principals, their school demographics, and other demographic information collected during the interview.

It was important to understand the degree to which each narrative provided information related to the themes of the research. To accomplish this, each narrative was considered as it related to each research question. From this, a thorough understanding of each participant’s experience was developed from the Beachum and McCray (2010) framework lens of active inquiry, equitable insight, and practical optimism.
Trustworthiness

Qualitative researchers use the concept of trustworthiness, which includes transferability, confirmability, dependability, and credibility, to establish the equivalence of reliability and validity (Chowdhury, 2015; Merriam, 2009). It is critical that validity and confidence are established in qualitative studies (Patton, 2015). The trustworthiness of this study was based on three techniques. Trustworthiness was established to include the interview protocol, member check, and reflexive journal. In the next section, all three techniques to promote trustworthiness in the research are described. The goal was to ensure that if the research were conducted by a different researcher, similar data would be generated if the researcher followed the same overall protocols used in this study.

**Dependability.** Qualitative dependability is equivalent to qualitative reliability (Chowdhury, 2015). The first technique used to obtain dependability is to ensure accurate and detailed note taking and that an adequate taping tool is used. The same interview protocol was used for each interview (Stake, 2010), though specific probes used with each participant were different. The protocol included a script that was used during each interview for consistency. The script contained critical details about the study and why the topic was chosen. It also contained information about the researcher to develop a rapport with the participant and information to help alleviate concerns the participant might have about confidentiality allowing them to speak freely about the topic.

**Credibility.** Credibility can be assured through personal self-reflection and deliberateness (Merriam, 2009). The research design, the collection of data, and the steps taken to manage and analyze the data enhance credibility (Creswell, 2013). Another strategy for improving the quality of this research is through a member check. Member checking is an
opportunity for the participants to check aspects of the data they provided (Creswell, 2013). The data is sent back to the participants after it is analyzed and interpreted. The interviewee can then evaluate and validate the interpretation. Participants in the study were asked to clarify, elaborate, or suggest changes if they are unhappy with the presentation of the information. The member check also gives the participants another opportunity to clarify or present new information.

McMillan and Schumacher (2006) suggested that triangulation is another strategy typically used to improve the validity and credibility of research. To help affirm assertions made, each interview was considered individually and compared to the other interviews (Stake, 2010). Triangulation of information helped build credibility and validation in the research (Patton, 2015). The use of triangulation controls for the researcher’s bias and supports the validity of the researcher (Stake, 2010). It also helps to avoid misleading the reader by checking for consistency among the data collected to verify all assertions (Stake, 2010).

**Transferability.** Qualitative transferability refers to how well the study can be transferred to a larger population and how well it fits outside of the context of the study (Marshall & Rosmann, 2011). The research is transferable to other Title I schools, given the nature of the principals being studied. The data provided will allow other principals to decide the degree to which the findings of this study can transfer to their work and schools.

**Conformability.** Trustworthiness and credibility can be assured only if the study can be replicated. To ensure conformability, a reflexivity journal was used throughout the research process. This journal served as a control for bias and enhanced the credibility and the quality of the research (Patton, 2015). One challenge for researchers when working with interviewees is to be fully present, committed to listening, and to maintain control of their own bias by not thinking of themselves and their own experiences throughout the interview process. Using a tool such as
a reflexivity journal, created a place for such reflection and was critical to eliminating bias in this research. Specifically, entries were made during the following stages of the research process: upon receiving IRB approval, as participants were being identified, after the participants were interviewed, after each interview was transcribed, during the coding and analysis stages of the research process, and during the process of writing this dissertation.

**Background of the Researcher**

My interest in social justice comes from my personal and professional experiences. I grew up in the south and by all indicators in poverty. I attended an all-Black elementary school in my neighborhood, and I felt successful there. I believed that the teachers cared for me and they were preparing me for the future. When I entered middle school, my family moved to a new city and I attended integrated schools for the first time. School was challenging, but I worked hard to finish high school. Along the way, I had the benefit of working with amazing teachers, counselors, and administrators who supported, guided and motivated me to excel in school.

For the past twenty five years, I have worked in the education field. I have been a teacher, counselor, and administrator. I have always worked in challenging and diverse school communities. I witnessed the inequitable conditions that scholars describe, and I know the answer is social justice. As a teacher, it was easy for me to tackle some of the inequities in my classroom. I could provide a warm welcoming atmosphere for my students and challenge them to pursue a more rigorous academic path with my support. As a counselor, I loved advocating and working with individual students and families to make high school graduation a reality and college a possibility.
This is my seventh year as a school principal, and I want to make a greater impact on the school community I serve. I believe it is my responsibility to ensure every student receives an equitable education. My goal has always been to make a difference in the lives of the students and families I serve. I have worked with several amazing leaders who have led their schools in a way that promoted socially just practices for their students. They faced a number of obstacles and challenges and continued to close the achievement gaps within their school community. I am interested in learning from these leaders and gaining an understanding of the challenges, barriers, and obstacles they faced as they engaged in social justice leadership practices. I believe this work will broaden my perspective and help me build a solid academic foundation to identify and provide meaningful strategies to support student academic achievement.

Summary

In addition to describing the research participants selected, this chapter described the research approach of phenomenology. Phenomenologists examine a subject’s feelings, beliefs, attitudes, and vision and provide an opportunity for the participant to make meaning of their work. National ESEA Distinguished principals studied through the lens of phenomenology were examined for their leadership beyond observable skills to include their thoughts, perceptions, emotions and conscious decisions around their actions. The aim of this research was to gather details about their leadership experiences and practices through structured interview questions.
Chapter 4

Findings

*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.* Margaret Mead

The goal of this study was to identify the leadership practices of former and current principals who have led National ESEA Distinguished Schools. This study identified how the participants became principals in Title I schools and the practices the participants implemented to help their schools achieve National Distinguished ESEA school status. Ultimately, this study will help to expand the field of social justice leadership studies by specifically focusing on principals of Distinguished ESEA schools and highlighting the practices of principals who embody social justice leadership.

The conceptual framework for this study was the Tripartite Framework of Social Justice in Education Leadership which was introduced by Beachum & McCray (2010). This framework was developed by combining and re-conceptualizing the social justice work of West (2004) and Starratt (1994). Active inquiry, equitable insight, and pragmatic optimism are the primary categories of this framework, which was outlined in Table 1.

A review of the context of the study and the participants’ school settings is discussed in this chapter. Next, the findings of the research question are addressed by asking the following sub-questions:

1. How did the participants become Title I principals?
2. How did the Title I principals lead their schools to achieve status as a National ESEA Distinguished Schools status?
3. In what social justice practices did the Title I principal engage?
The chapter ends with the overall findings of the main research question.

**Context of the Study**

Six principals who successfully led National ESEA Distinguished Schools were identified as participants for this study. Historically, the Title I program provided additional funding to schools and LEAs with a large percentage of children from low-economic families to assist these institutions meet state accountability standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Title I programs seek to close the educational achievement gap by providing all children with the opportunity to receive a fair and equitable education. The goal of the Title I program is for all students to meet state and local performance standards and for all schools to achieve the Annual Measurable Objectives (AMO) set by their state (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

Since 1996 NAESPA, formerly the National Title I Association, has been selecting examples of superior, federally funded programs for national recognitions. Each state can put forth up to two schools for consideration. Committees formed by each state’s Department of Education select up to two applicants to represent the state each year in a very competitive process. For a school to qualify for the National ESEA Distinguished School award, it must have a poverty rate of at least 35%, demonstrate high academic achievement (proficiency in mathematics and reading for at least 80% of the school’s students), and make Adequate Yearly Progress for two consecutive years (ESEA Network, 2018). Schools are recognized in one of three categories: (1) closing the achievement gap between subgroups, (2) exceptional student performance for two or more consecutive years, or (3) excellence in serving special populations (e.g., homeless, migrant, ELL) or some combination of those categories (ESEA Network, 2018). Schools must present evidence to their state’s selection committee indicating their success in one of these categories.
Principals who led their schools to National ESEA Distinguished status from 2015 to 2018 were identified as potential participants for this study. Purposeful sampling allowed for principals to be selected from National ESEA Distinguished Schools that had the following characteristics: (1) a poverty rate of 50% or higher as designated by the percentage of students receiving free or reduced meals at school, (2) students in grades pre-kindergarten through sixth grade, and (3) an enrollment of 30% or more ELLs. The data required to employ this sampling strategy are publicly available at (https://www.eseanetwork.org/, 2019). From this purposeful sampling, 23 school principals emerged as possible participants. These potential participants were contacted primarily by email. The email script (Appendix A) the purpose of the study, the qualifications of participants, and the participants’ rights. Of the 23 potential participants that were contacted, six participants agreed to participate in this study. The next section describes the professional background of each participant and a general overview of their work in education and their work in National ESEA Distinguished Schools. To maintain the confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms for both participants and schools were used and identifying details have been omitted.

**Participants and School Settings**

Participants in the study are former and current principals who have led National ESEA Distinguished Schools in the United States. The participant pool includes four women and two men who vary in age from 40 to 65 years old. The participants’ professional experience in school leadership ranges from 10 to 30 years. Five of the six participants currently hold roles as leaders in National ESEA Distinguished Schools. The other participant has retired and now works for a private company that supports student achievement.
The schools highlighted in this study are located within the United States, primarily in urban districts along the coasts (Table 5). These institutions are racially and culturally diverse, serving predominantly Latino, Black, Asian, and Pacific Islander students. All the schools are elementary schools, which serve students in pre-kindergarten or kindergarten through sixth grade. The schools vary in size from 500 to 800 students.

Table 5

Participants and School Locations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Name of School</th>
<th>Location of School</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kayla Bush</td>
<td>Pat McCarran Magnet ES</td>
<td>West Coast</td>
<td>510</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Ken Dunn</td>
<td>Joe Foss ES</td>
<td>Northern U.S.</td>
<td>690</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue Yates</td>
<td>Fremont ES</td>
<td>West Coast</td>
<td>550</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janette Smith</td>
<td>Osmond ES</td>
<td>Western U.S.</td>
<td>510</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire Holland</td>
<td>George Washington ES</td>
<td>East Coast</td>
<td>750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harris Daniels</td>
<td>Jones ES</td>
<td>East Coast</td>
<td>700</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first participant was Kayla Bush, a former principal at Pat McCarran Magnet Elementary School, a K-5, urban school located on the west coast. The school is economically and ethnically diverse. Eighty percent of the student body would be classified as a racial and/or ethnic minority (majority Hispanic), which is 20% higher than the state’s average. Over 60% of the students at McCarran qualify for free and reduced meals and 30% of the students are ELLs. Sixty percent of the students identify as Latino, 10% as Black, 20% as White, 8% as Asian, 2% identify as “other.”
The second participant was Dr. Ken Dunn. Dr. Dunn is the principal at Joe Foss Elementary School, a K-5 school located in an urban area in the northern part of the United States. Foss is located in a school community that is both economically and ethnically diverse. Over 70% of the students at Foss qualify for free and reduced meals and 35% of the students at Foss are ELLs. The school’s demographics are as follows: 30% of students identify as Black, 30% as White, 20% as Latino, 15% as Asian, and 5% as Native American.

The third participant was Sue Yates, who is the principal at Freemont Elementary School. Freemont Elementary School is located on the West Coast in a diverse, urban community. Freemont serves students in grades K-5. Minority enrollment at Freemont is nearly 95% of the study body (majority Asian). Over 60% of the students at Freemont qualify for free and reduced meals and 45% of the students are ELLs. Of all the schools in this study, Freemont has one of the highest rates of proficiency in mathematics and reading for its students. For the 2016-2017 school year, the math proficiency rate at Freemont was almost 90% and the reading proficiency rate was 80%.

