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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPAL'S PRACTICES
AND A REDUCED EQUITY GAP: A CASE STUDY

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

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During the last 60 years, national standardized testing has confirmed a gap in reading and math scores between White and Black students, often called the achievement, opportunity, equity, or race-based gap (Coleman et al., 1966; NCES, 2021). Researchers have attempted to identify factors that influence these student outcomes (Jayavant, 2016). Leithwood et al. (2004) found that the practices and behaviors of building leaders "are second only to classroom instruction in school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school" (p. 5). Based on their significant impact, research has been conducted to identify effective social justice and mainstream educational leadership behaviors that may contribute to student outcomes. A case study was conducted in a school experiencing more than a 5-year reduction in the equity gap. The school was led by a long-term principal whose leadership can be tied more closely to student outcomes. The findings indicated the principal's most prevalent practices, those that may be contributing to the reduction in the equity gap, were based on a strong foundation of relational skills and well-developed critical consciousness. The principal's relational skills, along with an equity lens, drove his efforts to develop relationships, engage the community, cultivate and maintain culturally relevant pedagogy used by the teachers, and exercise critical consciousness and self-reflective practice. These findings are relevant to students in leadership preparation programs as they learn strategies for leadership, for practitioners looking to improve student

outcomes and close equity gaps, and for school district leaders in hiring and supporting principals.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A documented gap in achievement for Black students versus White students has existed for over 50 years (Coleman et al., 1966; NCES, 2021). Despite reform efforts to mitigate factors that may influence this gap, it remains (Blankstein et al., 2016). Scholars have found that effective leadership practices have a significant influence on student achievement outcomes (Louis et al., 2010). Additionally, Sweeney (1982) reported that "Effective schools have effective leaders. Much of what the school does to promote achievement is within the principal's power and influence and control" (p. 1). The principal can influence most elements within a school that affect achievement. This paper examines influential factors of the equity achievement gap and the research surrounding leadership practices shown to reduce the gap by impacting student achievement. The achievement gap has held many names such as the equity gap, the opportunity gap, and the race-based gap. The achievement gap is used in this case based on how it was initially identified in the 1960s, not as an indicator of the student's lack of achievement.

Institutional Racism

This dissertation was written from the perspective that the founding and history of the United States is wrapped in racist policy (Hicks, 2011; Kendi, 2016; Kozol, 2012). Thus, it would be impossible to explore the equity gap without acknowledging that racism is woven into the fabric of our society (Hammond, 2014).

Throughout the history of the United States, populations, such as non-dominant people of color, language, race, culture, gender, or ability, shifted to the margins of society and have been

treated differently and in many cases with less dignity (Hicks, 2011; Kendi, 2016; Kozol, 2012; Tatum, 2017). Personal beliefs and U.S. policy have continually restricted these populations from gaining access to the same level of education, care, employment, rights, and living conditions as the rest of the country (Alexander, 2020; Kendi, 2016; Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008).

This history of inequity is known as institutional racism. Ladson-Billings (2017) declared, "This insidious institution is organic and self-perpetuating and cannot be dismantled via public sanctions" (p. 84). Studied examples of institutional or systematic racism are the mass incarceration of Black men, unfair real estate laws, and inequitable hiring policies (Alexander, 2020; Anderson, 2016; Bell, 2005; Hammond, 2014). Tatum (2017) explained,

Whether one looks at the productivity lowered by racial tensions in the workplace, or real estate equity lost through housing discrimination, or the tax revenue lost in underemployed communities of color, or the high cost of warehousing human talent in prison, the economic costs of racism are real and measurable. (p. 14)

Institutional racism compounds indignities and intentionally reduces opportunities for success for marginalized peoples. The complex intricacies of this system are difficult to name, isolate, and battle.

The fight for equal civil liberties and dignity has raged for centuries with gains and losses (Bell, 2005; Hicks, 2011; Kendi, 2016). For example, Black residents were given the right to vote, but southern states leveraged a voting tax to inhibit voters of color. Many Black voters were economically disadvantaged, limiting their participation (Alexander, 2020; Anderson, 2016; Kendi, 2016). With each win, scholars argued there is a countermeasure that accounts for the lack of expected progress. Despite this controversy, scholars agree that attempts have been

made to reform education and rectify injustices (Alexander, 2020; Bell, 2005; Coates & Coates, 2017; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Mondale & Patton, 2001; Nieto, 2010).

Historical Perspective of the Equity Gap

This chapter contains the historical, political, economic, and racial context influencing the creation and maintenance of the equity gap. As documented by national testing scores, these forces have combined to keep Black students from achieving the same level of proficiency in math and reading as White students for over six decades.

Origination of Public Education

The founders of the United States public education system began with altruistic intentions. In 1837, Horace Mann, the secretary of education for Massachusetts, saw the need for a systematic approach to education. Mann described his vision of education as a system of common schools that would impart a similar body of knowledge to children to equalize their chances in life. Mondale and Patton (2001) reported Mann's vision,

It is a free school system; it knows no distinction of rich or poor . . . it throws open its doors and spreads the table of its bounty of all the children of the state. . . . Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the equalizer of the conditions of men, the great balance a wheel of the social machinery. (p. 29)

The logistics of educating a nation requires elaborate structures that remain vulnerable to influences. Examining the evolution of education provides the context to understand the creation and status of the equity gap. One-room community schools and private institutions played a prominent role in educating students in the U.S. through much of the 1800s. As populations and cities swelled, student enrollment increased. Schools and school districts grew, gaining more significant roles in society and government. As the system evolved, so did racism in its structure

(Verstegen, 2015). The historical case of *Roberts v. City of Boston* in 1849 legally upheld the segregation of Black students from White schools. The U.S. Supreme Court used this case to support the 1896 decision of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, stating that "separate but equal" was all the 14th Amendment guaranteed (Alexander, 2020; Bell, 2005; Brown Foundation, n.d.). This decision upheld the Jim Crow Laws that "disenfranchised Blacks and discriminated against them in virtually every sphere of life, lending sanction to racial ostracism that extended to schools" (Alexander, 2020, p. 35). This pervasive nature of reasoning, ratified by courts, established a new national norm in social control that continued until the 1950s.

Americans were proud of their publicly funded education system as nationalism soared through World War I and II (Mondale & Patton, 2001). Immigrants poured in from war-torn countries, exploding large city populations. As student enrollment increased, educators began testing students to determine their intelligence quotient (IQ) and Scholarly Aptitude Test (SAT) scores (Alexander, 2020; Kendi, 2016). Students were assigned a track based on scores, whether vocational or scientific. Even though this kept many immigrants and impoverished children from elevated scholastic opportunities, many remained thankful, as this was still a higher level of free education than immigrants expected or received in their countries (Alexander, 2020; Mondale & Patton, 2001).

The 1950s brought critique and increased expectations from non-immigrant communities. Jobs were competitive, and a student's educational level or track determined their outcome in the economy (Mondale & Patton, 2001; Sass, 2020). World War I and II ushered the United States out of isolationism and thrust it onto the world stage for inspection. Overt racist policies, such as school segregation, were illuminated. The public education system Americans once touted with pride now paled compared to other world powers' educational success (Darling-Hammond,

2010; Kendi, 2016). The international spotlight made it more difficult for American power brokers to ignore and dismiss complaints. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) forced the courts to recognize lawsuits by claiming unequal education policies (Bishop, 1977; Sass, 2020).

Brown v. Board of Education (1954) was one of these cases. It culminated with the Supreme Court declaring "separate was not equal" and requiring the integration of schools to support both Black and White students in the same facilities. Unfortunately, while desegregation gave Black students the right to attend traditionally white schools, it did little to change the overall quality of the education of Black students (Bell, 2005; Kozol, 2012).

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka was one battle in the nation's fight for civil liberties for all people of color (Alexander, 2020; Bell, 2005; Kendi, 2016). In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act that prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin in government and public facilities, including schools (Kendi, 2016). This act opened doors to other policy and funding reforms designed to balance the scales of injustice.

Although education remained under the individual state's purview, Johnson implemented a system to leverage compliance with monetary support that remains today (Verstegen, 2015). Federal government grants were awarded to states that complied with a variety of federal mandates, such as standardized testing, to supplement state funding. President Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965, which established programs for low-income and students of color and monitored compliance through standardized testing and other strategic measures (Dickinson, 2016). This process promised critical scrutiny of testing

outcomes with less emphasis on the school and community context, or "inputs" (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 104).

The Civil Rights Act (1964) required a survey and summary of the condition of American public schools within two years of signing the law. As a result, James Coleman and several co-authors, in coordination with The Health, Wellness, and Education Department of the United States, published the "Equality of Education Opportunity" (EEO) report in 1966. The EEO Report is more commonly called The Coleman Report after the author (Dickinson, 2016). The Coleman Report examined multiple aspects of education, publishing the first central reporting of the consistent and significant gap between the learning and achievement of students of color and poverty and the wealthy, "Caucasian" students (Coleman et al., 1966, p. 30).

The published findings in the Coleman Report created interest for educational researchers and slowly began to move the legal landscape. The report offered statistical data to back social justice leaders and allow scholars to start causal investigations (Hill, 2016). Over the years, this disparity in achievement scores between students of color and White and Asian students has been called various names such as the achievement gap, opportunity gap, race-based gap, and equity gap (NCES, 2021). In 1966, the gap between Black and White student scores was <9.7%> in reading and <10%> in math (Coleman et al., 1966). Included in the Coleman Report were findings of "mostly segregated schools, disparities favoring White children in some resources like class size, school facilities, and the availability of advanced coursework" for Black students (Hill, 2016, p. #).

The Coleman Report did not provide recommendations on policy or strategies for support but did inspire an age of policy reform and federal legislation (Cain & Watts, 1970). The 1973 Equal Educational Opportunities Act addressed barriers outlined in the Coleman Report and

required states to act, incentivizing with federal money (Dickinson, 2016; Mujic, 2015; Sass, 2020). Standardized testing took on an increased level of importance as the measure of a nation's educational health, indicating a nation's overall strength and success (Kendi, 2016; Mondale & Patton, 2001).

By the mid-1970s, academic research and political attention increased funding for urban schools, higher pay for teachers, higher quality curriculum, and financial aid for higher education (Darling-Hammond, 2010). These efforts, known as the Great Society social programs, resulted in a significant decrease in reading and math score gaps between Black and White students. The reading gap average for 17-year-old students went from 53 to 20 points (Darling-Hammond, 2010; NCES, 2021).

In the 1960s and '70s human rights groups pushed for reform; they explicitly identified education as a system that created inequities. They referenced the equity gap, low enrollment for students of color in higher education, tracking, and the lower percentage of educators and administrators of color (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Gorski, 1999; Nieto, 2010). Activists and researchers such as James Banks, Carl Grant, Geneva Gay, and Sonia Nieto began to analyze the system and suggest reforms. Banks believed that "all aspects of the school had to be examined and transformed, including policies, teachers' attitudes, instructional materials, assessment methods, counseling, and teaching styles" (as cited in Gorski, 1999). Professional development training to teach multicultural skills and strategies abounded (Darling-Hammond, 2010). As with many theory-to-practice reforms, the installed multicultural education pedagogy and practices were inconsistent and incomplete. Nieto (2010) believed that,

Although multicultural education began as a reform movement with a powerful commitment to educational equity and an unequivocal stance against racism, in most

places it is implemented as curriculum and practices that are little more than ethnic additives or cultural celebrations. (p. 24)

Multicultural educational practices were necessary to affect change and difficult to implement as an effective measure to combat the race-based gap.

The headway made in the 1970s and early 1980s could have profoundly impacted the equity gap by 2021 if progress had continued (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Instead, the Reagan Administration changed the landscape of social programming. The cuts in healthcare, housing subsidies, and child welfare resulted in higher child poverty and homelessness rates. In addition, federal education funding for high-need communities went from 12% to 6% (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

The National Commission on Excellence in Education, authored by Gardner (1983), released "A Nation at Risk," commissioned by the Reagan Administration, proposing sweeping reforms in public education and teacher preparation programs. The impassioned report lamented the state of education and suggested resources from the government to supplement state funding and target national goals (Gardner, 1983).

In 1993, Massachusetts, a progressive education state often followed by other states, implemented its first high-stakes testing program based on statewide standards. The intent was to design a system that ensured all students were taught the same content and then tested in a standardized manner that provided transparency and accountability. This standards-based reform was followed by President Clinton's announcement of increased funding for bilingual and Title I programs (Sass, 2020).

The federal incentive pattern continued with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 in 2002. But, by far, No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 created its most significant impact by

making high-stakes student testing mandatory (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Kendi, 2016; Nieto, 2010). These test scores were used to assess the adequate yearly progress and grant or withhold federal funds as a penalty when goals were unmet (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

In 2009, President Obama made 4.35 billion dollars available to schools in the Race to the Top Initiative (Coates & Coates, 2017). States, and eventually schools, were asked to adopt core content standards and set up databases to report standardized testing results. The United States revamped standards to prepare students for the 21st-century technological skills and higher education. At the same time, data analysis of the testing results was designed to reveal low-achieving and turnaround schools needing changes (Coates & Coates, 2017; Darling-Hammond, 2010). States and local school districts jumped at the opportunity for increased funding and adopted standards and testing requirements in line with Race to the Top.

The Equity Gap

The Coleman Report (Coleman et al., 1966) made it clear that students of color, classified as minority student groups at the time, were scoring lower on achievement tests than White students. It stated,

With some exceptions . . . the average minority pupil scores distinctly lower on these tests at every level than the average White pupil. Thus, by this measure, the deficiency in achievement is progressively more significant for the minority pupils at progressively higher grade levels. (p. 21)

The data from the report isolated and named a gap in achievement between minority and White students and illustrated the compounding effects of lower achievement as students advanced through their education.

Table 1 compares test scores from 1992 and 2019 compiled data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in the National Report Card (2021). The historical and current data sets were created by the NCES, although the tests used in both data set years were different. This table contains only math and reading test scores, although other subjects have relatively similar results (NCES, 2021).

Table 1

Comparison of National Standardized Testing Proficiency Averages

Grade and Content Tested	1992	2019
	National Proficiency Average Gap between Black and White Students	National Proficiency Average Gap between Black and White Students
12 th grade math	-30	-30 (2015)
12 th grade reading	-23	-29
8 th grade math	-33	-32
8 th grade reading	-29	-27
4 th grade math	-31	-25
4 th grade reading	-32	-26

Table 1 illustrates the documented race-based gap in proficiency scores between Black and White students for the past 29 years as reported by federal agencies. The average gap between Black and White students' proficiency scores across the nation fluctuated between 23 and 32 points depending on the grade, year, and content. Black students consistently scored lower than White students in a predictable pattern on achievement assessments.

Scholars assert that lower test scores for Black students are due to multiple factors. The factors include the lack of access to higher-level classes, inadequate school facilities, poor

teacher quality, lack of training for teachers, implicit bias in classrooms, and poverty stemming from historical and political inequities (Alexander, 2020; Bell, 2005; Blankstein et al., 2016; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Kendi, 2016; Kozol, 2012; Nieto, 2010).

This paper uses the term equity, achievement, and race-based gap interchangeably, but the author notes that the race-based discrepancies in scores may be referred to as the achievement gap by other authors due to the historical nature of how the gap was initially identified, not as a label for the cause of the discrepancy. Blankstein et al. (2016) wrote, "It is increasingly clear that if we do not address the profound inequities in education, the disparities in learning opportunities that are behind the so-called achievement gap, our entire society will be imperiled" (p. 11). The gap in student scores is evidence of a current issue that has been constructed and compounded by historically inequitable systems in the United States.

Statement of Problem

For over 60 years, national reading and mathematics assessment systems have confirmed a disparity in standardized achievement between White and Black students. Despite continuous political and structural reforms in education, the equity gap exists today. Leithwood et al. (2004) found that "leadership is second only to classroom instruction among school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school" (p. 5). Since leadership has been shown to impact student learning significantly, it is essential to understand leadership actions that may address the disparities in student outcomes. Thus, this proposed study examined leadership practices in a school that has seen a reduction in the equity gap.

Importance and Implications

The United States education system must close the race-based discrepancy in standardized testing scores (Blankstein et al., 2016). Research is needed to investigate the

inequities and further explore racist structures embedded in the system at the root of the race-based gap. Historically, racist policies and practices oppressed Black families, limiting their potential to learn and their ability to earn. Seeking out system flaws and making intentional changes can reverse the overarching inequities. Reducing racist policies and systems will increase social and economic opportunities and outcomes for all populations for generations to come.

This study hopes to contribute information on best practices for principals and educational leaders to improve outcomes for minoritized students. Effective and targeted leadership practices are necessary to close the equity gap and increase achievement for Black students. These practices might inform faculty in principal preparation programs to promote social justice leadership in education.

Leadership and Organizational Implications

More light is being shone on the racial disparity in standardized testing data across the nation. Yet, despite efforts, the gap in the achievement data between White and Black students remains (Coleman et al., 1966; NCES, 2021). This study dives deeper into this problem and examines the specific leadership practices that effectively shrink the disproportionalities.

Linking leadership practices to student outcomes informs decisions on many platforms. State policymakers could use the data to implement a rating system for school leaders to evaluate their effectiveness or preparedness for a given situation. Evaluating principals on specific practices proven to influence the equity gap might shift the focus of the principals and their evaluators' attention. Higher education institutions could add effective leadership behaviors to their curriculum to train their candidates at the beginning of their careers. When hiring principals and choosing the school that would best fit principals, district

leaders could juxtapose the findings of this research with their knowledge of their candidate pool to evaluate the best options. Most significantly, these findings may provide principals with the best practices to lead a school toward reducing the equity gap.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the leadership practices in one school with a principal in residence for an extended time and with standardized testing scores that show reduced equity gaps in reading and math. This was explored by conducting a case study within one suburban school. I interviewed the principal and surveyed the staff to understand their perspectives on their leadership practices. In addition, I conducted on-site observations to collect firsthand data on how the principal interacted with the students, staff, and community, and managed daily leadership responsibilities. Finally, I coded, categorized, and themed the data to determine what social justice and/or mainstream leadership skills were perceived to be effective in reducing the equity gap.

Research Question

To explore the leadership actions in the selected school, the following research question guided this single case study research.

Q1 How do elementary school principal practices contribute to a reduction in equity gap student scores between Black and White students in elementary schools?

Definition of Terms

Equity gap: The equity gap is the statistical gap in the average proficiency scores in standardized test data between White students and students of color. This gap is known as the equity gap, the achievement gap, the opportunity gap, and/or the race-based gap. The name has changed over time as the reason for the gap has become more apparent with research and socio-political understanding (Blankstein et al., 2016).

Social justice school leadership: Social justice school leadership is defined as a leader's actions intended to disrupt the status quo of practices that have marginalized populations within the education system. Social justice leaders strive to identify the issues of oppressed peoples and advocate for change (Theoharis, 2007).

Conclusion

Institutional racism has been a part of the history of the United States since it began (Hicks, 2011; Kendi, 2016; Kozol, 2012). The policies and structures of education were built within this system and have resulted in educational inequities. The equity gap, a product of these historical and current inequities, is the disparity in testing outcomes between White students and students of color. This study examined elementary principal social justice practices that may effectively reduce the equity gap for Black students.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Education in the United States continues to evolve as reform movements are initiated to increase student outcomes and raise ratings compared to other countries (Darling-Hammond, 2010.) Researchers continue to investigate the critical factors linked to student achievement to best direct reforms. Barnett and McCormick (2004) found that "inevitably, any discussion of reform focuses attention on school principals, who, as leaders of schools, are responsible for the implementation of reforms" (p. 2). This literature review outlines research on the responsibilities and practices of principals within their schools. In addition, a section on social justice leadership creates a lens for practices identified to affect change targeted at social inequities.

Leadership Influence

Research since the 1970s links student achievement to effective school leadership (Brookover & Lezotte, 1979; Cotton, 2003; Davis, 1998; Edmonds, 1979; Leithwood et al., 2004; Louis et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005). Leithwood et al. (2004) claimed, "Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school" (p. 5). Leithwood et al. (2004) estimated a correlation between student outcomes and leadership between a .17 and .22 effect size. Marzano et al. (2005) found a correlation of .25. While the effect size may differ, studies agree that schools cannot be successful with ineffective leadership (Blankstein et al., 2016; Brookover & Lezotte, 1979; Cotton, 2003; Edmonds, 1979; Marzano et al., 2005).

Direct and Indirect Influence

Leadership opportunities shift with the magnitude of variables in the educational structure. School leaders make decisions and contact multiple facets of the school, influencing the school environment directly and indirectly (Louis et al., 2010). Building leaders affect student outcomes primarily through indirect impact, or "impact mediated through teachers and others" (Cotton, 2003, p. 73). Through policy structures, culture, climate, and other factors, leaders can create momentum and synergistic energy across the system, exponentially increasing the ability to affect change (Louis et al., 2010).