The fourth participant, Janette Smith, is the principal of Osmond Elementary School, which serves around 500 students in grades pre-kindergarten through sixth. This school is in an urban area in the Western part of the United States in a school district with almost 20,000 students. Minority student enrollment for Osmond makes up 60% of the student body (majority Hispanic). Over 85% of the students at Osmond qualify for free and reduced meals and 50% of the students are ELLs. Test scores at Osmond are far above the state averages (45% in reading and 46% in math). Proficiency levels at Osmond are nearly 70% in reading and 79% in mathematics, which suggests that most students at the school are performing at or well above grade level.
The fifth participant, Claire Holland, is the principal at George Washington Elementary School, which serves around 750 students in grades pre-kindergarten through fifth. George Washington is located in an urban area on the east coast in a large school district. Minority enrollment for George Washington is 75% of the student body (majority Hispanic). Almost 70% of the students at George Washington qualify for free and reduced meals and 35% of the students are ELLs. The mathematics proficiency rate at George Washington is around 85% and the percentage of students who have achieved proficiency in reading is around 90% (which is significantly higher than the state average for the 2016-2017 school year).

The sixth and final participant, Harris Daniels, is the principal at Jones Elementary School, which serves around 700 students in grades kindergarten through fifth. Like George Washington Elementary, Jones Elementary is in an urban area on the east coast in a large school district. Minority enrollment at Jones consists of 75% of the student body (majority Hispanic). Almost 70% of the students at Jones Elementary qualify for free and reduced meals and 55% of the students are ELLs. The math proficiency rate is around 94% and the reading proficiency rate is around 93%. Like George Washington Elementary, the proficiency rates at Jones are well above the average proficiency rates in mathematics and reading for the state.

**Presentation of Findings**

The following section presents the findings of the research, beginning with the sub-questions.

**Research question 1.** How did the participants become Title I principals? To better understand the findings, it’s important to understand the background of each participant, focusing on why and how they came to work in National ESEA Distinguished Schools. To accomplish this, the participants in the study were asked to reflect on their career progression in
the education field and their path to becoming a principal at National ESEA Distinguished school. Through these reflections, the researcher sought to engage in a dialogue with the participants around their work with diverse student populations over the course of their professional lives. The researcher also sought to elicit a high-level overview of the background of each participant. What follows is a detailed account of the participants’ responses.

**Kayla Bush’s career progression.** Kayla noted that after completing her student teaching and graduating from college, it was difficult for her to find a teaching job. She knew that there were opportunities on the west coast, so she decided to move and was hired as a first-grade teacher in the fifth largest school district in the United States (at that time). However, after accepting this role, Kayla was soon transferred to a different role. Kayla said:

> When I started teaching, I was hired as a first grade teacher, but my principal heard me speak Spanish and he moved me to a different position. It was kindergarten through sixth grade ELL self-contained. I worked with a team teacher. It was a hard job.

Kayla obtained her Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) endorsement during this time to understand the process of teaching English as a second language. The next year she was hired as a bilingual teacher in a different school that had a full bilingual program for kindergarten through fifth grade. She taught first grade and third grade for several years and then became the Reading Improvement Program teacher. Around this time, she began to provide professional development for staff focused on training staff to teach reading. This work helped her become a staff developer for her region, where she coached and modeled how to teach reading for other educators. Of this experience, Kayla stated:
I was kind of a trainer of trainers. I went to every teacher’s classroom and I taught reading for a full week, modeled it. I coached them through a week as they taught reading. It was a support model for teaching literacy.

Next Kayla built one of the first computer labs in her district and became an Education Computing Specialist (ECS). She learned all about computer programs and educational software and began training administrators in new software platforms. After two years she became an assistant principal. Kayla served as an assistant principal for the next four years in two different schools before she was hired as a Title I principal.

**Title I experiences.** Kayla started her career in Title I schools. She spent seven years in Title I schools as a teacher and an assistant principal before moving to a non-Title I school as an assistant principal. Kayla then asked to be moved to a non-Title I school because she wanted a different experience. She was moved to a school in her neighborhood and was surprised by what she learned.

I thought I was a great teacher. I thought I was really meeting the needs of my kids and raising expectations, and then I walked into a second grade classroom and saw the work that was on the board. I just did not know what I did not know. It’s not that you are not hardworking, smart, or well trained. I saw the kids working at such a rigorous level. I realized I did not understand learning or child development to the level that I thought I did. When I was hired at McCarran, I was excited because I was back in my hood, and I thought, “Wow I have the power now.” The knowledge to make a difference and I was excited. I would make sure my students had every opportunity to excel.

Kayla noted that McCarran Elementary was the lowest performing school in the district at that time. The school’s neighborhood had high crime and the high school down the street was a very
tough school. Still, she believed she could make a difference. Two weeks on the job she learned that her school would become a magnet school.

I did not know what a magnet school was but when I learned what a magnet school was, I was even more excited because magnet schools diversified racially isolated schools. The concept is brilliant because you get a theme, extra funding, and you get to recruit kids from all over the valley to come to your school, which can change the future for this neighborhood. That’s exciting!

Kayla learned to become invested in the future of her students. She believed she could change the game for them and used her position to do so.

**Leading Title I schools.** From Kayla’s perspective, Title I schools needed people who truly embraced and loved their school community and wanted to make a difference. She believed she embodied this during her time at McCarren Elementary School and this was the reason that she was so successful during her time there. She explained, “I constantly grounded my staff in the lives of the students we served and the neighborhood.” For Kayla, it was important that the staff understood where the students were coming from. For this reason, she was very open with her staff about the needs of their students and educated them on the criteria for free and reduced lunch.

I always share information with my staff, so they are aware because it is easy to forget all the drama behind the scenes that students come to the table with. We are responsible for providing our students with opportunities.

Kayla would add that she has been successful as a Title I principal because she believed in providing her students what they needed to be successful and ensuring that her staff was knowledgeable about their students. Her biggest message was that Title I schools need leaders
who genuinely care about their students and their school’s community and who can help teachers bring the community back into their schools.

**Dr. Ken Dunn’s career progression.** Ken started his career as a fourth-grade teacher in a large urban school district. He knew right away he wanted to be a school principal.

I started off as a fourth grade teacher and after two years, I knew I wanted to be a principal. My plan was to bounce around the district, which had about 25 elementary schools. I thought I would bounce around every couple of years and get some good experience in different school settings.

Ken noted that after teaching fourth grade for two years, he moved to a Title I school. In his second year of teaching fourth grade at this school, he was asked to step in as an assistant principal.

The principal needed help, so the district asked me to step in as the assistant principal. I had some great experiences. The position dissolved at the end of the year and I moved back to fourth grade.

After two more years in his second school, Ken moved back to a non-Title I school. Ken stated that he obtained some great experiences in a non-Title I schools; however, after four years, he took a role as an assistant principal at Joe Foss Elementary School, a Title I school.

**Title I experiences.** When asked why he continued to work in Title I schools, Ken explained how he felt about working in this type of school setting.

Well for me, it is just the variety and then the need is here. I just kind of jive along with this work. I need that every day for me to keep me healthy and vibrant. It wears me down most days but that is why I am here. I think I was born to do this work. I love the diversity and helping families. We have so many different cultures here and we know the
families and we help them with their basic needs as well as their academic needs. There is so much pride in our school.

Ken served as principal of Joe Foss Elementary School for eight years and noted that during this time he enjoyed his work because every day brought forth new experiences and challenges. Often each day did not go as planned but in the end, he knew that he would be helping kids every day.

Every day is an adventure and the day goes so fast, I need 40-hour days. Just figuring out the complex nature of the system, I am not sure I will ever become what I feel is accomplished to get this job done. Every new day is ever evolving, and we will continue to get better and there is so much to do that it takes a lifetime. I am the guy that wanted this challenge.

**Leading Title I schools.** Ken indicated that his background played a role in preparing him to be a Title I principal.

This is hard for me because I understand I am a middle class White male with a sister and two parents. I understand my position and that I do not have hardly any hits against me in society. I have had every privilege possible. The first time I saw a Black person living in the Midwest was in college. I did not see any other cultures other than Norwegians, Germans, Dutch, and English. I was very sheltered in my hometown of 600. Luckily, that is not the case in my hometown now. However, I would say I grew up around poverty. There were families who had nothing.

He noted that although his family was not poor, he had friends who lived in poverty.

I remember one friend had their mattress on the floor and they only took a bath once a week. I did not understand it and to me they were just kids. As I got older, television
exposed me to more people and the world around me. I can remember thinking I want to move to New York or Los Angeles to be around people who would bring diversity into my life.

Ken described himself as the guy who wanted a challenge and considered this to be a key part of his success as a Title I principal.

I want to work with the kids who were different than me. I just like people for people, and I want everybody to be better and that keeps me motivated. I love coming to school every day because it is the place where I can make a difference.

Ken was committed and proud of the work he was doing in his Title I school and hopes to continue this work for years to come.

**Sue Yates’ career progression.** Sue’s career began at the middle school level; however, she has served in numerous roles throughout her career. After working for 15 years in middle schools, she moved to the Human Resource Department where she was responsible for hiring, terminations, resolving teacher grievances, and supervising the teacher evaluation system. After a few years she decided to apply for a principalship and was hired as the principal. Sue said:

I missed the interaction with the kids bantering back and forth with middle school students. I never had elementary school experience, but I interviewed for an elementary school and they hired me. I have been the principal at Freedom Elementary School for almost 20 years.

Sue noted that although she never set out to be an administrator, because of layoffs in the early 1980s she wanted to make herself marketable. For this reason, she was intentional about taking roles in different areas of education.
**Title I experiences.** Sue’s experience in Title I schools began after her work in Human Resources.

My Title I experience started in Human Resources where I worked with teacher grievances in elementary and early education centers. I did not have any experience working in Title I schools, but I interviewed, and they hired me as the principal. When I got to Freedom Elementary School it was an average Title I school and now we are well known in our district. We are a National Blue Ribbon School, Distinguished State School, and now Title I Distinguished School. I am proud to be the principal here.

Sue believed her experiences in human resources prepared her for many of the challenges that arise when leading a Title I school.

**Leading Title I schools.** As an immigrant, Sue was an English Language Learner during her time in primary and secondary school. Because her background was similar to the students she worked with, Sue felt she could empathize with her students.

I think early on in my administrative career, I knew I was Asian and only five feet two, so I walked into a room and people look at me like, “Who is this person and why is she here?” You know racial tension is still there. It is not visible, but you know it is still there because you can feel it when you walk into the room. So, there is never an expectation that I am going to be a powerhouse in this place. I think you know that kind of whole typical myth about Asian girls not speaking up and they are the quiet observers of everything. The whole myth just blows me away because I was living it. People were expecting that of me, right? You sit there, and you just observe and do what you are told a typical Asian female should experience.
As a result of her upbringing, Sue sought out to change this mindset and by being mindful of the expectations and model she set for her staff and students.

Here 75% of my kids are Chinese and I am not going to perpetuate that myth or stereotype. I will not, and I would not expect staff to model it in the classroom. The key is real intentionality to train especially my Asian female students who are English Language Learners to be articulate, to stand up, deliver, and present in front of the class. Sue believed this strategy would help demystify myths or stereotypes about Asian females. She intentionally focused on raising awareness everyday about how the world viewed her students and how her staff prepared them to be the champion of their own lifestyle, twenty years from now.