An example of the indirect impact of principals on student outcomes is through professional learning communities (PLCs) (DuFour et al., 2010; Kalkan, 2016; Louis et al., 2010). Louis et al.'s (2010) findings explained the connection between effective leadership practices, PLCs, and student outcomes. Professional learning communities are research-based teams of educators that follow structures that guide them through the evaluation of shared data to refine instruction to meet the needs of students. Louis et al. delved into PLCs "because accumulating evidence shows that it is related to improved instruction, student achievement, and one of our leadership variables" (2010, p. 42). They further explained that this type of organizational learning is most successful when directly supported by principal leadership. Thus, the influence of leadership behaviors indirectly supports student achievement through organized PLCs.

Leadership Practices

Extensive research exists on theoretical leadership styles, such as transformational, collective, shared, and distributed leadership (Fullan, 2001; Leithwood et al., 2004; Louis et al., 2010). Louis et al. (2010) found that "no single pattern of leadership distribution is consistently

linked to student learning" (p. 54). This paper does not focus on the leadership theories or styles described as collective, shared, distributed, or transformational. However, it focuses on specific practices that leaders are responsible for in their daily duties. For that purpose, after a summary of Louis et al. (2010), Cotton (2003), and Marzano et al.'s (2005) studies around effective leadership practices, this review of literature uses Marzano et al.'s (2005) framework of 21 effective practices of principals to organize the synthesis of research.

Links to Improved Student Learning

The Wallace Foundation worked with several authors from the University of Minnesota and the University of Toronto to gather evidence through research and analyze the outcomes to investigate the links between student learning and leadership in a report called *Learning from Leadership: Investigating the links to Improved Student Learning* (Louis et al., 2010). The study by Louis et al. (2010) includes multiple theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches, and a database of more than 9,000 respondents from different levels within education. Their multi-faceted five-year mixed methods study provided results critical to defining the impact of leadership on student outcomes.

The framework used to guide Louis et al.'s (2010) extensive study comes from an earlier work by many of the same authors. Leithwood et al. (2004) examined the literature on leadership influences in the school setting from multiple perspectives of the state, district, school, and teacher. Their initial synthesis guided the empirical research in their 2010 leadership research study. Leithwood et al. (2004) collected and categorized successful leadership practices into three sets: setting directions, developing people, and redesigning the organization. The 2010 study added a category, managing the instructional program (Louis et al., 2010).

In 2021, The Wallace Foundation worked with Grissom et al. to extend the research meta-analysis of Louis et al. (2010) and Leithwood et al. (2004). Grissom et al.'s (2021) findings took advantage of newer longitudinal data made available by improved tracking and technology in qualitative research and education. The researchers recategorized effective principal practices, dividing them into skills and leadership behaviors. Grissom et al. (2021) recognized three skills: human development and relationship skills, skills to support classroom instruction, and management skills. These three types of skills support the four behaviors of effective principals: engaging in focused instructional interactions with teachers, building a productive climate, facilitating collaboration and PLCs, and managing personnel and resources strategically (Grissom et al., 2021). The findings of the study confirmed Leithwood et al.'s (2004) conclusion that leaders have a significant impact on student outcomes. In addition to confirming the impact size of leadership, Grissom et al. (2021) examined factors of student outcomes and practices of principals. Their research found that “the overall impact of an effective principal can be linked to observable behaviors” (Grissom et al., 2010, p. XV). This result suggested that further research on observable principal behaviors may contribute to the training of influential school leaders. Even though the three studies described in this section build upon one another, this researcher chose to include the Louis et al. (2010) report in the literature comparison because of the detailed description of principal behaviors.

Schools are subject to influence from many forces making isolation of leadership practices and their direct link to student outcomes difficult. It is essential to acknowledge the variations of leadership and other significant factors involved in the complexity of educational environments. Louis et al. (2010) created an extensive research model with many layers. This literature review focuses on the first of three parts since parts two and three examined leadership

at the district and state levels. While these levels are crucial to the education system in the United States, the scope of this paper is the building level. The decision to focus solely on the building level allowed the researcher to study the specific leadership responsibilities connected to student achievement in more depth.

Principals and Student Achievement

Kathleen Cotton (2003) analyzed 81 studies on effective leadership practices from the 1970s to the early 2000s. Her synthesis focused solely on studies of leadership behaviors that relate to one or more student outcomes. The studies included elementary, middle, and secondary schools that gathered information from principals, teachers, students, and combinations of those groups. Most of the studies were conducted in the United States, and "more than half focus on low-SES (socioeconomic status) minority students" (Cotton, 2003, p. 5). Leithwood et al. (2004) and Marzano et al. (2005) cited this study which reinforced and added findings to a boom of literature at that time, all working to connect student achievement to effective principal behaviors.

School Leadership that Works

Marzano et al. (2005) used 35 years of extensive research on leadership behaviors to conduct a quantitative meta-analysis, resulting in objective conclusions. The researchers examined "69 studies involving 2,802 schools, approximately 1.4 million students, and 14,000 teachers to compute the correlation between the leadership behavior of the principal in the school and the average academic achievement of students in the school to be .25" (p. 10). With the computed results, the authors laid out 21 responsibilities and their effect sizes, showing the strength of the correlation of each responsibility to student achievement. The specific

responsibilities were not new to research, but rather organized to represent a synthesis of decades of literature (Marzano et al., 2005).

Effective Leadership Practices

I have chosen to examine leadership responsibilities found by Cotton (2003) and Louis et al. (2010) using Marzano et al.'s (2005) 21 responsibilities. Table 2 compares the effective principal leadership practices reported by the three studies previously mentioned in this proposal, Marzano et al. (2005), Cotton (2003), and Louis et al. (2010). The Xs in Table 2 represent effective practices reported in Cotton's (2003) and Louis et al.'s (2010) studies that share similarities to Marzano et al.'s (2005) 21 responsibilities. Some of Marzano et al.'s (2005) responsibilities correlate with more than one of Cotton's (2003) and Louis et al.'s (2010) identified practices which are illustrated with two or three Xs.

Table 2*Alignment of Effective Leadership Practices*

21 Responsibilities (Marzano et al., 2005)	25 Practices (Cotton, 2003)	Core Leadership Practices (Louis et al., 2010)
Affirmation	XX	X
Change agent	X	X
Contingent rewards	XX	X
Communication	XX	X
Culture	X	XX
Discipline	X	X
Flexibility	X	X
Focus	XXX	XXX
Ideals/beliefs	X	X
Input	XX	XX
Intellectual stimulation	XX	X
Involvement in curriculum, instruction, and assessment	X	XXX
Knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment	XX	XXX
Monitoring/evaluating	XXX	XX
Optimizer	XXX	XXX
Order	X	XX
Outreach	X	X
Relationships	XX	X
Resources	X	XX
Situational awareness	-	X
Visibility	XX	XX

Table 2 aligns researched practices from the review of literature by Cotton (2003), the empirical research by Louis et al. (2010), and Marzano et al.'s (2005) meta-analysis, showing the similarities between the findings. Each of the 21 Responsibilities will be defined based on Marzano et al.'s work with additional explanations provided from other sources.

Affirmation. Building leaders must provide accountability and affirmation for the successes and failures within the school (Marzano et al., 2005). To do this, principals need to be active participants in creating school goals and examining data to analyze results. Whether or not the school reached its target, the work to accomplish goals, as well as the outcomes, should be acknowledged and celebrated (Cotton, 2003). During efforts made by a collaborative team, principals must still provide individual recognition (Louis et al., 2010). Staff should be identified for their contribution and encouraged to celebrate with rituals and symbolic structures that unite the team (Cotton, 2003).

Change Agent. Being a change agent in education requires questioning the status quo. Building leadership should be willing to reexamine existing practices to ask critical questions about the results. Risk-taking is part of challenging current structures, policies, and opinions (Cotton, 2003). Risk-taking is modeled and encouraged by the leader (Louis et al., 2010). A school that is "consistently attempting to operate at the edge versus the center of the school's competence" must expect imperfect outcomes (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 45). Leaders that embrace the struggle to work towards a better school and acknowledge the potential for failure foster staff collaboration (Louis et al., 2010).

Contingent Rewards. Marzano et al.'s (2005) study, supported by Louis et al.'s (2010) and Cotton's (2003) studies, found that school staff should be recognized for hard work, unique abilities, and high performance. In addition, putting ceremonies and symbols in place to honor

the recipients can lead to a collective sense of "attachment and loyalty to the school" (Cotton, 2003, p. 21).

Communication. Leadership theories have long included communication as an essential function of solid leadership (Fullan, 2001; Heck & Hallinger, 1999; Leithwood et al., 2004; Louis et al., 2010). Marzano et al. (2005) added to this consensus by identifying essential communication practices between staff and principal, within the staff, and building consistently open pathways through availability and relationships. Communication systems must be designed to create shared understandings and shared decision-making across the school staff (Cotton, 2003). Discourse is encouraged, and new ideas are always welcomed and considered. Authentic and productive discourse requires and builds trust, allowing for close relationships (Cotton, 2003). Communication is essential to building a shared vision and universal direction for stakeholders (Cotton, 2003; Louis et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005).

Culture. Culture in a school can be positive and promote growth, or harmful and inhibit success (Marzano et al., 2005). Cotton (2003) included climate in the discussion of culture, stating that effective principals center the school's vision and goals on high academic achievement and create an environment where students and teachers care about each other. Marzano et al. (2005) and Cotton (2003) cited the necessity of an overriding set of norms and expectations that guide the behaviors of students and staff. Culture is a significant part of a collaborative workplace, supporting "both a manner of approaching tasks and the feeling of solidarity that accompanies it" (Cotton, 2003, p. 24).

Discipline. The leadership responsibility of discipline is the act of "protecting teachers from issues and influences that would detract from their instructional time or focus" (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 48). Frequent or unnecessary interruptions in classroom instruction can result in

lower student outcomes (Cotton, 2003). Louis et al. (2010) included "buffering staff from distractions to their work" as part of their practices for managing the instructional program for effective school leadership (Louis et al., 2010, p. 75). Leaders who encouraged staff to engage in disciplined thought and action and self-discipline experienced tremendous success (Collins, 2001).

Flexibility. Practices associated with flexibility are adapting to the contextual needs in a situation, switching between directive and nondirective leadership, encouraging discourse, and disrupting and making changes in the system when necessary (Marzano et al., 2005). Cotton's (2003) review of the literature found that while principals were involved and worked alongside the teachers, principals used their judgment to adjust instruction and teach based on their observations. Principals gave this consideration individually and to different levels depending on the teacher's experience and performance (Louis et al., 2010).

Focus. Fullan and Fullan (1993) stated, "It is probably closer to the truth to say that the main problem in public education is not resistance to change, but the presence of too many innovations mandated or adopted uncritically and superficially on an ad hoc fragmented basis" (p. 23). Marzano et al. (2005) explained focus as setting clear goals and keeping those goals at the center of the school's work and decision-making. The goals must be based on the non-negotiable belief that all students can learn, and to do so, they must be held to the highest expectations (Cotton, 2003; Louis et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005). Regardless of the school's starting point, a culture of continuous improvement is necessary (Cotton, 2003). Leaders need to set aside time and resources to ensure common goals are established, communicated, and supported throughout the year (Louis et al., 2010).

Ideals/Beliefs. Decisions are made in a framework of individual ideals and beliefs. Effective school leaders make their established beliefs known about such things that are relevant to schools. For example, leaders may publish their beliefs about classroom inclusionary practices for students with disabilities. This transparency reduces the opportunity for surprise when decisions regarding students are finalized (Cotton, 2003; Louis et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005). Additionally, principals can model integrity as their interactions and words align with the known beliefs throughout the year (Louis et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005). Principals modeling a growth mindset in their conversations with staff create the norm and can demonstrate asset-based language when discussing children. When principals hold themselves accountable for their success, staff follow their example (Cotton, 2003).

Input. Marzano et al.'s (2005) meta-analysis determined that the principal's goal is to get as close as possible to a building-wide consensus on significant decisions and changes. Therefore, the leader establishes structures, time, and space for staff voices (Louis et al., 2010). Teams or committees are one way to organize these discussions (Marzano et al., 2005). Cotton (2003) extended this with findings that the teams must be armed with facts such as budgeting constraints and be given official authority to come to a decision.

Intellectual Stimulation. After reviewing much of Heck's (1992) studies on practical leadership qualities, Cotton (2003) concluded that the continuous conversation surrounding instruction was "among the top three or four most important things principals do" (p. 30). It is critical to equip the staff with proper research and current theories through professional development to ensure the discussions consist of valuable discourse (Cotton, 2003; Louis et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005). Principals show their commitment to instruction by engaging in classroom activities and using their instructional voice. Cotton (2003) found that schools may

experience an unspoken bargain where teachers validate the principal's voice in instructional discussions in exchange for teacher participation in shared leadership decisions.

Involvement in Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment. A widely acknowledged fact is that principals engaged in instructional and curricular work in their schools will see a higher performance from students (Cotton, 2003; Louis et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005). Teachers report admiration for principals who demonstrate behaviors they expect in their staff (Cotton, 2003). Principals model their priorities when they take the time to design curricular activities, discuss assessments, and address instructional elements (Marzano et al., 2005).

Knowledge of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment. Cotton's (2003) analysis recommended that principals set aside time monthly to work with other administrators and stay current on instructional practices and curriculum. Marzano et al. (2005) summarized Fullan (2001) by saying that "a principal's knowledge of effective practices in curriculum, instruction, and assessment is necessary to guide teachers on the day-to-day tasks of teaching and learning (p. 54). Principals gain authenticity when accurately recounting current research and practices when working with staff (Cotton, 2003; Louis et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005).

Monitoring/Evaluating. Teacher evaluation is a point of controversy and continues to be a part of reform efforts (Cotton, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2010). Regardless of national or state requirements, feedback to teachers is an essential part of improving teacher performance (Cotton, 2003; Hattie, 1999; Heck, 1992; Louis et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005). Researchers have emphasized that highly effective school leaders must create systems that allow staff and administration to continually track and analyze the effectiveness of their curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Student outcomes will improve when the data are disaggregated and used to make adjustments to teaching practices. Also, the leader should communicate the results of the

data analysis to teachers and the community (Cotton, 2003; Louis et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005).

Optimizer. Successful school leaders use energy and optimism to support teachers in achieving challenging goals (Cotton, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005). These principals act as change agents to inspire others through their belief in the abilities of the staff. They build a shared vision that elevates the capacity of the staff (Louis et al., 2010). They embrace change initiatives that boost student outcomes (Cotton, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005).

Order. Cotton (2003) reported, "From the earliest research to the present day, the principal's establishment and maintenance of a safe, orderly school environment have been identified as the most fundamental element of effectiveness" (p. 8). Clear and consistent operating norms, procedures, and structures help to create an orderly school. These procedures should be modeled and reinforced by the principal (Marzano et al., 2005). Students are held to a high standard for behavior, and the teacher has the authority to handle disciplinary actions. In high-achieving schools, students understand and abide by well-established behavior guidelines, and disciplinary action is infrequently required. Staffing and resources are available for disruptive students, and scheduling supports efficiency and behaviors (Louis et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005).

Outreach. Building leaders is at the intersection of district leadership, the community at large, parents, staff, and students. This position requires communication and engagement with all stakeholders to build alignment, relationships, and consensus (Cotton, 2003; Louis et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005). Additionally, principals can create a critical network of resources by accessing and leveraging the capital of each participating party (Leithwood et al., 2004).

Relationships. Several responsibilities are dependent on relationships in a principal's day (Marzano et al., 2005). One report in Cotton's (2003) study found that 65% of superintendents surveyed reported that poor interpersonal skills was the number one reason principals lost their jobs. Relationships are fostered through face-to-face communication that allows for emotional bonding with the staff and community. Leaders can leverage strong bonds during difficult conversations and in times of uncertainty (Fullan, 2001).

Resources. Successful principals ensure that teachers receive the necessary supplies and equipment to perform their job. Additionally, teachers need professional development opportunities that increase their professional capacity, provide intellectual stimulation, and stimulate a passion for their job (Marzano et al., 2005). Louis et al. (2010) stated that effective "principals were involved in managing the teacher's attendance at workshops offered outside the school as well as planning for and sometimes providing, on-site professional development" (p. 71). Professional development deployment requires time, money, and the flexibility to manipulate schedules to make space for staff to grow (Cotton, 2003).

Situational Awareness. Marzano et al.'s (2005) study found situational awareness to have an effect size of .33. This finding is the most significant correlation to student achievement of the 21 responsibilities listed. However, the researchers warned that the effect size could shrink if more schools participated. Situational awareness is the ability to work within the context of a school and show an awareness of the apparent and undercurrent needs of the staff. In addition, situational awareness includes predicting obstacles and shifting fluidly to solve them (Cotton, 2003; Davis, 1998; Marzano et al., 2005). Louis et al. (2010) emphasized that "leadership success depends significantly on the skill with which leaders adapt their practices to the

circumstances in which they find themselves, their understanding of the underlying causes of the problems they encounter, and how they respond to those problems" (p. 95).

Visibility. As stated earlier, principals are at the center of converging groups. The staff, parents, community members, district leaders, and students all look toward the principal as the school's figurehead. Principals are role models for engagement and appropriate behaviors in the building. Influential school leaders are highly visible to stakeholders. The leader attends community and school functions, walks the halls daily, spends time in classrooms, and interacts with students often (Cotton, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005). These actions support instructional goals, build and maintain relationships, and help the principal stay connected with the progress of students and teachers (Louis et al., 2010).

Summary

Research has shown that leadership is the second most influential school-related factor in student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2004). The high level of impact, or effect size, of everyday leadership practices in schools has been calculated by researchers (Leithwood et al., 2004; Louis et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005). The synthesis of the three studies in this section outlines evidence-based practices that improve student outcomes.

Social Justice Leadership

To close the equity gap, leaders must practice leadership that targets the root causes. This literature review examined effective leadership practices and includes a section focused on effective leadership practices used to promote social justice. Social justice leadership research examines many of the same actions as mainstream leadership studies, but with the additional lens of equity (Furman, 2012; Louis et al., 2010; Theoharis, 2007; Wang, 2018). Since the implementation of No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002), schools are no longer able to

ignore what Peske and Haycock (2006) call the "invisible children" (p. 38). Practitioners and researchers spend more time examining data for students of color and students who qualify for financial lunch assistance. Social justice leaders strive to reduce inequalities within systems responsible for the gaps in achievement and success between disenfranchised children and the remaining student body.

Scholars have defined the complex and ambiguous term of social justice leadership pertaining to schools (Bogotch, 2002; Furman, 2012; McMahon, 2007; Theoharis, 2007; Wang, 2018). Based on the work of Dewey and Freire, Bogotch (2002) concluded, "There can be no fixed or predictable meaning of social justice before actually engaging in educational leadership practices" (p. 153). Yet, despite the gap between theory and practice, school leaders are faced with ever-present and all too real evidence of social injustice within schools (Beard, 2013; Blankstein et al., 2016; Bogotch, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2014; McMahon, 2007; Wang, 2018). The disparities in standardized testing data are an example and result of the inequities within the education system (Alexander, 2020; Bell, 2005; Blankstein et al., 2016; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Kendi, 2016; Kozol, 2012; Nieto, 2010).

McMahon (2007) viewed social justice with a wide lens, asserting the educational leader must challenge the current system of inherent racism, or they run the risk of "reinforcing the status quo" (p. 686). Furman (2012) agreed with the transformational nature of social justice leadership and its responsibility to identify unfair and racist practices to make changes for equality. Finally, Bogotch (2002) added, "All social justice educational reform efforts must be deliberately and continuously reinvented and critiqued" (p. 154).

Researchers have conceded the moral imperative of social justice leaders to change the system, but little research exists to explain the practices leaders exercise in pursuit of justice

(Furman, 2012; Khalifa et al., 2016; McMahon, 2007). Jayavant (2016) explained the difference between leadership styles and practices. Leadership styles are nebulous concepts. Leadership practices describe the specific behaviors, actions, and characteristics repeatedly demonstrated by the leader. This literature review focuses on the less nebulous and more concrete and practical actions of leadership identified to impact social change and student achievement outcomes.

Theoharis (2007) approached the social justice leadership definition from a pragmatic standpoint related to the daily realities of school leadership: "I define social justice leadership to mean that these principals make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision" (p. 223).