_Janette Smith’s career progression._ Janette’s educational career began at the elementary level. She taught first and second grade in several states and school districts for over 11 years. She has worked as a Title I coordinator to support differentiated instruction and interventions and provided professional development for staff. As an instructional facilitator, Janette supervised interns completing their field work at the college level through a school partnership with a local university. After completing her administrative degree, she served one year as a middle school assistant principal. Janette was one of the few participants in this study that worked at all levels before becoming a Title I principal at Osmond Elementary School.

_Title I experience._ Janette always worked in schools that were classified as Title I or that received targeted funds to support student achievement. Although the work was challenging, she believed she could make a difference.

I just feel like you make such a difference and to me it is exciting work because you are constantly looking at student data, their needs, and what you are doing. It is challenging,
and I feel like these kids need stability and consistency and I feel like I am a good fit and I can provide that for them.

**Leading Title I schools.** Because she worked in a variety of educational roles, Janette has a wealth of knowledge. Before becoming a principal, she had been a teacher at all grade levels, a facilitator, a Title I coordinator and an assistant principal. Additionally, throughout her career she had the opportunity to work with two effective principals and to obtain good mentors. Janette said, “I think my strong literacy background and understanding of teaching pedagogy has prepared me as well.” Janette believed that this, rather than her own personal background, led to her success.

I did not grow up in poverty at least I do not think I did. Compared to what my kids are experiencing, I did not have any of their experiences. I am a White girl who grew up middle class. I mean there is very little that I speak to them except, I am here, and I am not going anywhere. I find myself having to take a step back and think okay now what? What I am speaking about is not their reality.

Because Janette’s background was very different from many of her students, she has tried to be especially cognizant of the type of obstacles and traumas that her students were experiencing, so that she could better support their growth.

**Claire Holland’s career progression.** Unlike the other participants, Claire started her career as an ESOL teacher. She taught kindergarten through ninth grade English as a Second Language (ESL) in several countries before moving to the United States. Claire explained that she started her career late because she was on a different career path; however, when she got married, she ended up moving into education because of her husband’s career. “I ended up
getting into education a little bit serendipitously because we lived overseas and teaching was a job that could travel, and it worked out for me.”

Claire was hired as an ESL teacher when she moved to her current district. She taught for a few months and then the principal moved her to a third grade classroom as the teacher to reduce class sizes. Claire taught in several schools before becoming an instructional coach in a Title I school. She also served three years as an assistant principal in two different schools before she was hired as the principal at George Washington Elementary School.

**Title I experience.** Claire explained that she had always worked in schools where her skillset could support student achievement and have the most impact. Often these schools tended to be Title I schools. She noted that she never really thought about working in a Title I school or non-Title I because she has always believed that she could have an impact on any type of school. She goes on to explain:

> I am a native Spanish speaker from Chile, and I have spent a lot of time in schools that have a large Latino population. Knowing Spanish was certainly an asset. I believe I have a unique skill set that helps me reach these families. Working with diverse students and families is where my skills could have the biggest impact on the students I serve.

Claire has worked in five elementary schools. The majority of these schools were Title I schools. Claire explained that working in Title I schools was exciting to her because she loved working in a learning environment with high levels of learning for both students and adults. Additionally, she loved problem solving and improving systems that impact student learning and Title I schools often allowed her to do both.

**Leading Title I schools.** Claire’s background was similar to Sue’s. When she was seven years old, there was a military coup in her country and her family had to flee to Sweden. She
only spoke Spanish at the time so being in a country where everyone else spoke another language, Swedish, was quite challenging.

Both of my parents were both well-educated. I had lots of opportunities in terms of personal education myself. But I came to a country where I did not speak a word of the language. I knew I had some strengths as a student, but I could not demonstrate them when I got there because I could not access things. I think the people who made the most impact in my transition into Swedish schooling were some of the teachers who really believed in me and really could see my strengths and who could value the culture I came from and what I brought. There were not that many teachers who did, but the few who did made a difference in me that I believed in myself even as a kid.

Claire kept this experience at the forefront of her work. She remember what she experienced and tries to keep this in mind when working with diverse student populations.

We should never give up on them because they can also surprise us even when we think that something gets in the way or God knows what’s happening on their home front or what experiences they have had. I think that education is transformational and when we think about society and the things we want for our world; these kids are the ones who need to do it. We have the greatest opportunity to give them the best chance in life.

Claire believed that although her educational experiences prepared her well, her own personal upbringing and educational experiences were invaluable.

_Harris Daniels’ career progression._ Harris had a unique start to his career. He taught kindergarten and fourth grade overseas before moving to the United States in 2003. He was hired as a fifth grade teacher and taught fifth grade for several years before he was hired as the state director for the visiting International Faculty program. In this leadership position, he
worked with over 400 international teachers in his state. After four years, he decided to return to public education. He was hired as an elementary assistant principal and after two years, he was hired as the principal at Jones Elementary School.

**Title I experiences.** Harris has worked in Title I schools for over 20 years. He believed he could relate to the students he worked with. He explained:

I think I am attracted to working with students in poverty because I was one of those students. I relate to those students on so many levels. It truly is about educating students. It is not about the parents or the politics, it is helping kids learn. Listen, I am a turnaround principal and I know I can help students, families, and the community by making sure every student gets what he or she needs to be successful.

Harris was focused on making a difference and leaving a legacy. He believed that teachers have the power to change the lives of the children they teach and to impact an entire community through education. This work excites him because of the possibility of changing the educational outcomes of his students.

What excites me about this work is the opportunity to change the outcome of an entire community. We can inspire hope in children and their families. There is no greater responsibility or opportunity than to give hope every day to the students we serve.

**Leading Title I schools.** Harris echoed Claire’s passion for Title I students and indicated that he knew what it felt like when no one cares or believed in you.

I grew up in another country in a diverse school setting. I was a kid from poverty and a broken home where drugs and alcohol were the norm. There was a lot of crazy stuff happening in my home and I was not a good student. One teacher told me, “You are not smart enough.” I remember what that felt like. School was hard. As the principal that
will not happen on my watch. Every student deserves a champion. Someone who believes in them and sees them as worthy, loved, and cared for.

Harris stated that his upbringing has been a key aspect of the work he does. He believed these experiences have helped him be the type of teacher and administrator that could reach kids.

On another level we do not talk enough about the ability to reach your lowest learners and having the training, expertise, strategies, and skill sets to reach those kids. You have got to know how to teach reading, writing, mathematics, and handwriting skills. Listen, a good reader is a good writer and a good writer is a good reader.

Harris considers himself a “turnaround principal” and loves working in schools that need a large amount of support and love because he believed providing this support and love is social justice. He believes you can change the game by changing your practice.

When asked about the path that led them to Title I schools, these six principals all reflected on their own professional paths and personal backgrounds in some way, shape, or form. For some, the ethnic and cultural aspects of their background played a larger role while the professional experiences of others more deeply shaped their trajectory. Still, despite their differences, all the participants felt as if their background and experiences played a pivotal role in how they came to lead Title I schools and influenced their success in leading Title I schools.

**Research question 2.** How did the Title I principals lead their school to achieve National ESEA Distinguished School status? The participants were asked questions about the challenges they observed as a new principal and the actions they took to address these challenges. These challenges primarily related to instructional practices, improving staff performance, integrating families, and addressing inequities to improve student outcomes. Actual practices of the principals varied depending on the school leader, the student population,
the needs of the school, and the leader’s own experiences; however, the similarities in these challenges across the various participants highlights some of the common obstacles that Title I leaders face. In the next section, I will address some of the challenges observed and highlight similarities and differences among the participants.

**Instructional practices.** The primary focus of the school principal is to improve teaching and learning. In this study, several principals identified addressing instructional practices as a challenge for them when they began at their schools.

Claire reported that she took time to delve into the school data when she arrived at her school to figure out why all students were not performing at the same level. She said the data was hard to find and had not been shared with the staff. She spent time listening to stakeholders to try to determine what had been happening at the school.

First, I brought together key leaders and shared the data. Even with the data before them, it was hard for them to accept. I really used the data as a third party, so it was not “me,” but the data. Then I got them to be part of the problem-solving piece and made them the leaders in the work as part of my shared leadership practices. I told them we need to agree on some instructional practices and structures we use across the whole school. Claire said this was the beginning of addressing some of the challenges facing the school. She included everyone in the process and as a team they decided what every grade level needed. They began by unpacking the standards and realized that some grade levels were teaching standards that did not belong in their grade level. Clarifying what to teach was an important challenge to address before they could address the next challenge, how to implement the new standards and formats they had agreed upon.
Ken said his biggest challenge was having a consistent collaborative model that allowed all teachers to collaboratively discuss their data. His teachers were meeting frequently, but not sharing student data.

Teachers would get together once per week and it was like a mini staff meeting. All the teams would get together K-5 and talk about things. Like what was coming up or what was going on with ELL and special education students. They just did not talk about data. Ken had experience with the DuFours’ professional learning communities (PLCs), work and knew that he could use their framework for highly effective PLCs to tackle this first challenge. He knew that his team had to have benchmarking and data dialogue meetings to break down the data and discuss student progress. Once he was able to address these instructional practices, he could move to addressing staff needs.

Janette’s school had a lot of strengths. Her teams collaborated frequently, collected a lot of data and really analyzed student work. Still, she noted that instructional practices were also one of her biggest challenges. She identified Tier I instruction, interventions, and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) as primary challenges. Janette believed in programs that were well researched, well developed, and allowed teachers to deliver instruction to meet students’ needs with relative ease. She felt that the Tier I instruction and interventions at her school lacked structure and focus. She was most concerned with the intervention program.

There was a lot of structure and frameworks that were already in place when I came which was awesome. The thing that I feel like was missing was that these teachers were having to figure it all out. There was not a structured or Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) in place so when kids were not successful, the teacher had to figure it out. Which is number one, exhausting and two, not always research-based.
For Janette, a priority was helping her staff to identify the essential skills that their students needed to develop and to determine the best way to teach those skills. She was able to address these challenges by reviewing John Hattie’s work around learning targets, which was initiated by her district.

Harris also identified instructional practices as a challenge and worked to address it immediately. He identified setting the tone for instruction and implementing learning around PLCs as important actions that he needed to take to address the challenges he observed.

I am a true believer in the work of Ron Edmonds, the father of the Effective Schools movement in the United States. The overarching principle of the Effective Schools movement is that all children can learn, and I truly believe that. The correlates [from Ron Edmond’s work] that I hold at my core include strong instructional leadership, clear instructional focus, positive school climate, and high expectations for student success.

For Harris, the problem was not the kids. He believed that the key to school improvement came down to adults engaging in high functioning PLCs to better teach standards and curriculum.

Sue stated that she walked into a school that was very divided. By the time she arrived, the school had already been through four administrators in a short period of time.

I knew we had to get the adults together. So, when I came on board my main charge in my mind was to unify the staff before we could even do anything for our kids. It is harder to work with adults than kids because adults come with so much baggage and all different perspectives. To me, the first challenge was to present ourselves as a professional staff and then we addressed the instructional practices. I knew I had to create a space and time for staff to meet at least at their grade level. I provided time for them to have conversation, vent, unload, and re-imagine the work.
Sue believed that building a collaborative space for her staff to meet was essential. Every Friday at 9:30 a.m., she supervised all the students and gave her teachers an opportunity to meet. Sue would provide the agenda but allowed the teachers to run their own meetings. Once the teachers became accustomed to this practice, they wanted even more time to collaborate.