Social justice leadership assumes that all students and their families do not have the same access, opportunity, or conditions required to reach their potential (Furman, 2012). Social justice leaders consider historical and systematic racism, current political policies, depressed economic conditions, and family dynamics that may affect a student's performance (Beard, 2013; Blankstein et al., 2016; Bogotch, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2014; McMahon, 2007; Wang, 2018). Khalifa et al. (2016) agreed with these researchers but used another name for leadership focused on social change, culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL); CRSL encourages school leaders to embrace instructional and administrative practices that mitigate outside factors and cultural biases within the school walls (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Responsibilities of Effective Social Justice Leaders

This section synthesizes research from empirical studies, reviews of literature, and a social justice leadership practice meta-analysis. Within the United States, Furman's (2012) review of literature organized social justice leadership into three central concepts, requiring

leaders to develop their capacity in multiple dimensions. Looking to increase evidence determining effective leadership practices, Beard (2013) conducted a study on the decisions and practices of a deputy superintendent to close the achievement gap. Woods and Martin (2016) examined leadership practices through the lens of stakeholders in a high poverty, high achieving elementary school.

Additionally, three international studies are included. Walker and Dimmock (2005) studied five successful English principals that lead multiethnic schools to understand their values, priorities, strategies for improvement, and challenges. Jayavant (2016) described effective primary leadership practices in New Zealand, noting the influence of the leader's values and beliefs on their ability to change the status quo. Wang (2018) outlined the focuses of effective social justice principals in Canada.

Finally, Khalifa et al.'s (2016) contemporary and extensive meta-analysis provided the framework to compare social justice and mainstream effective leadership practices in this literature review. Khalifa et al. (2016) reviewed 77 articles, studies, and books encompassing multiple terms such as culture, social justice, language, identity, national origin, gender, and many of the same studies of traditional leadership paradigms like Leithwood et al.'s research in 2004. The responsibilities and practices described in this framework are critical to the work of social justice leaders. However, they are not an exhaustive list of successful leadership practices as defined by Marzano et al. (2005), Cotton (2003), or Louis et al. (2010). This combination of literature captures the historical and current perspective of social justice leadership and seminal scholars. My synthesis of social justice leader behaviors is guided by Khalifa et al.'s (2016) work due to the study's extensive, inclusive, and timely nature.

Critical Self-Reflection

Self-awareness in the context of social justice leadership includes knowing oneself and understanding the social and political context within the school they lead. Khalifa et al. (2016) stated, "They must be keenly aware of inequitable factors that adversely affect their students' potential. Likewise, they must be willing to interrogate personal assumptions about race and culture and their impact on the school organization" (p. 1281). Self-awareness requires reflection of action and thought to capture one's value and influence in the world authentically (Furman, 2012). Practicing this reflection can help a leader uncover their actual values and beliefs. This moral platform becomes their foundation and inspires others to question old ideas to pursue equality (Beard, 2018; Furman, 2012; Jayavant, 2016).

Culturally Responsive Curricula and Teacher Preparation

Culturally responsive leaders are responsible for the continual development of teachers' skills and knowledge and the development of personal cultural consciousness in teachers (Khalifa et al., 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2014). Without an understanding of their own bias and positionality in the world, it is challenging to teach responsively to the cultural needs of students (Jayavant, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Walker & Dimmock, 2005).

Darling-Hammond (2010) stated that "inadequate systems for providing high-quality teachers" and "rationing of the high-quality curriculum through tracking and interschool disparities" were two of the five major obstacles to quality education for all students (p. 30). Leaders need to focus on systems and supports that attract, retain, and train high-quality educators (Woods & Martin, 2016). Creating a collaborative community to enrich critical thinking and increase relational transparency is essential to risk-taking and growth in teachers (Beard, 2018; Furman, 2012; Wang, 2018).

Additionally, communicating a vision for culturally responsive teaching is the responsibility of the building leader. A social justice leader leverages resources to provide curriculum and materials that support that vision (Khalifa et al., 2016; Walker & Dimmock, 2005).

Culturally Responsive and Inclusive School Environments

Theoharis (2007) found that influential social justice leaders worked to create a welcoming school environment. Families and students should be invited into the school culture and included in what has been a traditionally exclusionary system (Wang, 2018). Effective leaders consistently communicate high expectations for staff, including strength-based language and thinking about students (Nieto, 2010; Woods & Martin, 2016). Khalifa et al. (2016) wrote, "Deficit constructions and thoughts about students of color and economically disadvantaged students are a barrier to equitable learning environments" (p. #). Walker and Dimmock (2005) asserted that the role of the leader is to disrupt negative racial stereotypes and promote positive changes. Students need to feel valued and accepted, regardless of their differences. Social justice "school leaders make sure that students' physical, social, and emotional safety is tended to" (Wang, 2018, p. 493).

Engaging Students and Parents in Community Contexts

Social justice leaders consider their family and student populations' unique needs when planning for resources and structures. This understanding includes considerations for home visits, language needs, and space for community partnerships (Khalifa et al., 2016). Walker and Dimmock (2005) reported that "locating the school within the wider community consumed considerable time and resources but was non-negotiable in terms of making schools meaningful

places for minority students" (p. 297). Standard partnering opportunities, such as parent-teacher conferences and musical performances, have been found to be insufficient to create community connections (Jayavant, 2016; Khalifa et al., 2016). Guiding staff to understand the broader social context within the community they teach influences the actions taken to interweave students' cultural needs into instruction (Furman, 2012).

Table 3 illustrates a conceptual framework based on the effective social justice leadership responsibilities described in Khalifa et al.'s (2016) meta-analysis. Khalifa et al.'s work was used due to a large amount of literature reviewed in the meta-analysis, the inclusivity of terms, the factors included (e.g., culture, identity, and gender) within the analysis, and more current publishing date. The Xs in Table 3 represent practices identified within the studies that correspond to Khalifa et al.'s (2016) responsibilities of effective social justice leaders.

Table 3

Conceptual Framework of Responsibilities of Effective Social Justice Leaders

Practices of Effective Social Justice Leaders	Khalifa et al. (2016)	Theoharis (2007)	Beard (2018)	Jayavant (2016)	Wang (2018)	Walker & Dimmock (2005)	Wood & Martin (2016)	Furman (2012)
Critical self-reflection	X	X	X	X	-	-	-	X
Culturally responsive curricula and teacher preparation	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Culturally responsive and inclusive school environments	X	X	-	X	X	X	X	X
Engaging students and parents in community contexts	X	-	X	X	X	X	X	X

Social Justice Leadership Conclusion

Table 3 illustrates the alignment of research on social justice leadership. The practices and responsibilities identified by this study go beyond good leadership to guide the change social justice leaders seek. Theoharis (2007) cautioned "us all to consider that decades of good leadership have created and sanctioned unjust and inequitable schools" (p. 253).

Conclusion

The summary of this literature is a synthesis of effective leadership behavior and social justice leadership behavior research. The Leithwood et al. (2004), Cotton (2003), and Marzano et al. (2005) studies informed the framework for mainstream leadership practices. I chose Marzano et al.'s (2005) description of behaviors to frame my literature synthesis because it aligns closely to Lous et al.'s (2010) analysis and incorporates Cotton's (2003) findings. My literature review's social justice leadership portion is synthesized from eight sources, including empirical research, literature reviews, and meta-analysis. Khalifa et al.'s (2016) meta-analysis of over 200 sources categorized leadership practices into four categories that guided my synthesis of social justice leadership practices.

There are overlaps in effective leadership practices identified by mainstream authors, such as Marzano et al. (2005), and practices identified to be effective for social justice leaders, like Khalifa et al. (2016), such as providing professional development. Additionally, there are behaviors solely associated with social justice leadership (e.g., developing critical consciousness). Multiple perspectives and evidence of effective leadership were captured by reviewing both categories of literature. It is unclear which group of behaviors aligns with leadership at a school with a reduction in the equity gap.

This thorough literature review makes it evident that leadership significantly impacts student outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2004; Louis et al., 2010). The research in this chapter detailed the effective leadership behaviors for school principals. Also in this chapter, research was reviewed explaining practices specific to social justice leaders working to disrupt the status quo and reduce the equity gap in their schools. In Chapter III, I will explain my methods used to conduct a qualitative case study exploring observable principal behaviors in a school that has reduced the equity gap. The school selected was one of few elementary schools in a large suburban school district that has affected the gap. To investigate theory versus application, I collected data to determine the principal's primary leadership behaviors and link these documented principal behaviors with positive student outcomes reducing the race-based gap in assessment scores.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Chapter III includes the research design and methods used to study the behaviors of a long-term principal in a school whose students' standardized testing scores in reading and mathematics had an achievement gap smaller than the state mean scale score gap. This school is unique in that the principal has been in residence for 13 years, which is considered a long tenure in a large urban district that rotates its principals frequently. Due to the principal's tenure, student assessment outcomes can be tied more closely to behaviors and actions during their leadership (Grissom et al., 2021; Louis et al., 2010). I examined the principal's leadership through an in-depth evaluative instrumental case study involving multiple stakeholder perspectives and data collection points.

The meaning created through data analysis was made by extrapolating the behaviors that are perceived to be effective in promoting student achievement for all students, including underserved groups. These results may help inform practicing principals and principal preparation program faculty to focus on effective social justice school leadership behaviors that may contribute to a reduced equity gap.

Research Problem and Purpose

During the last 60 years, national standardized testing has confirmed a gap in reading and math scores between White and Black students (Coleman et al., 1966; NCES, 2021). This disparity in data has been labeled as the achievement, opportunity, equity, or race-based gap. Although the student assessment measures and metrics have changed and the gap values have

fluctuated, the discrepancy has remained since the Coleman Report was published in 1966. Since that time, researchers have attempted to identify factors that influence these student outcomes (Jayavant, 2016). Leithwood et al. (2004) found that the practices and behaviors of building leadership "are second only to classroom instruction in school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school" (p. 5). This study examined the responsibilities and behaviors of a leader in a school that shows promising data concerning the equity gap between Black and White students using the following research question:

Q1 How do elementary school principal practices contribute to a reduction in equity gap student scores between Black and White students in elementary schools?

Research Design

Social constructivists believe individuals build meaning through interactions with others. When discussing qualitative research, Creswell and Poth (2016) stated, "The goal of the research, then, is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation" (p. 24). Therefore, a case study provided the best access to understanding the principal's behaviors through the lens of the school's personnel. Additionally, a case study helped develop a more profound understanding of the elementary school, a bounded system or a "unit around which there are boundaries" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p.38). In this case, the bounded system was a school showing promise in delivering an equitable education to all students.

More specifically, an instrumental case study was conducted to study the bounded system. This system shed light on a specific question: how do elementary school principal practices contribute to a reduction in equity gap student scores between Black and White students in elementary schools? The case studied in this research was a school with standardized testing data with a reduced equity gap in literacy and math.

Sampling

The unit of analysis in qualitative research is the sample the researcher chooses to investigate. In a case study, this is a bounded system with the necessary criteria that helps the researcher explore a question. Mesa Elementary was selected for this case study through purposeful sampling. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) advised using purposeful sampling to "discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 96). This study investigated the principal's actions in an elementary school that reduced the equity gap between Black and White students.

The criteria required to qualify for this study was an elementary school with a principal in residence for five or more years. Measuring a principal's impact on a school is problematic. The principal is responsible for factors that affect student outcomes, but their influence is mainly indirect. Also, changes made by the principal may be gradual, with the results reflected later (Grissom et al., 2021). Using a standardized assessment measure across one state's schools, a school was located with standardized achievement test scores showing a reduced equity gap between Black and White students in comparison to the state's gap in literacy and math. Table 4 shows the standardized scores of Mesa Elementary in relation to the state average and the equity gap present in both.

Table 4*Mesa Elementary Math and English Language Arts Equity Gap*

Year	All Students	Black Students	White Students	School Gap Between White and Black Students	State Gap Between White and Black Students	Gap Difference in State vs. School Gap
English Language Arts State Standardized Testing Mean Scale Score						
2019	737.2	733.3	741.4	-8.1	-23.8	15.7
2018	732.3	726.7	735.4	-8.7	-23.1	14.4
2017	737.3	731.3	743.2	-11.9	-23.3	11.4
2016	731.6	719.2	737.3	-18.1	-23.2	5.1
2015	731.2	725.7	734.4	-8.7	-23.8	15.1
Math State Standardized Testing Mean Scale Score						
2019	731	727.7	737.2	-9.5	-23.4	13.9
2018	729	720.2	731.8	-11.6	-23.9	12.3
2017	734.6	722.2	739.9	-17.7	-25.4	7.7
2016	733.8	718.9	739	-20.1	-24.9	4.8
2015	726.4	720.6	728.6	-8.0	-23.8	15.8

Table 4 spans five years of standardized testing data generated by the state. There is a significant difference between the state gap and the school gap. The Mesa Elementary principal, Mr. Jones, has held the job for 13 years. He will be the principal of Mesa for the 2022-23 school year as well. The principal's length of residency is crucial, knowing that change happens slowly. The longer the principal has led, the more time they have had to leave their mark on the school (Grissom et al., 2021).

Nationally, the equity gap has not closed for Black students in the last 60 years. In examining data in a large urban district, few schools showed a positive trend toward reducing the equity gap. Even fewer schools had appropriate data that fit the testing criteria and had a

principal in residence for over five years. Mesa Elementary was unique in that it met both requirements.

Data Collection

Multiple perspectives were essential to provide the most expansive and useful data as possible. Creswell and Poth (2016) wrote of the importance of collecting multiple types of data to create a quality case study. They stated that in a qualitative case study, “the researcher collects and integrates many forms of qualitative data, ranging from interviews to observations, to documents” (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 98). I chose to collect three types of data, interviews, observations, and a survey.

Data Sources

Staff Surveys

Staff surveys were developed by considering the information I hoped to collect. I referred to Khalifa et al.’s (2016) CRSL categories for inspiration and guidance. The survey was initially designed with 10 questions. After speaking with the principal of Mesa, 2 questions were combined to meet the principal’s request of limiting the number of survey questions to persevere teacher time. I sent teachers and special service providers surveys via email to consent or ignore the request. Qualtrics, an online data collection site, was used to collect the information. I had immediate access to the secure Qualtrics survey data. These survey questions can be found in Appendix A. The questions consisted of open-ended questions requiring a short answer. The survey questions were about their perceptions of the principal's practices, what practices they witnessed that may affect the equity gap, and what unexpected practices they have seen in the principal's leadership.

Selected Staff Interviews

Once the anonymous surveys were collected, I reviewed the responses to determine follow-up interviews. The participants were chosen from a pool of Mesa staff that provided thorough, detailed responses along with contact information for follow-up interviews. I contacted these participants to request an interview and an opportunity to expand on their answers. In-person conversations allowed me to ask specific questions about the participant's experience with the principal at the school. Interview responses were used to add depth, context, and detail that further defined the principal's actions throughout their tenure at the school.

Principal Interview

I developed the principal interview questions with Khalifa et al.'s (2016) CRSL categories and subcategories in mind (Appendix B). My focus was on understanding Mr. Jones's day-to-day practices and perceptions of his leadership. As Creswell and Poth (2016) emphasized, I created a comfortable environment for the interview by building rapport and asking non-threatening questions designed to elicit the most relevant information. I interviewed the principal between receiving the survey results and before the observations. The principal's interview was semi-structured to allow for follow-up with unanticipated questions raised during the conversation. In addition to the recorded dialogue, I took notes during the interview. My anecdotal notes about the interview provided a broader understanding of the context of the interview and highlighted the connection between the interviewer and interviewee (Briggs et al., 2012). I submitted the digitally recorded conversation to Rev, a transcription service.

Creswell and Poth (2016) described the need to establish rapport with an interviewee. I developed a collaborative interview experience for the principal by carefully planning out icebreakers, small talk, and sharing personal experiences that created a connection. The principal

and I attended the same monthly meetings, which created a natural entry point for conversation and common ground.

Observations

As another data source, I conducted on-site observations at Mesa Elementary (Appendix C). During these observations, I was a non-participant per the description by Creswell and Poth (2016). I conducted research as an outsider of the system without directly participating in the events or activities to avoid changing the interpersonal dynamics within the school setting.

I chose the observed events based on the content, purpose, attendees, and availability. I attended two staff meetings where the principal addressed the entire staff regarding building and student concerns. One of the meetings included a section uniquely assigned to hear student voices. These observations allowed me to observe the principal in direct interaction with the staff and record additional salient information. Additionally, I shadowed the principal during a staff Equity Meeting and a community after-hours Parent Teacher Child Organization (PTCO) event. The Equity meeting consisted of a committee of staff members who meet monthly and are tasked with examining and disrupting inequitable practices in the school. The team also plans professional development to inform the staff about culturally relevant practices.

Data Collection Process

First, I surveyed the staff to understand their view of the principal's actions. Second, I conducted observations to witness the principal's actions firsthand. I observed at staff meetings, during daily interactions, and during planning meetings. After collecting the data, I interviewed the principal to understand his perspective and most significant actions contributing to social justice leadership.

I experienced a positive survey response of 22 out of 40 staff members, a 55% return rate. Only 17 of the responses were used in since the surveys were begun but never finished. It was not possible to differentiate if the respondents had begun another survey or abandoned the task completely. Additionally, the surveys offered 2 follow-up volunteers. The answers provided were largely insightful and thorough. Many survey respondents took the time to leave paragraph-length information, delivering large amounts of codable data. Due to scheduling, the interview with the principal needed to proceed observations. The principal offered his time, generously extending the interview from 1 hour to 2 hours 30 minutes. The change in data collection order to interview the principal prior to observations resulted in increased invitations to observe. My initial research plan included one to three school observations. I conducted four school observations in three formats, inclusive of four stakeholder categories: staff, students, parents, and community.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is complex and dynamic, changing as new meaning is understood. Once the data were collected, I began the work of carefully sifting through the thoughts, opinions, observations, and answers given. Creswell and Poth (2016) described the five-step spiraling process that provided a thoughtful and methodical approach to processing large amounts of qualitative language and information.

I followed the spiral template in Creswell and Poth (2016) throughout the data analysis process. The interviews, surveys, and observations were collected and organized electronically. I submitted and received the interviews from the transcription service. The interviews and other data responses were entered into *NVivo*, a qualitative software program,

to help manage and analyze the data. While reading through the responses and interviews, I wrote memos as new ideas became apparent.

The coding process began with a priori coding and ultimately became a combination of a priori and open codes. I used the 4 categories and 32 subcategories from Khalifa et al.'s (2016) framework. During the analysis, it became apparent that some data could not be assigned directly to one of the 32 subcategories in Khalifa et al.'s (2016) literature review. To maintain the validity of the study, I chose to open-code the remaining data. Once coded, I consolidated and collapsed codes until categories and themes emerged. Some of these were reminiscent of principal behaviors in the mainstream leadership literature, behaviors not specifically linked to the reduction of the equity gap (e.g., Marzano et al., 2005). For example, building relationships was not specifically listed in Khalifa et al.'s (2016) review, but elements of relationship-building was a part of Cotton's (2003) and Marzano et al.'s (2005) mainstream behaviors for effective principals. In these cases, I chose to open code the data to create a new code not taken directly from any of the researched authors included in my literature review. The a priori and open codes were classified into themes. Finally, when the data were condensed, combined, and strong themes had emerged, I presented it in the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Ethics and Consent

Social science research is conducted to understand people, their relationships, and the social constructs. It is imperative to protect the subjects involved while conducting investigations, throughout the data analysis, and when results are published. I took a thoughtful approach to protection in every stage (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019).

Institutional Review Board

I submitted a proposal to the University of Northern Colorado Institutional Review Board (IRB) and to the Smithfield School District (a pseudonym) to secure permission to conduct research. The IRB committees were provided detailed information regarding informed consent, confidentiality, participant recruitment, and data collection. I did not begin data collection until receiving authorization from UNC and Smithfield committees.

Human Subjects Protection

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) wrote that the word participant "serves as a litmus test concerning ethics . . . with connotations of inclusion and willing cooperation" (pp. 188-189). Participants should feel protected and understand the purpose of the study.

Informed Consent

The ethical responsibility of the researcher is to ensure all participants have given informed consent (Appendices D and E). Participants were given the purpose, procedures, benefits, and risks of the study. They were told that participation was strictly voluntary. The risk and time associated with this study was nominal as they were asked short questions regarding what led to the success of their school. To participate in this study, participants acknowledged their informed consent to access the survey on Qualtrics. Prior to the observations and principal interview, the principal signed an informed consent letter.