In conclusion, several principals identified addressing instructional practices as a challenge for them when they began at their schools. While four of the six principals sought to address this issue first, two of the principals believed they had to unify their staff before they could address instructional practices. Instructional leadership was centered on improving teaching and learning (Brauckmann & Pashiardis, 2011) and given that this was one of the primary measures of a Title I school, it is not surprising that successful Title I principals sought to improve this critical aspect of their school.

*Improving staff performance.* When asked about improving staff performance, four of the principals acknowledged the role of professional development in their quest to achieve National ESEA Distinguished Schools status.

Ken stated that developing his staff was a priority for him and he had “a laser focus” on professional development.

I believe there is a difference between training and professional development. Training would be one of the ins and outs that you need to do to teach reading, writing, and mathematics. Professional development is different than training because it occurs over time and everyone gets what they need to improve instruction.

For Ken, choosing a focus was vital, so he had a five-year plan to help improve staff performance.
We want to target those areas that transcend all other areas. Currently, we are using a book by Nancy Frey, John Hattie, and Douglas Fisher, *Developing Assessment-Capable Visible Learners, Grades K-12*, for our professional development and you can use these components and integrate them into anything. This is a five-year professional development plan for the staff. We are going to take this book apart and use it as our backbone.

He believed that there should always be an instructional focus, so when he visits classrooms, he tries to tie his observations to the professional development plan of the staff member he is observing. Ken also utilized staff meetings and in-service opportunities to improve staff performance. Each year they added on another layer. For example, this year they are reviewing areas of weakness in the curriculum and collaborating on solutions as a staff.

Claire took a different approach to professional development. She used funds from her appropriated budget to enhance her staff’s professional development. Sue did not believe she had to bring experts into the building in order to develop her staff. Her philosophy was that teachers needed time to learn from one another and the subject matter experts were already a part of the staff. She provided a structured and strategic focus on professional development through “mini universities,” which used collaborative learning time for professional development. Claire explained, “Our professional development is structured and strategic. We run them somewhat like a mini university course. My coaches lead teachers through inquiry cycles, and they conduct lab sites for us to observe and then debrief our observation.” For example, Claire reported that she had a (uncertified) reading and a math coach on her staff. Although the coach was not from an instructional coaching program, the coach provided valuable support and guidance to the
other staff members. In this way, Sue leveraged her own internal resources to improve staff performance.

Janette had ongoing professional development at Osmond Elementary School. She created several support teams to look at the specific needs of her students. These teams were provided with ongoing professional development and they led research-based professional development for the staff.

I have a language acquisition committee because 50% of our kids are English language learners. This team looks at programs and they figure out where the deficiencies or weaknesses for language acquisition and what supplements are needed. They share this information with the whole staff quarterly.

Additionally, Janette had a student success team that works to address student behavior. She noted that the team was originally the behavior support team; however, they changed the name because it seemed to have a negative connotation, implying that the students were troublesome or consistently misbehaved.

This is now our student success team and they are looking at classroom management strategies, mindfulness, and Social Emotional Learning (SEL). My social worker, special education teacher, and I look for ways to support students whose behaviors are preventing them from making the academic progress they should be making or affecting other students because of their behavior.

Janette said this team’s goal was to support these students as a group. She also implemented Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) as a best practice from the work of the student success team. Claire implemented a professional development plan where staff could self-select a goal from a list of research-based strategies. The staff member worked on the goal
all year and shared information about the teaching practice with their teacher learning community. She had an individualized approach to professional development.

Sue believed in setting high expectations for students. Given the high population of English Language Learners at her school, she knew she had to provide professional development to her staff to help them better work with this student population. As Sue’s staff was constantly changing, she strategically provided ongoing professional development for many years to ensure that all staff members had the same knowledge and training.

The mindset is not negotiable, and the expectations are non-negotiable. Sometimes I come across as hard-nosed, but I know where we need to go, and I want to be transparent about the reason why we are going there. We could talk about how we get there as a staff, but I am not compromising as to where we are going. You just got to be very firm about the why.

As staff play a pivotal role in student academic performance, improving staff performance is an essential factor of a school’s success. Here, we saw how four of the six participants sought to improve staff performance, which likely impacted their school’s ability to achieve National ESEA Distinguished Schools status.

**Integrating families.** When participants were asked how they integrated families into their schools, all of the participants shared various strategies, practices, and programs they had implemented including hiring bilingual staff, creating parent centers and volunteer opportunities, developing student-led conferences, and initiating family-friendly walk-throughs.

When discussing the way in which she worked to integrate families into her school community, Sue explained that most of her families were immigrant families and were not native English speakers. In fact, most of her students spoke Cantonese or Mandarin and came from
Hong Kong and mainland China. For this reason, Sue sought to find ways to connect her families to the school community through language and culture. Sue reported she was bilingual and understood the importance of families feeling comfortable communicating at school.

I had to be intentional in hiring staff members who were bilingual and now the staff reflects the population of my students. Now when my families come to school, they know there is someone here who speaks their language, and everything is translated. Sue says that communication and trust were important because this demonstrated that her staff respected and understood the needs of her students’ families.

Claire is a fluent Spanish speaker and 50% of her student population are also Spanish speakers. She made it a point to work closely with her parent liaison to support families. She said that when she held a parent coffee for her Spanish-speaking parents, they were thrilled because she could speak to them in Spanish and it helped her develop trust and credibility in the community. Claire also talked about developing spaces and communicating with parents about the work of the school through their parent centers.

One thing I noticed when I came to Washington is that we did not have a Parent Center. I found a space, which was one of our trailers. I worked with our district office and my parent liaison to discuss what a parent center would look like, what purpose or purposes it would serve, what materials and items would be needed and how we would establish it. Claire reported that after setting up the Parent Center, they held an inaugural opening for parents. They also developed a school calendar with opportunities for parent coffees, classes, and meeting spaces. Lastly, they gathered donations and provided basic needs for their families. Claire claimed that she wanted her families to feel comfortable at Washington and to have a
sense of belonging. She reported that she conducted family-friendly walk-throughs to observe different aspects of the culture and climates of the families at her school.

Ken stated that over 25 different languages are spoken at Joe Foss Elementary School; however, the largest language minorities are from Asia along the southern slopes of the Himalayan mountains.

You would not think we would have such a large population of families from that region. Our community just exploded so we hired a parent liaison to work with these families and help integrate them into the school. As principal, I wanted to make sure we were meeting their immediate needs.

Ken believed they had a caring community at Foss. He looked for ways to support families who speak English as a second language and who may need an interpreter. His goal was to support and engage the parents in the school’s community.

We schedule conferences outside of the regular conference times because many of our families might work at a meat-packing plant. They really cannot come in for a conference because they work the second shift. So, we schedule early morning conferences. Our school liaison sets those conferences up along with our English language learner’s teachers.

Foss had a cultural fair every year that allows families to bring their cultural food, attire, and other mementos from their countries to share with the community. The families complete a presentation about their culture to the fair attendees. Members from throughout the community, including community volunteers and the fire and police departments, are invited to attend the fair. The fair has shown Ken that the families are proud to share their culture with the other families and the school’s staff and community. Ken noted that it also provides his staff,
especially the clerical staff who have been at Joe Foss for over 20 years, with more intimate knowledge about the students at the school.

Ken also engages with the families by trying to help support some of their basic needs through donations and corporate partnerships.

We just got a big donation of turkeys for Thanksgiving. If a family wanted a turkey, we have them available. We do not celebrate Christmas, but we celebrate the holidays and usually provide boxes of food for families in need. We have companies who donate food to the school, and we can give that donation to our families.

Ken also conducted family-friendly walk-throughs, which helped to bring about a sense of belonging for the families and also helps to create engagement with the families.

Kayla stated that community is critical at her school. She works closely with several community organizations to work on projects that support her school. Kaya integrated families into her school by providing volunteer opportunities for parents and by creating a family center. Kayla came across the idea to create a parent volunteer space at a conference she attended. In addition to the center, Kayla also hired a part-time parent volunteer to support the parents.

I found a space near the library, and I created a parent volunteer center. I put a dining room table in there, a coffee pot, and water. The parents love it. They might be cutting things out or laminating things for us. We have all types of jobs for them to do.

Kayla said she put in a dining room table, coffee maker, water and other items in the center to make the family center a comfortable and welcoming place. Lastly, Kayla began providing volunteer opportunities for high school students and student alumni to help former students stay engaged in her school’s community.
Kayla believed that building community and helping families feel a sense of belonging increased parent engagement at her school and also helped her students’ performance.

Janette used a different approach. At Osmond Elementary School, student-led conferences and digital data notebooks, which were created by students, were used to help integrate families into the school community. Janette explained that she worked closely with staff and the PTA to create student writing promises. These promises were created to outline the expectations for writing for the entire school community. She also organized a community council to help with this effort. Both of these resources helped her increase both student and parent engagement at the school.

The older students - fourth, fifth and sixth graders - create a digital data notebook. They create slides with their scores, goals, and progress that they present to their parents. This gives students ownership of their learning. Students and their teachers work together to identify and explain next steps to their parents. At those conferences the parent takes home a packet of information with support activities to work on with their students.

There are also videos posted online with additional information for parents.

Like Janette, Harris used student-led conferences to integrate families into his school. He believed that it was more important to send parents the information they need to know because he understood that not all parents have the time to physically come to the school. Through student-led conferences, he was able to take some of the burden off the parents and allow them to focus on just being present when they could.

Families today do not have time to organize and oversee stuff. Families must just be able to come and participate. I use social media to reach my parents. I have not written a
newsletter in probably eight years. No one reads the newsletter. I send a quick text about upcoming events on Sunday to keep my parents informed.

Ultimately, these principals addressed the difficult task of integrating parents into their school communities in a variety of ways. Overall, we can see some similarities in the intentions behind their practices and strategies. Each principal took the time to understand the makeup of their student families and used this information to develop an approach that they felt the families would embrace. They all understood integrating families into their school community to be an important part of their work as school leaders.

**Addressing inequities.** All the participants identified key inequities in their schools when they began. The main ones identified and addressed were providing additional support for ELL students, discrepancies between discipline practices involving students of color versus white students, scheduling and tracking practices.

Sue addressed inequities from an ELL lens. She believed ELL students are subject to inequities when data were ignored or not properly analyzed. Data analysis was a large component of Sue’s work. She used data for her team to develop very focused strategies for their students.

I think the thing we did clearly was make sure our staff understands the inability to use language does not equate to non-intelligence of students. Just because you cannot speak and express it currently in the format in which we want them to articulate does not mean we do not work hard to get the thinking behind that language deficit.

For Sue, having her staff better understand the data for their ELL students represented a paradigm shift as now they were able to maintain the standards for all their students and not just for those students who are native English speakers.
Ken echoed Sue’s response. He also expressed a commitment to addressing the needs of ELL students. His team used a new program that his district purchased to monitor ELL students’ progress. The program allows staff to target specific skills that they want to address from the WIDA assessment (a measure of Developing English Language proficiency). The staff could then track specific skills like listening, reading, and writing in the program to measure student progress over time. The ELL teachers meet monthly to update and track student progress. Ken says they maintain this ELL data on a huge data wall that is accessible for all of the staff.

Harris believed addressing inequities and disparities in student outcomes began with believing in every single child. He focused on differentiation to meet an individual child’s needs and believed discipline practices to be problematic.