Confidentiality

The connection that participants had to the study was the reason their perspective was invaluable, but, in most cases, it was also a fundamental part of their lives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In this study, teachers were questioned about their principal, who was their direct supervisor. While the questions had a positive presupposition, the participants' data

were kept confidential. Their responses and participation had no bearing on their evaluation or position within the school district. I asked the participants of this study to share positive observations of their principal, allowing for further comment if requested. I also asked the principal about the qualities he believed contributed to his success. Unless the respondent chose to deviate from the solicited response, all information collected acknowledged the positive work of the principal and the school staff. This pragmatic approach reduced obstacles and increased the reasons participants chose to engage. Confidentiality provided a layer of protection and, hopefully, reduced the anxiety a participant felt by joining in. In addition, willing participants offered more thorough and accurate answers to the interview and survey, while reluctant participants may not have produced authentic information.

To protect the identity of the school and staff, all names of participants in this study, including the school district and school name, were changed to pseudonyms. The biographical and geographical descriptions of the school and the district were factual, but vague when possible (i.e., a large urban district versus a city name). I was the only connection to the identity of the case study school and participants.

Data Security

I stored the data at my home in a locked office. Qualtrics's secure servers held data from questionnaires. Assigning pseudonyms to the district, school, and participants protected the confidentiality of the participants through the data analysis process.

Researcher Stance

I acknowledge my personal goal to positively influence the equity gap and disrupt racism. I have worked in education for 15 years as a teacher and an administrator. Through this time, my colleagues and I have received various trainings through our district on culturally relevant

educational pedagogy and practices. Unfortunately, regardless of the efforts made at local and national levels, very little progress has been made in reducing the gap in achievement for students of color. I believe that a disruption in racist education systems must happen to give all children the ability to achieve and grow equitably in school.

Leadership preparation programs and district professional development are designed to teach school leaders how to create and maintain the best environment for students and learning. These lessons in learning are constructed around research-based best practices to facilitate maximized student outcomes. I believe a gap exists between theory and application in the world of educational leadership. As a pragmatist, studying principal behaviors at a school with desired outcomes and juxtaposing them with theory-based principal practices contributed to an understanding of how to impact student outcomes with school leadership.

Trustworthiness

I worked to prevent personal biases from influencing data collection and analysis to maintain the study's credibility and allow the findings to be transferable. I had an educational leadership doctoral student review the interview and survey questions and their order before use to check for question bias. I asked a work colleague (another district administrator) to read and provide feedback about what information they believed my questions would uncover. I requested their honesty in assessing the objectivity of the content and tone of the questions. As a case study, the data collected were from multiple sources, including the principal's and staff members' perspectives, and my observations of the principal's interactions with staff, students, parents, and community members. This data triangulation from multiple points of view increased the credibility of the findings. Creswell and Poth (2016) wrote about the importance of providing rich descriptions to enhance the study's transferability. My goal was to create a study with

dependable and confirmable findings (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The credibility of these findings could support practitioners to implement effective leadership practices to affect change in the equity gap within their schools.

Conclusion

The purpose of this case study was to understand the practices of school leadership that contribute to reducing the gap between the achievement of White and Black students. A unique school was selected for this case study based on its positively trending data for the achievement of Black students and a principal in residency for more than five years. The results of this study that highlight social justice actions that this school leader used to help eliminate the race-based equity gap in education will be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

This chapter describes the findings from the data analysis of the data collected at Mesa Elementary. The data captured the staff and principal's perspectives through interviews, a survey, and researcher observations. These findings outline a combination of practices that contribute to the reduction of the equity gap in this school and answered the research question:

Q1 How do elementary school principal practices contribute to a reduction in equity gap student scores between Black and White students in elementary schools?

This qualitative study examined the principal practices that contributed to a successful gap reduction between Black and White student scores. As a case study, it was important to include multiple sources of data to understand the school and principal practices.

The most prevalent practices in the data are presented first, starting with the principal's focus on developing relationships. Mentoring and empowering teachers, connecting directly with students, building meaningful community relationships, and demonstrating care were behaviors tied to relationship building in this case study. Next, the findings illustrate practices the principal used to engage the community; i.e., serving as a social activist and connecting the school with the community. Following community engagement, I describe how the principal cultivated and maintained culturally responsive teacher pedagogy by encouraging critical consciousness and cultural awareness, providing culturally responsive professional development, and implementing culturally relevant systems and instruction. Lastly, establishing core values, pursuing and

growing from feedback, and continuous learning will be discussed as the principal's behaviors that contributed to critical self-reflection and reflective practice.

Mesa Elementary School

Mesa Elementary is situated within a large suburban school district with more than 55,000 students and 45 elementary schools. Mesa's enrollment and demographic composition has not fluctuated much since data were collected from the state's standardized scores in 2020. Enrollment for the last testing year collected, 2019-2020, was 516 students. According to state reports, the students represented at least seven demographic categories: American Indian/Alaskan Native (.4%), Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (1.2%), Asian (3.7%), two or more races (9.7%), Black (11%), Hispanic (31.2%), and White (42.8%). Minority students account for 57.2% of Mesa's enrollment. Mesa's mobility rate was 12.1% and its Free and Reduced rate was 49%. Mesa's surrounding community boasts two parks, a library, religious organizations, a daycare, a gas station, eating establishments, and several small businesses.

Mesa Elementary has experienced a reduction in the race-based gap of standardized literacy and math student scores over a period of five years, 2015–2020. The state's student mean scale scores on the Colorado Measure of Academic Success (CMAS) for math and literacy reveals an equity gap of 23.1-25.4 points between White and Black students. With steady improvement as the years progressed, Mesa's gap fluctuated between 8 and 20.1, ending at 8.1 for English language arts (ELA) and 9.5 for math (Colorado Department of Education, 2022). This gap reduction is unique in Mesa's school district and may be the result of many factors, including the principal's leadership practices over his 13 years tenure as the building leader.

Mr. Jones, the principal of Mesa Elementary School, was passionate about public education. According to Mr. Jones, at times in his life, he considered other professions such as

politician or minister, but found fewer restrictions and more opportunities through education. Mr. Jones enlisted in the United States Air Force but began his education journey by volunteering in schools in Compton, California. He quickly realized his ability to positively impact students. As a man of color, he understood his sphere of influence on Black and Brown boys and changed his career path. Throughout the years, he has passed on multiple opportunities for career advancement and alternative professions to continue the work he loves as an elementary school principal.

Mesa, with a staff of approximately 40, has experienced minimal teacher turnover since Mr. Jones began his principalship. Teachers in this research study were complimentary of Mr. Jones as a person and as a leader. One teacher commented on his demeanor, “He is very thoughtful, methodic, and a very good listener.” Another teacher added, “He is approachable; he is flexible; he has a good sense of humor; he is honorable, and he is filled with integrity.” In an era of political unrest and the COVID pandemic, a staff member felt that “he is an amazing anchor during stressful times.” Mr. Jones’s devotion to Mesa and public education was evident and relevant to the everyday practices he demonstrated as a leader that contributes to the reduction in the equity gap.

Developing Relationships

Developing relationships emerged as an overriding theme in all data sources and multiple times from all stakeholder groups. Relationship building with stakeholders included mentoring and empowering teachers, connecting directly with students, creating meaningful relationships with the community, and demonstrating care.

Mentoring and Empowering Teachers

The principal's dedication to mentoring and empowering teachers was the most prevalent practice in the data. Supporting teachers required the principal to connect directly with the staff and build trust. Mr. Jones's leadership was built on trust. One teacher expressed, "I feel like I can teach the way that I want to teach. And I'm trusted." Another teacher agreed, "He allows his staff to be who they are and trusts them to do their jobs." Likewise, Mr. Jones trusted his staff to reflect his leadership and help him improve stating, "My staff, now for 13 years, I know them well and they know me well. They tell me the truth. Sometimes, it's hard to hear, but most of the time they're right. Most of the time they're spot on." Mr. Jones asked for trust as well as extended it.

One-on-one connections helped Mr. Jones create opportunities for trust. He shared, "These one-on-one talks? That's my biggest one. That's my go-to when I try to influence people in a relational way. . . . I do a lot of things behind the scenes—one-on-one talks with people." A staff member commented, "Mr. Jones is compassionate and genuine. He cares about his teachers as people, not just employees; always making a point to know and ask about your children, spouses, health, etc." The principal made personal connections with staff that built trust.

Supporting staff was a mission and passion that Mr. Jones took seriously. He described his job as: "It's about helping people be successful and really understanding people. It's really a people job." His goal was to connect with people to build trust, allowing him to help them learn and grow. In his interview, the principal again voiced that his purpose was to mentor teachers, "I'm really invested in people, training people and teaching people." He used every opportunity to do so.

Mr. Jones found a way to effectively use the school district teacher evaluation tool to drive teacher and student growth:

I really value those meetings at the beginning of the year, the goal-setting meetings every year, where we would just sit down and talk about instruction. . . . “What's your goal? What do you want to get better at?” We really think about that. We really put some time into setting it up, writing a plan, [finding] the measurement and the evidence. I'm really serious about that. We got to get better.

Teachers created goals to maximize their learning, knowing Mr. Jones held a space for accountability and goal reflection. “Bring some evidence that you just made some progress on your goal. You got to show me something,” Mr. Jones instructed. In the survey, a teacher acknowledged that “Mr. Jones does that better. . . . I think he empowers his teachers.” He trusted teachers to focus on their goals throughout the year and looked forward to hearing about their growth.

During his interview and at the observed staff meetings, Mr. Jones discussed his hopes that the evaluation process resulted in growth for teachers. In one meeting, he told a personal story from his Air Force days about the dangers of perfectionism and reminded staff the goal was learning, not achieving. He fostered vulnerability by reassuring staff more than once not to feel pressured or worried about end-of-year evaluation meetings. Mr. Jones repeated, “Don't stress, do better. Come to the evaluation and tell me what you did.” He wanted to reduce the anxiety teachers might feel about evaluation to ensure focus on the teacher's potential for growth.

Teachers stated their appreciation of Mr. Jones's trust in them and their desire to meet his expectations. A veteran teacher, who moved to Mesa Elementary a few years before, remarked about a difference they noticed since coming to Mesa. They emphasized that “People want to

work for Mr. Jones and not only just be in the building, but [they also] want to physically work. I have been motivated to work harder these last 3 years than I was for the last 10 years.” Mr. Jones’s intentional relationships motivated his staff.