One fundamental thing that we can do is not overidentify certain minority groups when it comes to discipline. We must take away the excuses to suspend kids. When a school is struggling everybody thinks you should suspend the whole world. Well guess what? The students come back as soon as the suspension is finished and so we need a new plan. According to Harris, students are not learning at home because schools cannot teach them at home. He believed that behavior was feedback for planning, preparation, and execution of instruction. Harris worries that education operates in silos far too often and that a lot of people struggle with fractured and fancy ideas that do not address core issues. He noted that we can often forget the effect of trauma on a kid’s life and that it was critical for adults to understand the backgrounds of students.

Janette believed that her students’ experience in elementary school sets them up for the rest of their life. For this reason, she had a full-time social worker on staff and was constantly looking for ways to connect people with the resources they needed.
I am concerned about behavior and the consequences. Often our idea of consequences is a punishment. Students spend time in lunch detention, or suspension in and out of school, and it is just draining. It is ridiculous. We are doing more work around restorative circles and talking with our students about how their action affect themselves and others. It is very interesting to watch kids help each other change the way they think about what they did. I think that’s all part of this whole social justice and is geared to understanding what I do, and I love it.

Janette says that her school was a Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) school and that she was consistently looking for opportunities to interact with students to better understand their behavior.

When Claire was announced as principal at George Washington Elementary School, one inequity she immediately noticed was how the master schedule was designed. Students were being pulled out of class during core instruction for music and other activities. The following year she created a master schedule with a couple of big priorities. First, she adjusted the schedule to include collaborative work time for teams and provided more uninterrupted instructional times for students and staff. Every team was given common planning time daily. She also eliminated pullout programs. She created structures for the collaborative teams to use.

I made sure the teams had norms and agendas. I guided a lot of the work in the beginning. I tried to put the people who were in coaching roles into a position of success. I worked closely with them. We learned to unpack the standards, create common assessments and quickly moved to full transparency in terms of student results.

Claire believed all kids deserved a good education and all teachers must work collaboratively to make that happen for themselves and for their students.
Kayla took a different approach to addressing inequities. She focused on fostering and maintaining an atmosphere in which everyone’s basic needs were met.

I put in place a Big Brothers and Sisters Program because moms and dads love their kids so much, but they do not always have the skills or tools to guide their children in a manner that is going to help them be successful in school.

Kayla ensured that her students were paired with a successful high school student that could mentor the students. Kayla also brought in a free, licensed therapist to provide additional social and emotional support for students and their families.

Inequities make it challenging for all students to succeed. The participants in this study understood this to be true and worked to address the various inequities in their schools – ranging from support for ELL students to scheduling practices. By working to address these inequities, these leaders better positioned their schools to achieve National ESEA Distinguished Schools status.

**Research question 3.** In what social justice practices did the Title I principals engage?

There were numerous commonalities in the participants’ responses to this question. For reporting purposes, the interviewee responses to this research question are synthesized in detail in the next section of this chapter. However, an examination of equities role in social justice leadership is needed before delving into the findings.

**Equity and social justice.** The concepts of equity and social justice, both fundamental to the idea of social justice practice, were linked together and almost interchangeable when I asked the participants how equity and social justice supported their work. The participants all recognized that the terms *equity* and *social justice* are similar, complex terms. Most principals used equity to describe social justice, using terms like access, opportunity, and advocacy.
One of Sue’s goals was to ensure that everyone gets what they need; it was important for her to make sure that there was a level playing field for her students. She believed that her job was to create a school climate that embraced equity and social justice by challenging the system and making sure her students get what they need to be successful.

It is hard to fight. Even within our own system, the equity lens, even though we are professing to be a progressive district. Changing the lens and structures from central office is difficult. For example, I am a Title I school, and we are physically located in a middle-class neighborhood. However about 50% of my students are bused in from more poverty-driven neighborhoods. So, we do see disparity in the parent’s education, their involvement in school, and the type of activities some of our kids have inherited and are entitled to after-school. For a Title I school, why would I not have a parent advisor or full-time social worker? Why should I have to pay for that myself? That is why I go to central office and I have good reason for demanding those things because it is for the kids that I am advocating for. That equity piece is the work for our students.

She believed part of her responsibility as a principal was to ensure an equitable environment for her students, understanding that some students might need more than others.

Some students will require more because that is what equity is, right? Leveling the playing field that everybody gets what they need. My kids who require more extended help are going to be the first kids I would put in the after-school program.

Kayla, Ken, and Claire also expressed their commitment to creating a safe and positive learning environment when it comes to equity and social justice. Kayla identified climate, consistency, community, and culture as the foundation for helping schools and students thrive. She believed the elimination of her bilingual program was a way to ensure equity for her
students. Kayla said, “We eliminated the bilingual program right off the bat, and we dispersed the students equally in every classroom with a single focus of excellence in teaching strategies.” She said that this was her way of leveling the playing field.

Ken echoed Kayla’s response in his commitment to creating a safe and accepting environment for his students. He explained that his school demographics have changed so much that there were 25 different languages spoken at the school. He further explained that there are people from all over the world in their school community: “A few years ago, our staff participated in a pilot program around equity and bias. The program was dedicated to supporting diversity, promoting inclusion, increasing access, and achieving equity in their school.” Ken stated that all the concepts they learned about were related to equity and social justice. The school participated in the pilot program for four years, and as a result of their participation, language around gender equity and biases is commonly used in Ken’s school.

Claire attributed her personal experiences to her approach to equity and social justice to her personal experiences. Growing up in a country where there was very little equity in terms of opportunity was a constant reminder of the need to keep equity and social justice at the forefront.

My district is really focusing on equity and I happen to work in a school that has a staff that is very passionate about the work they do around equity. When I arrived at my school there was an anti-bias committee and they have done a lot of work around curriculum and planning units. We talk about whose perspective are we teaching through and what perspectives are not present in the lesson.

Claire believed a strong education was all about social justice, because a good education could open doors and offer endless possibilities. She stated, “we do not always use the terms, so we do not always connect the two.”
Overall research question. What are the leadership practices of principals in National ESEA Distinguished Schools (formerly National Title I Distinguished Schools)? Six major themes were identified from the transcribed participants’ analysis of the actions they took to address the challenges in leading their schools to achieve National ESEA Distinguished School status. Using both inductive and interpretive reasoning, the researcher identified six leadership practices, which are listed Table 6. In chapter 5, I will discuss how these practices aligned with the principles of social justice leadership.

Table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership Practices Identified from the Study</th>
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<tr>
<td>Create a safe and orderly learning environment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Develop a collaborative culture within the staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) that address instructional practices</td>
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<tr>
<td>Provide professional development for staff</td>
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<td>Increase family engagement</td>
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Create a safe and orderly learning environment. As the instructional leader, the principal is responsible for creating an environment within the school that supports teaching and learning. This was a common theme that emerged as a challenge from the participants in the study.

Kayla believed that as the new principal she had the knowledge to make a difference in her new school. She was excited, although she knew her school was in bad shape. Kayla noted
that the school was the lowest performing school in the city and was in a neighborhood with high crime. Still, she believed that the school culture and climate were key elements of how the school would look and feel to students, staff, and the community. She said, “When you walk in and it looks like a prison, the students are going to act like prisoners.” Kayla did not want the school to feel like this. She wanted her students to feel like they were at Disneyland, so they would be excited and engaged in learning. Two weeks into the school year, she learned that the school would become a magnet school. While she was excited, she knew she needed to make changes in the overall look and feel of the school. She began transforming the school with a simple paint job to give it a face lift.

The walls were gray and gross. The first project I did was have all the teachers paint their doors and that made a big difference. Then we painted career murals on the walls because we wanted to show our students the variety of careers because when you are in your neighborhood all you know is what you see.

Harris also worked on the school climate when he started as principal at Jones Elementary School by giving the building a facelift as well. Providing high expectations for a safe and orderly learning environment is one of the core beliefs he gained from Edmond’s Effective Schools work.

I absolutely love recreating the facility and upgrading the facility, changing the environment. I believe in the human senses and I want my students to feel safe and comfortable. Most school buildings sit under dull yellow lighting. I changed the light bulbs immediately and put day light bulbs in, so it does not feel like a rainy day.

Harris believed “the building becomes the expectation and vocabulary that you set for it.” He
worked with his staff and community to paint every wall in the building and created murals with positive messages for the students and staff. It was important for Harris that his students felt comfortable and saw positive images at their school.

**Developing a collaborative culture.** The principal is responsible for implementing curriculum and being accountable for the academic success of all students. The principals in this study either entered a collaborative culture or had to create one. Janette stated that she was well received by her school community because she taught at the school early on in her career. There were people in the building that she had a relationship with, which helped her to quickly build trust among the staff. She said it was a great school community and her style was different than her predecessor’s, which provided a different cultural layer. “Our vision is continuous progress for all, not just the kids, but the adults too,” she said. “Sometimes that is tough to do. Teachers work hard, and I remind them we are all getting better!” Janette said she approached her staff as a leader learner, which is a leader who seeks to learn along with their staff. Her staff responded favorably to this approach. Janette believed that relationships were critical and that was one of the reasons she had very little staff turnover.

Sue reported that when she was hired at Fremont Middle School, the biggest challenge she faced was building school community and unifying the staff. She said, “the staff was divided; they had gone through three or four administrators and there were cliques here and there.” Sue believed she had to unify the staff before she could do anything for the kids.

The challenge of course is working with adults is harder than working with kids because we come with all kinds of baggage and all different perspectives. I had to decide how I was going to take this group of adults who do not talk to each other well and build collaboration. The challenge was to present ourselves as a professional staff.
Sue built a space for collaboration. She looked at the schedule and found time for her teams to meet every Friday morning at 9:30 a.m. Initially, she managed all the students to allow her teams to meet, but eventually hired additional support.

Kayla mentioned climate as one of her four C’s to success. She said that the culture of a school was a critical piece because it acknowledges the individual people and what they bring to the learning environment. She values her staff and the cultural aspects they bring.

You will never hear a staff member here say “I do this” because if you are doing it your team is doing it. I expect to hear “we” statements and not an “I” statement. There is no “I” in team. We have traditions that define us as a school and as a principal I was careful not to break traditions.

Kayla immediately embraced her school community and wanted to make a difference. She constantly grounded the staff with information about the community they were serving, in an effort to build a collaborative culture among staff.

I shared information about the community and over 60% of our students qualified for free and reduced meals. I wanted my staff to know this is the amount of money a family makes to qualify. I wanted them to be aware because our kids are kids and it is easy to forget the drama behind the scenes that they come to the table with.

Harris claimed that the value of a positive school climate was one of his core beliefs. For him, it was crucial that principals build climate by listening to the stakeholders and learning about what happened historically in the building. Harris believed that in struggling schools it was typically not the students that were the problem, but the adults. In his opinion issues usually relate to moral or instructional practices and expectations from staff. To build relationships and understand where his staff was coming from, he used surveys.
I give a simple survey to the staff. I ask them to tell me three things they absolutely love about our school. I ask them to tell me three things they think they would like to grow at the school, not change or dislike, but grow because I want to create that positive mindset about the work.

Harris also made it a point to walk around the school and regularly converse with staff. This gave him insights on what has worked well in the past and what has not worked well. He noted that building relationships was probably the most critical thing you could do because people were not going to follow someone, they did not have a relationship with or trust.

Claire admits she walked into a great school community. The principal had been there 16 years and had done some wonderful things.

When I arrived, the staff felt proud of the work they had done. They were very caring and loved the kids they taught. I spent time getting to know the staff and just really listening and figuring out what was happening and trying to be non-judgmental but absorbing everything going really slow to eventually go fast.

Like Harris, for Claire success of the school was about relationships and shared leadership. She presented her staff with data as a growth opportunity and she felt fortunate that she had a staff that wanted to grow. She expressed admiration and pride in her staff as she discussed the school’s accomplishments.

Ken did not spend a significant amount of time discussing the topic of building a collaborative culture. In his school, his approach was more focused on building teams and working with families, which in some ways helped to build a collaborative culture overall for a school.
Utilizing Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to address instructional practices. The implementation of PLCs was another action discussed by the participants. Three principals (Ken, Kayla, and Sue) identified PLCs as avenues to improve student achievement and teacher effectiveness.

Ken reported that his teachers met in collaborative teams once a week. He noted that these meetings were like mini staff meetings. He realized they needed a consistent collaborative model so that was his focus. He used the work from Solution Tree and the DuFours to guide the staff into smaller collaborative groups to include ELL teachers and special education teachers. Ken said, “We started with benchmark meetings or data dialogues to break down our data and really get into next steps for our students who were not being successful.”

Kayla stated that she believed consistency to be the key to reinforcing collaborative teams. She set high expectations for teams to work together and determine how they would structure instructional practices.

I do not care about the delivery method but expect everyone to deliver the same thing so that the standards are covered and delivered. To deliver the same message to all students and teachers is part of the process and selecting the solutions.

Sue reported that she initially provided time for teams to collaborate and eventually hired support to provide release time for teachers. Her teams started to value their time together and moved from loosely organized 30-minute planning meetings to 60-minute grade-level meetings with a very structured agenda. Kayla said, “This is how collaboration started from the very primitive form to now a very sophisticated form. Now my staff crave this time to work together.”
Providing professional development for staff. The participants acknowledged the role of professional development as an area they addressed to improve the performance of their faculty and staff to reach National ESEA Distinguished School status.

Ken had “a laser focus” on professional development and a five-year plan for the professional development of his staff. He believed there was a difference between training and professional development. According to Ken, training is quick and short term. You can train someone to teach a lesson in reading, writing, and mathematics or a specific way to do something. Professional development transcends training because it is continuous over time and provides an opportunity for staff to become immersed in the work.

Claire and Janette provided ongoing and structured professional development. Claire empowered her teachers to focus on professional development during their collaborative team time. Janette’s instructional support team created multiple opportunities for staff to learn from one another. Sue and Harris reported that they strategically provided ongoing professional development to address the needs of ELL students.

Increasing family engagement. Another common theme that emerged from the data was family engagement. When participants were asked how they engaged families into the functioning of the school, all the participants shared various aspects of their work that included hiring bilingual staff, creating parent centers, providing volunteer opportunities, implementing student-led conferences, and hosting family-friendly walk-throughs. For example, Sue, Claire, and Ken all took great pride in hiring bilingual staff to communicate with their parents. They also all hired parent liaisons that supported their schools. As Sue and Claire are both bilingual, they understood the importance of finding ways to connect their families to the school
community. All the principals wanted their staff to feel comfortable communicating with families.

Kayla and Claire both discussed developing spaces to communicate with parents about the work of the school through their parent centers. Kayla created a parent center and hired a parent coordinator to support parents who volunteered at school. Claire used her parent center to host parent coffees and to offer classes and other meetings.

Harris, Janette, and Ken did not mention parent centers or parent volunteer opportunities; however, they did talk about family engagement as a vehicle for improving student achievement. For example, at Jones Elementary School, Harris did not encourage his parents to volunteer. Instead, he set up student-led conferences and shared frequent communications through social media to engage his families.

Family-friendly walk-throughs were conducted by Claire and Ken. Claire said these walk-throughs were a way to observe different aspects of the culture and climate at the school. She also said they presented an opportunity to discuss ways to provide an open and welcoming school environment, which impacts student performance as well as school culture and climate. Ken said that the purpose of their walk-throughs was to ensure that their families felt like they belonged and to solicit feedback from them.

**Address inequities in marginalized student groups.** All the participants identified key inequities in their schools when they began. The principals identified and addressed the following inequities: providing additional support for ELL students, discrepancies between discipline practices involving students of color versus white students, scheduling and tracking practices, and assisting with basic needs.
Sue and Ken addressed inequities from an (ELL) lens. They believe ELL students are subject to inequities when data is ignored or when we do not analyze and disaggregate data properly, especially for ELLs. They both believed that ELL students needed additional support that was not always provided from the district level. To counter this inequity, they both worked to provide additional opportunities for ELLs to access the educational system. Ken said his team maintained ELL data on students by name and need to ensure they addressed the individual needs of their students.

Claire focused on developing structures for collaborative teams to address the inequities in her school. She believed that all students deserved a good education and that all teachers must work collaboratively to make that happen for themselves and the students.

Janette and Harris addressed inequities from a different lens. As previously noted, Janette believed that her students’ experience in elementary school sets the foundation for the rest of their lives. She had a full-time social worker and was constantly looking for ways to connect people with the resources they need. He focused on differentiation to meet an individual child’s needs and believed discipline practices to be problematic.

One fundamental thing that we can do is not overidentify certain minority groups when it comes to discipline. We must take away the excuses to suspend kids. When a school is struggling everybody thinks you should suspend the whole world. Well guess what? The students come back as soon as the suspension is finished and so we need a new plan. Lastly, Kayla took a different approach to addressing inequities. She focused on fostering and maintaining an atmosphere in which everyone’s basic needs are met through mentorship and other programming.
Summary

The Title I principals in this study have a strong moral commitment to social justice for the diverse student populations they serve. Their experiences have provided them with intimate knowledge of the obstacles facing their school communities as they work to advance student achievement. These individuals are passionate, caring, and optimistic as they strive to transform their schools into places that provide equitable education for all. Furthermore, these participants deeply understand that the complex problems they face are grounded in the daily realities that their students, staff and communities encounter every day.

Data presented in this chapter provided a solid foundation for describing the work these participants engaged in and the obstacles they faced in advocating for social justice. The leadership practices highlighted in the interviews reveal their beliefs and perspectives in advancing social justice practices. They demonstrate that these individuals are willing to go beyond the status quo and participate in social discourse that questions the inequities that their students experience. These principals understand the social, political, and economic constructs that impact teaching and learning for students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds.
Chapter 5

Conclusion and Recommendations

Each time a man stands up for an ideal or acts to improve the lot of others or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope. Robert Kennedy

The purpose of this study was to identify the leadership practices of principals who successfully led Title I schools and gained recognition as National ESEA Distinguished Schools (formerly National Title I Distinguished Schools) for their positive student growth in academics. These principals work with diverse student populations in which many students typically struggle to make academic gains and meet state standards. As schools become more culturally and racially diverse, school principals are challenged with meeting the needs of all students and closing the achievement gap. In this study, social justice leaders are defined as school leaders who believe they could create educational opportunities for all students by creating supportive environments that include high quality instruction. This includes addressing the social structures of oppression, privilege, and opportunity, which can affect marginalized student groups in a different way than more advantaged groups.

This study used a phenomenological methodology with qualitative analysis to identify actions undertaken by Title I principals. It sought to determine how consistent these actions are with the principles of social justice leadership. Participants in this study are current or former Title I principals and they are dedicated to delivering high quality instruction to their students and closing the achievement gap as demonstrated by their designation as National ESEA Distinguished school principals. This chapter provides a summary of the findings as they relate to the literature, implications, recommendations for further research, conclusion and a reflection.
Research Question

The research questions for this study were:

1. What are the leadership practices of principals in National ESEA Distinguished Schools (formerly National Title I Distinguished Schools)?
   a. How did the participants become Title I principals?
   b. How did the Title I principals lead their schools to achieve National ESEA Distinguished School status?
   c. In what social justice practices did the Title I principal engage?

Review of Methodology

Data collection. A semi-structured interview protocol was used for Data collection. This offered more flexibility, which allowed for additional prompting to provide for a better understanding of the subjects under study (Baskarada, 2014). Interviews for this study took place across a three-month span. Questions were designed to solicit participants’ reflections on their experiences as Title I principals. The questions primarily focused on the participant’s experiences as leaders of National ESEA Distinguished Schools. The interview responses were studied to understand the participants’ unique experiences (Stake, 2010) and to look for overall patterns.

The principals were emailed the interview questions and consent form a week before the scheduled interview. All interviews took place in person or through Google Meets at a time agreed-upon by each participant. All interviews were conducted by the researcher. The participants were informed that the interviews would be recorded, and with approval, the interviews were recorded using two digital audio voice recorders. Audio recording ensured that the information that the participants shared was recorded verbatim. The interviews were
transcribed by the researcher. The researcher spent time re-listening to each interview prior to and during the coding and analyzing phase. This allowed the researcher to better analyze the data and develop logical conclusions. In addition to recording the interviews, the researcher also took notes using a note-taking outline (Appendix C). Written notes were always kept secure to ensure confidentiality and referenced when needed.

Important to any qualitative research is member checking the content of the transcripts (Moustakas, 1994). A copy of each transcript was sent to every participant to verify the content. Participants were asked to check for accuracy of meaning and to indicate if any additions or amendments were warranted. All six of the participants responded and no amendments or additions were suggested. Pseudonyms for both participants and schools were used and identifying details have been omitted.

**Summary of the Findings Related to the Literature**

Research around social justice leadership mostly focuses on theory and not on leadership practice. Previous studies on the practice of social justice leadership were conducted by Fraser (2012), Theoharis (2008 and 2009), Wasonga (2009), and Weems (2013). The difference between this study and previous studies was the target population studied. This study focused on Title I principals who have led their schools to National ESEA Distinguished School status. Studying principals from Title I schools ensured that students within the target population were included in the research. Additionally, the requirements that the principals selected currently serve or previously served at a National ESEA Distinguished Schools ensured that principals in this study have been successful at such schools. There were similarities between these findings and other research findings as revealed in the publications reviewed. Overall, there were more similarities than differences.
Differences in findings. Differences between previous studies and this study were minimal and were largely on the context of the research subjects’ positions and the research conducted. For example, Fraser (2012) studied charter school principals. Charter schools are independent of school districts. Furthermore, charter school principals have increased autonomy and flexibility in curriculum and instruction as they set their own rules and performance standards. Additionally, because they receive minimal state funds, they are not held to the same standards with regards to meeting state accountability standards. Public schools, on the other hand, must adhere to educational standards set by state boards and are governed by the school district. Title I principals receive state funding and are required to meet annual measurable objectives, which are set by the state.

Given the purpose of this research, only elementary schools were selected. Therefore, data was not gathered regarding other grade levels or schools that were not identified as Title I. Weems (2013) studied the current and former superintendent from a specific school district. The superintendent is a political figure hired by the school board to run multiple schools for a single district. They set the vision and direction of the school system. The Title I principals in this study were from different districts across the United States. They interacted with different superintendents with different visions for the district they served.

Another difference between this study and previous studies was that the current study focused on actions the principals took to lead their school to National ESEA Distinguished School status. The findings revealed several different actions the principals took to meet the challenges in their schools. In this study the principals were asked about their backgrounds before becoming a Title I principal. Fraser (2012) focused on life experiences prior to becoming a school leader. Wasonga’s (2009) participants shared narratives specifically around the
decision-making process. This study did not focus on decision making; however, participants in this study connected decision making to the actions they took in leading their schools. Theoharis (2009) studied two specific traits that his participants embodied. The traits he studied were the ability to be a passionate visionary leader and a “tenacious commitment to justice.” A passionate visionary loves the work and is dedicated to doing what is needed for student success (Theoharis, 2009). He described a leader with a tenacious commitment to social justice as someone dedicated to creating equitable learning environments for their students. This study did not focus on leadership traits, although the participants did highlight their vision and tenacity.

**Similarities to other studies.** Theoharis (2008) examined social justice leadership practices of school leaders serving racially, socioeconomically, and linguistically diverse student populations. He identified the following practices that are used by social justice leaders to improve student achievement: (1) providing an inclusive and welcoming school culture, (2) developing collaborative teams to analyze data and address concerns through an equity lens, (3) developing a team of administrators to help with the work, and (4) holding high expectations for student achievement (Theoharis, 2008).

The participants in this study undertook similar actions to those described by Theoharis. The principals shared their work around creating a safe and orderly learning environment. This was a common theme that emerged as a challenge from the participants in the study. Kayla believed that the school culture and climate was critical to how a school feels and looks. It was important to her to make sure that her students felt as if they were in an environment where they would be excited and engaged in learning. Harris also worked on the school climate when he started as principal at Jones Elementary School by incorporating murals with positive messages for the students and staff.
The principals also developed PLCs to analyze data and address concerns through an equity lens. Three principals – Ken, Kayla, and Sue – prominently discussed using PLCs as a mechanism to increase the effectiveness of their teachers and to improve student achievement.

Weems (2013) examined several studies that shed light on the practices of principals who led from a social justice lens. These principals promoted meaningful professional development for staff (Brown, Irby & Yang, 2008; Kose, 2009; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003; Theoharis, 2007). The work of four participants (Ken, Claire, Janette, and Sue) acknowledged the role of professional development as an area they addressed to improve the performance of their faculty and staff to reach National ESEA Distinguished School status. Overall, there are several similarities to the findings in this study and other studies. Still, more research is needed to delve deeper into this work of educating students with similar backgrounds.

Summary of the Findings

The overall objective of the research was to identify the leadership practices of the Title I principals and to determine how consistent their leadership practices were with the principles of social justice. Six key findings were identified from the transcribed participants’ analysis of the actions they took to address the challenges in leading their schools to achieve National ESEA Distinguished School status. Though actual practices of the principals varied depending on the school leader, the student population, and the needs of the school, and their experiences several actions were derived from the interviews and narratives of the participants. The six key findings are listed below:

Create a safe and orderly learning environment. Principals are responsible for creating an environment within the school that supports teaching and learning. They must continue to foster a school culture and climate that nurtures children and families and ensures
they feel a sense of belonging (Dantley & Tillman, 2010). Therefore, rejecting traditional paradigms and creating an inclusive community are essential for educating marginalized populations (Theoharis, 2009). As the instructional leader, the principal is responsible for creating a school climate that is conducive to teaching and learning. Creating a safe and orderly learning environment was one of the key findings that emerged as an action that Kayla, Harris, and Janette addressed immediately. Transforming the school community was a priority for them. Three of the principals used a variety of strategies including giving the building a facelift with fresh paint, painting murals and new lighting. Other strategies included addressing the school discipline policies, incorporating restorative justice practices and eliminating the bilingual program to address inequities within underserved student populations. These strategies reinforce creating a safe and orderly learning environment.

**Develop a collaborative culture.** The principal is accountable for higher learning outcomes and thus is also responsible for implementing curriculum. A collaborative culture exists when staff members work together to make decisions that impact the school (Wasonga, 2009). Effective principals make an indirect impact on student achievement by addressing pedagogy, providing professional development, and developing a positive school environment for learning (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). All the principals in this study either entered a collaborative culture or had to create one. Five of the six principals reported using the following common practices to develop a collaborative culture: building positive relationships with the staff, unifying the staff to function as one team, building time into the master schedule for collaboration.

**Professional learning communities (PLCs).** The principals reported the importance of having a collaborative approach to teaching and learning. Three principals (Ken, Kayla, and
Sue) identified PLCs as avenues to improve student achievement and teacher effectiveness. PLCs provides school staff with the structures to sustain instructional practices. DuFour and Fullan (2013) noted that structured PLCs can change the culture of teaching and learning. The actions taken by the principals included changing the master schedule to incorporate collaborative team time; developing a collaborative model to focus conversation; and explicitly teaching and guiding the staff through the PLC cycle.

**Professional development.** Although principals’ leadership behaviors influence their respective school’s success, research affirms that effective principals also influence a school’s culture and climate through professional development, teacher collaboration and policies and procedures (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). Four of the participants (Ken, Claire, Janette and Sue) acknowledge the role of professional development as an area they addressed to improve the performance of their faculty and staff to reach National ESEA Distinguished School status. Effective principals provide ongoing professional development for staff by creating a vision and goals for staff individually and collectively to improve teaching and learning. Strategies to incorporate professional development included: incorporating professional development into collaborative team time, identifying specific areas of professional development for staff, creating a long term professional development plan and setting high expectations for teams to work together. It is important to develop professional development around equity and issues associated with social justice (Theoharis, 2009).

**Family engagement.** Another common action that emerged from the data was around family engagement. Building community was important to all the principals interviewed. As social justice activists they fostered a school culture and climate that nurtures children and families and creates a sense of belonging (Dantley & Tillman, 2010) through programs and
structures. Social justice principals aspire to create "caring communities where relationships matter" (Marshall & Olivia, 2010). When participants were asked how they engaged families into the functioning of the school all the participants shared various aspects of their work to include hiring bilingual staff, creating parent centers, providing volunteer opportunities, and implementing student-led conferences and family-friendly walk-throughs.

**Addressing inequities.** Social justice principals must be able to recognize the inequities that exist amongst their student populations. They must also find ways to resolve these complex problems with a goal of student success for all students. This work involves identifying unfair and unjust practices and addressing those practices through school policies and community expectations (Wasonga, 2009). All the participants identified key inequities in their schools when they began. The principals identified and addressed the following inequities: providing additional support for ELL students, discrepancies between discipline practices involving discipline practices involving students of color versus white students, scheduling and tracking practices that limit access and opportunity.

**Implications for Practice**

School principals with a focus on social justice can draw on several implications from the results of this study. The principalship is not an easy job and often a lonely position in public schools. Principals are faced with local and state mandated accountability practices through standardized testing. Additionally, they encounter high expectations pertaining to closing the achievement gap between White students and students of color as well as students from disadvantaged backgrounds. They are tasked with finding solutions to extremely complex problems.
The goal of this study is to contribute to research on social justice practices. Based on the findings of this study there are two primary implications for discussion as it relates to current literature and future leadership studies: (1) school culture and climate; and (2) professional development for staff and principals as it pertains to addressing the needs of marginalized student populations. The next section outlines the importance of the knowledge gained from this study.

**School culture and climate.** Some schools have such a positive school culture that it is evident when entering the facility. The students and staff that make up the school community feel safe, respected, cared for, and engaged in learning. There is also academic improvement by all students. The principals in this study all expressed their belief that a safe and orderly school community is key in creating a climate and culture conducive to teaching and learning.

Building community was important to all the principals interviewed. As social justice activists they foster a school culture and climate that nurtures children and families and creates a sense of belonging (Dantley & Tillman, 2010) by putting programs and structures in place that create a caring community. The principals all shared various aspects of their work to develop and maintain a positive school culture and climate. Common actions included family engagement, hiring practices, providing volunteer opportunities for parents, holding student-led conferences and providing walk-through opportunities for parents.

**Professional development.** This study can benefit the work being done in the areas of professional development for principals. This study highlights the importance of principal preparation and professional development in working with diverse student populations. Professional development programs with an emphasis on equity and leadership skills that are sensitive to issues of social justice are essential (Theoharis, 2009). A strong leadership
preparation program should provide principals with an opportunity to reflect and discuss their beliefs, attitudes and experiences that influence their leadership with diverse student populations. Principal preparation is an important factor in improving student achievement. Principal candidates are often unprepared to address inequities around race, gender, poverty, language minorities, or students with disabilities. They leave the principal preparation program without the skills, strategies or rationale to address the unique needs of their students and most faculties receive no professional development in social justice (Marshall, 2004). Unfortunately, many instructors in these programs lack the skills and level of expertise to address social justice concerns (Hawley & James, 2010). It is essential that school leadership programs teach aspiring leaders the key factors to becoming critically consciousness, culturally competent, and understand inclusive schooling practices.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

Only six participants were interviewed for this study so one recommendation is to increase the sample size. For further research, more interviews could be conducted of even more Title I leaders. School leaders are busy, and it is often difficult to get them to participate in an interview about their work in schools. For this reason, it would have been beneficial to spend more time researching the schools and looking at relevant data such as test scores, discipline data etc. Lastly, it would be beneficial to interview school staff to get their perspective on the work at the school as well during a site visit.

Another recommendation is to interview principals in larger school communities. The principals in this study lead schools with a student enrollment between 500-700. The sample size includes principals from the east coast and west coast, so including principals and schools in other geographical areas is another recommendation. Nonetheless, despite the narrow
geographical scope of this research, the findings can still be applicable to schools across the United States.

As the demographics around the country continue to shift, Title I schools are becoming more prevalent in urban areas. More focused research might be considered on Title I school leadership with topics such as the effect of teacher leadership; student discipline strategies; and the recruitment, hiring and retention of staff. It would be helpful to explore more topics on the practices of social justice leaders and Title I schools.

**Conclusion**

The findings in this study provide details on what actions six Title I principals took to lead their schools to National ESEA Distinguished Schools (formerly National Title I Distinguished Schools) status. These Title I principals believe their work as social justice leaders is about changing inequalities and overcoming marginalization. Furman (2012) noted that despite many differences in definitions, many leading scholars of social justice believe the focus should be on the experiences and inequities experienced by marginalized groups to improve educational outcomes. In general, social justice, leadership is about creating more equitable schools (Dantley & Tillman, 2010). DeMatthews and Mawhinney (2014) developed the definition below which focuses on the difficulties in creating socially just schools:

The gritty experiences of social justice work, particularly under the most difficult circumstances, do not always result in positive outcomes, at least not in the short term. The fact that persistent historical and structural marginalization not only exists but is pervasive in education underscores the fact that eliminating inequities is an ongoing struggle rather than a singular battle fought and won over the course of a school year (p. 846).
These leaders believe they must create educational opportunities for all students by creating supportive environments to access high quality instruction which leads to academic achievement for all of their students. These social justice leaders address the social structures of oppression, privilege, and opportunity that can affect marginalized student groups from access to educational opportunity. They spend their time building a safe and orderly learning environment and providing professional development to address the complicated and complex task of leading Title I schools.

The participants in this study did not talk about vision; however, it was evident that they all had a vision for what needed to be done in their schools. They were careful and thoughtful as they approached the work, taking a hard look at the data and presenting it to staff in a way that they could understand so they could successfully accept the challenge of closing the achievement gap. All the participants had a sense of urgency and worked from a place of love and concern for their students.

Reflection

When I started the doctoral program, I knew I wanted to do research around social justice. The term is often used in education and I wanted to learn more about it. I have always worked in challenging schools and I believed that social justice was the key in closing the achievement gap. In one of my first classes the entire class used my topic “social justice” to outline a potential study. I was so excited because it seemed pretty simple. However, you just don’t know what you don’t know. I was open to learning more about social justice and eager to find research around social justice practices. I really thought I would be able to identify and interview a few principals who I believed where social justice leaders and begin my study.
However, I quickly learned that true research required a systematic approach and just how difficult this process would be.

First, it was hard to define social justice and the literature review took me in a lot of different directions. The more I read, the more difficult it became too narrow my focus and subject. I knew I wanted to interview principals, but it was hard to determine which principals were social justice leaders. As I worked closely with Dr. Glenn, my advisor, he would ask me “What does the research tell you?” or “How do you know a principal is a social justice leader?” I thought about these questions constantly. Finally, in one of our sessions a classmate asked me if I had considered Title I principals as possible participants for my study. I must admit as a secondary principal I did not know anything about Title I schools which took my research in a new direction.

Principals who participated in this research study have successfully led Title I schools to National ESEA Distinguished School status. The student populations they serve typically struggle to make academic gains and are considered economically disadvantaged. This study provided me an opportunity to identify the leadership practices of principals who have made significant academic gains with their students. It was evident that the leadership practices of these leaders created a learning environment conducive to learning.

As a researcher and school administrator, I find myself dealing with increased accountability policies, and challenges with closing the achievement gap and increasing rigor for my students. This work is becoming increasingly more difficult and I am looking for real solutions to address the needs of my students. My hope is that through the dissemination of these findings, more principals will engage in discourse around social justice leadership. That
we will work together recognize the inequities that exist amongst student populations and to find ways to resolve these complex problems with a goal of student success for all students.

This study has provided me with the opportunity to talk and learn from school principals who have created schools and classroom cultures where all students regardless of their background feel welcomed and respected and are given the opportunity to learn. Writing this dissertation was hard and quite challenging however; it was a wonderful learning experience and I learned so much about myself, my work, and the education system.
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Appendix A

Email Script

Dear Mr. /Ms. (potential participant’s name),

My name is Amielia Mitchell and I am a Doctoral student from the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Department at Virginia Tech. I am currently conducting a research project that will involve interviewing school principals from National ESEA Distinguished Schools (formerly National Title I Distinguished Schools) in the United States in order to understand their leadership practices. The data being collected will be used for the completion of a doctoral dissertation and possible publication. The research will be conducted under the supervision of Professor William Glenn from Virginia Tech.

I am writing you because of your school’s selection to the National Title I Distinguished Schools list. Congratulations on your nomination and selection to this distinguished group of schools! This is quite an accomplishment and I believe your work at (Name of School) would support my research on social justice leadership. Your participation in this research would involve a 60- to 90-minute interview with open-ended questions. You would be asked questions about your leadership practices leading to your success and your reflections and perceptions around your work. If you are willing to participate, I will email you more information about the study. I will follow up with you in one week to see if you have additional questions or concerns.

Thank you for taking time to read this email.

Amielia Mitchell
Doctoral Candidate, Virginia Tech
Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
Appendix B

Follow Up Email

July 2019

Dear Mr. /Ms. (potential participant’s name),

My name is Amielia Mitchell and I am a doctoral student from the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Department at Virginia Tech. I am currently conducting a research project that will involve interviewing school principals from National Title I Schools in the United States in order to understand their leadership practices. The data being collected will be used for the completion a doctoral dissertation and possible publication. The research will be conducted under the supervision of Professor William Glenn from Virginia Tech. The overall purpose of my study was to gain a better understanding of your leadership practices leading to your success and your reflections and perceptions around your work.

You are being invited to participate in this study to be carried out from August 2019 to December 2019. Your participation in this research would involve a 60- to 90- minute interview with open-ended questions guided by the conceptual framework developed from a review of the literature on social justice leadership. The interview would be conducted through Zoom or in person depending on your schedule and availability. During the interview, you would be asked questions around the following big ideas:

- How did the participants become National Title I Distinguished principals?
- How did the Title I principals lead their schools to achieve National Title I Distinguished School status?
- In what social justice practices did the Title I principal engage?
Responses to this study will be held in strictest confidence. You will be assured of
confidentiality with all research writings, publication and presentations. Your name and school
will be given fictional titles and names in the final transcription of the data for the dissertation.

The work you are doing is quite impressive and I would be grateful if you would
participate in my research on this very important subject. If you have questions or concerns,
please feel free to contact me or my Professor William Glenn. I hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,

Amielia Mitchell
Doctoral Candidate, Virginia Tech
Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
Appendix C

Research Study Notes

The Leadership Experiences of National Title I Distinguished Principals

Research Description: The goal of this phenomenological study is to identify the leadership practices of former and current principals who led National Title I Distinguished Schools.

Background Information

Last Name__________________ Frist Name__________________  Female or Male

Caucasian Asian Black Latino Native American

Age: 20 - 30 _____ 31 – 40_____ 41 – 50 _____ 51 – 60 _____ 61 – 70 _____

Years as a Principal _______ Years as a Title I Principal ______

Date of Interview:

Interview start time: _______________ Interview end time: _______________

Participant Pseudonym:

Thank you for consenting to participate in this research interview. I would like to record the interview so the study is as accurate as possible. I will inform you when the recorder is activated and shut off. You may request that recorded be turned off at any point of the interview. This interview will probably take between 60 and 90 minutes to complete.

Specifically, this study is interested in your leadership experiences as a Title I principal. What actions did you take and what perceptions and meaning can you share from your experiences?

Questions with Probes
Appendix D

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

How did the participants become Title I principals?

1. Would you please tell me about your career progression in education, including all the schools and the positions at which you worked?
   a. **Prompts:** Which of these schools were Title I schools?
   b. Why did you choose to work in a Title I school?
   c. What excites you about this work?

How did the Title I principals lead their schools to achieve National Title I Distinguished School status?

2. What challenges did you observe when you began at your school?
3. What were the most important actions you took as a leader to address those challenges?
   a. **Prompts:** Why did you choose these actions?
   b. How did these actions transform the school?
4. What areas of improvement in the performance of faculty and staff were needed in order to reach National Title I Distinguished School status?
5. What steps did you take to integrate families into the functioning of the school?
6. What steps did you take to address inequities/disparities in student outcomes?

In what social justice practices did the Title I principal engage?

7. What experiences do you believe prepared you to lead Title I schools?
8. What role has equity and social justice leadership supported your work as a principal?
9. Is there anything else you would like to share about your work at the school?
Appendix E

Research Subject Consent Form

Title: Social Justice Leadership in Title I Schools

Protocol No.: IRB#19-562

Investigator(s): William J. Glenn, J.D., PH.D. (Primary Investigator)
Associate Professor, School of Education
Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University
7054 Haycock Road, Room 444
Falls Church, Virginia 22043
United States of America

Amieila S. Mitchell (Investigator)
3616 Fishers Hill Court
Fairfax, Virginia 22033
United States of America

Daytime Phone Number(s): (703) 538-8493 – Dr. William J. Glenn
(703) 909-4089 – Amielia S. Mitchell

You are being invited to take part in a research study. A person who takes part in a research study is called a research subject, or research participant.

What should I know about this research?
• This form sums up the research.
• The researcher will explain this research to you.
• Taking part in this research is voluntary. You can agree to take part and change your mind later.
• You can choose not to take part. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.
• If you do not understand as a question
• Ask all the question you want before you decide.

Purpose of this Research Project

The purpose of this study is to identify leadership practices and the actions of school leaders who successfully led Title I schools and gained national recognition. The National Title I Distinguished School Programs is a program that recognizes schools for their positive educational advances. Title I principal’s work in schools with diverse student populations that traditionally struggle to make academic gains and meet state standards.
The study will involve data collection from principals who led National Title I Distinguished schools. The research will be used in a dissertation to increase discourse around student achievement and closing the achievement gap. From purposeful sampling, 23 principals emerged as possible participants.

**Procedures**

You, the participant, will be asked to sign an informed consent form prior to the collection of any data. You will also be asked to provide demographic information regarding your role as a principal and work experiences. The information will be de-identified by the investigator.

Next, you will participate in one semi-structured interview that will last around 60-to 90-minutes. You will receive the interview protocol a week before the actual interview. All interviews will take place in person, through Skype or Google Meets at a date and time that is agreed upon by you and the investigator. The interview will be scheduled between August 2019 to December 2019.

The interview will be audio recorded using two digital audio voice recorders and transcribed by the researcher. A transcript of the interview will be made. To ensure credibility to the transcribed data will be sent back to you after it is analyzed for you to clarify, elaborate or suggest changes if you feel I did not accurately capture your information. You will have 72 hours from the time you receive the transcript to provide revisions to the investigator.

All data collected (including the transcription of your interview, audio recording of your interview, and documents created by the investigator from the interview) will be kept confidential by the investigator and will be retained for three years following the publication of the study. After that, the investigator will shred and destroy all hard copy documents and delete all data collected and stored on technology.

**What are my responsibilities if I take part in this research?**

If you take part in this research, you will be responsible for participating in an interview either in person, through Skype or Google Meets at a date and time convenient for you. The interview will last approximately 60-to 90-minutes.

**Risks and Benefits**

There is little or no risk to you to participate in this study. If, however, you experience any emotional distress during any part of this research and no longer wish to participate in the study, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. You may experience concerns about confidentiality. The investigator will not divulge your identity and data will be de-identified by the investigator. There is no cost to you to participate in this research.

There are no benefits to you from taking part in this research. However, possible benefits include understanding made by the investigator from your data which will be published in a dissertation so that others can learn from your actions as Title I principal and add to the literature on social justice.
Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality

Pseudonym for each school site and principal will be used. A key that links the actual names of those school sites to the pseudonyms that will be stored separately from all other research. Individual interview sessions will be audio recorded using two recorders. The recordings will be through a password protected personal recording device and password-protected computer. Each interview will be transcribed by the researcher. The researcher will store all data and transcriptions on a password-protected computer in a secured location. The researcher will retain written copies of transcriptions, in a locked and secured filing cabinet. Only the Investigator will have access to this information. "At no time will the researchers release identifiable results of the study to anyone other than individuals working on the project without your written consent".

The Virginia Tech (VT) Institutional Review Board (IRB) may view the study’s data for auditing purposes. The IRB is responsible for the oversight of the protection of human subjects involved in research.

Compensation

There is no cost for participating in this study.

Freedom to Withdraw

You are free to withdraw from this study at any time. You are free not to answer any questions that you choose or respond to what is being asked of you without penalty.

Questions or Concerns

If you have questions or concerns about this study, you may contact one of the research investigators whose contact information is included at the beginning of this document. Any questions or concerns about the study’s conduct or your rights as a research participant or need to report a research-related injury or event, you may contact the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board at irb@vt.edu or (540) 231-3732.

Statement of Consent

I have read the Consent Form and conditions of this project. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent:

_________________________________________  ________________________________  __________________
Subject Name                                  Subject Signature                          Date

_________________________________________  ________________________________  __________________
Researchers Name                              Researcher Signature                     Date
Appendix F

Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board Letter

MEMORANDUM
DATE: September 3, 2019
TO: William Joseph Glenn, Amiella S Mitchell
FROM: Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572, expires January 29, 2021)

PROTOCOL TITLE: Social Justice Leadership in Title I Schools
IRB NUMBER: 19-562

Effective September 3, 2019, the Virginia Tech Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) and Institutional Review Board (IRB) determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review under 45 CFR 46.104(d) category(ies) 2(ii).

Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities impact the exempt determination, please submit a new request to the IRB for a determination.

This exempt determination does not apply to any collaborating institution(s). The Virginia Tech HRPP and IRB cannot provide an exemption that overrides the jurisdiction of a local IRB or other Institutional mechanism for determining exemptions.

All Investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at: https://secure.research.vt.edu/external/irb/responsibilities.htm
(Please review responsibilities before beginning your research.)

PROTOCOL INFORMATION:
Determined As: Exempt, under 45 CFR 46.104(d) category(ies) 2(ii)
Protocol Determination Date: September 3, 2019

ASSOCIATED FUNDING:
The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this protocol, if required.
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* Date this proposal number was compared, assessed as not requiring comparison, or comparison information was revised.

If this protocol is to cover any other grant proposals, please contact the HRPP office (hrp@vt.edu) immediately.