Mr. Jones empowered teachers and built trust with staff through shared leadership as well as the evaluation process. The Mesa Equity Team consisted of classified and certified staff. These staff members facilitated and drove the agenda for an improved culturally relevant environment for students. They were dedicated to equity and well-versed on using the district-recommended conversation tool to norm difficult and honest equity conversations. During the Equity Team meeting observation, staff used this tool to begin their meeting, taking turns speaking with vulnerability about their current emotional and mental status. The team worked through several agenda items efficiently and took time to discuss the final version of their student-based project. The project they discussed was a student-friendly version of the district-recommended adult conversational tool that students will use to host the same type of equity-minded discussions. As the next items were considered and the staff planned professional development, it became clear the principal did not object to their claims on preciously hoarded staff meeting time. Mr. Jones sat through the meeting and occasionally offered a comment. Trust between the principal and staff was evident as the Equity Team made decisions as an extension of leadership with little guidance from Mr. Jones.

The principal used relationships to lead. He focused on people and motivated them with what he calls “relational influence.” He addressed this thinking in length:

I want to convince people that I care about them. I want to convince them that I can meet their needs. . . . Their felt and unmet needs. Because sometimes they have needs, they don't know they have, right? So, I'm trying to figure out, what do they need? And then,

once I've let them know I care, meet their needs, felt and unfelt, then I can start to get some mentoring and some coaching and so, that's relational influence. That's my go-to. I use relationships to move people along.

Mr. Jones's personal connections helped him get to know each person, and he used this to support and assist them with their goals and growth.

Connecting Directly with Students

Mr. Jones's ability to connect and build relationships with students was apparent in the participants' responses and during observations. As he walked through the halls or outside after student release, he called out to students by name, asked about an incident from earlier in the day, inquired how the student did on a test, or asked about their family members. He stopped to get a status update from a fourth-grade girl he had helped earlier in the day with a friendship problem. He squatted to keep his tall frame from interfering with the conversation as the girl relayed the action she had taken to resolve the situation. Mr. Jones gave the student a quick fist bump, both parties were satisfied with the outcome.

Likewise, a staff member at Mesa pointed out that the principal "enjoys talking to students." Another noted, "He doesn't delegate a ton of discipline . . . he handles the tough discipline." Throughout his career, Mr. Jones seized the opportunity to build relationships with students when they were sent to the office for disciplinary measures. He elaborated on this:

And what I found was . . . every time there was a difficult situation for me, I saw it as a chance to build relationships with people, with kids. And so, as I'm dealing with discipline issues . . . [and] of course, unfortunately, many Black and Brown boys get to sent down here. . . . I was really building a relationship with those kids.

The principal recalled, “I would sit down with them one-on-one, and talk to them, and dig deep . . . get to the root issues, and deal with the heart.” In the interview, Mr. Jones explained what teachers told him that the students said about him. Students told teachers, “He'll listen to me, and you're not listening to me. He'll work. He's fair.” The principal realized he needed to empower teachers to build the same relationships. He requested that “every teacher was focused on two kids of color they got to really invest in.” Mr. Jones practiced this expectation with many students. “I connect with the kids, especially our Black and Brown boys. [I] connect with them, help them, really build a relationship with them, meet their needs, and be a mentor; all that kinda stuff.” As he did with staff, Mr. Jones built relationships with students to support their growth.

Creating Meaningful Relationships with the Community

Mr. Jones knew what his families liked and needed to engage with the school. He took every chance to meet and get to know families. “I'm trying to be known to my parents and trying to know my community, that's kind of one of my goals,” Mr. Jones offered during his interview. A Mesa staff member reinforced this exclaiming, “He’s at every parent night.” Mr. Jones reflected, “With some parents, I have a better chance of talking with them at the Fall Festival or Skate City night than I do at parent conferences.” Bingo night was designed as a creative opportunity for the parents to attend a PTCO meeting and gather as a community at Mesa.

In their survey, a teacher remembered, “Early in his career at Mesa, Mr. Jones was able to quickly identify students by name, their parents, and visitors.” During an observation, Mr. Jones joyfully and rapidly walked through Mesa Elementary at the start of the community Bingo event. He acknowledged every person, parent, or student with kindness and a smile. Most people were addressed by name, almost as if they were friends. The principal’s connection with the community was evidenced by the full gym of Bingo attendees and the seamless coordination

between the principal and the PTCO volunteers. The PTCO president and school volunteers worked purposefully, checking people in, feeding them, and organizing Bingo cards, all while exchanging jokes and friendly banter.

When Mr. Jones picked up the microphone to welcome the community, the crowd hushed with attention. His warm words of appreciation for their attendance and desire for them to enjoy the evening were met with loud applause. He continued to address, joke, tease, and acknowledge the crowd as he announced each BINGO game throughout the night, saying, “Winners come up here and tell me what they are going to do with their money. If you can’t tell me, you have to give me the money!” The community appreciated the principal’s attention and humor as much as the principal enjoyed providing it.

Mr. Jones held strong beliefs that parent engagement was crucial, especially in parent conferences. He explained his insistence on conference attendance:

I require every parent to come to fall conferences. . . . I know you're busy, you have a lot going on, [and] you can't come all the time, but you can come to fall conference. [You can] meet your child's teacher and have a conversation about your child. If you don't come to conferences, we'll go home with you.

If parent engagement was lagging for any reason, Mr. Jones went to their home. “We do a lot of home visits. . . . If parents don't call me back, I do a home visit.” During his interview, the principal clarified he did not require staff to go with him, but they were welcomed if they wanted to join him.

Mr. Jones’s community and family bonds outlasted the tenure of student attendance at Mesa. He confessed:

I get a call from the community all the time about stuff because they know that I know the kids. I know almost every kid in the neighborhood here. I'll say, "If there's any problem, give me a call, and I'll help you out."

Mr. Jones's continual and deep-rooted engagement with families of Mesa even after they left the school helped to explain his nickname disclosed by a staff member--"The Mayor of Mesa." The community recognized Mr. Jones's devotion to creating relationships within the community.

The principal's ability to demonstrate care for all stakeholders in the school was crucial to developing relationships. A Mesa teacher claimed, "He developed relationships that extended far beyond his duty as principal and ensured that each family, student, staff and person felt important and needed at the school." Mr. Jones goes above and beyond to care for his stakeholders.

Staff Care

The staff of Mesa recognized the care Mr. Jones provided. A survey respondent asserted, "I feel that Mr. Jones's most successful attributes are the way he treats people. He truly cares about the staff, students, and parents at Mesa." Another staff member espoused, "He tells you, 'I appreciate you. I value you. Thank you.' He cares about people. He really does. I mean, he cares." Mr. Jones verbalized his appreciation to show his care.

Caring for stakeholders was at the core of Mr. Jones's leadership. He expounded on this during his interview:

And so, for sure, my number-one is this idea of people. I really err on the side of taking care of people first. . . . My staff, [I'm] taking care of their needs, more so than taking care of the mission. I don't get caught up on deadlines, and getting stuff done, and all the to-do's. . . . That's not my highest priority. I focus on the people.

Several of Mr. Jones's interview responses were embedded with a version of this attention to caring for people and putting people before the minutia of schools.

In addition, observations yielded examples of caregiving such as providing staff meeting time to catch up on overdue "to-do" items, Valentine's gifts of administration monitoring a class to give the teacher a break, the promise of personalized coffee delivery, and an acknowledgment of the fear around COVID precautions and updates.

Community Care

Care is a large part of how Mr. Jones built relationships in the community as well as with staff. He explained that when he was concerned about the families, he leaned in:

Say I'm worried about [a family], you don't get to not talk to me. If I call you about something, you don't just not call me back. . . . I call a few times and it goes to voicemail. The phone's not working, so I have to do a home visit tonight. I do a lot of home visits. . . . It's not like I'm being mean or harsh or trying to check on you, but you can find out a lot just going to someone's house and sitting down in their living room.

In the interview, Mr. Jones explained how he tried to meet family's needs such as home and food insecurities, phone bills, and transportation in unconventional and creative ways that he chose to keep private. His care for families extended beyond the traditional principal practices.

Student Care

Mr. Jones showed his care directly to students as well as through his connection to their families. A teacher remarked, "He is very student focused and is great at praising those doing good things and those that are working hard." According to staff, when working through discipline with students, he demonstrated "fair treatment for all students. [He conducted] complete and thorough investigation[s] of all behavior issues and [provided] thoughtful

consequences.” Mr. Jones commented, “Well, I'm not nice to them, but they know that I care.” During observations, Mr. Jones followed up with two students regarding their discipline incidents in an open, conversational manner, lacking defensive posture or language. Students responded in a like manner and reported progress on their agreed-upon resolution and goals. The abundance of care the principal demonstrated to all stakeholders supported his relationships with staff, students, and the community.

Engaging the Community

The second theme that emerged during data analysis was the principal’s purposeful and thorough engagement with the community. In addition to the behaviors the principal of Mesa Elementary demonstrated to curate and maintain relationships with stakeholders, Mr. Jones actively worked to engage the community by serving as a social activist and finding ways to connect the school with the community.

Serving as a Social Activist

In Mr. Jones’s interview, he recalled how he embraced the public education system since leaving the Air Force for a career as a high school math teacher in Los Angeles, California. “Everybody believes in public education; everybody believes that kids should be educated. So, one thing I love about schools is everybody comes here. We're not exclusive in any way. We're not picking and choosing our people,” the principal explained in an interview. While he was an advocate for public education, Mr. Jones understood the challenges of accepting all saying, “It makes it tricky and harder because of everybody's different needs, but I love just that everybody's accepted here.” The principal welcomed all students and sought to meet their varied and unique needs.

Creative partnership with staff, parents, PTCO, and outside organizations helped him target student needs. A staff member spoke about a project designed to teach personal financial literacy to students, “He is all in. . . . He's supporting [the project]. I mean, he's given me everything I need for this because he [said], ‘I believe in this. Our community needs it.’” Another staff member observed, “Mr. Jones focuses on student growth (as a whole child), learning opportunities, equity for all students, and opportunities that extend beyond the school day.” The principal understood and sought to remedy student needs.

An example of this was that Mr. Jones and his wife wrote a grant to support literacy for Mesa students in a tutoring program. He explained,

It was this nonprofit. . . . We had a Saturday program here for six or seven years. We had kids of color coming in on Saturdays for a three-hour program: an hour of academics, an hour of character development, an hour of . . . we'll call it enrichment, be it sports, or music, or stuff like that. That provided some good results.

Partnership with an outside organization provided needed literacy intervention.

Mr. Jones has met the needs of his students through additional partnerships with HOPE Worldwide (a mentoring program) and Girl Scouts. He also worked with Sims-Fayola, a non-profit agency designed to change the lives of young men of color and support their caretakers. He has coordinated with the local churches to bring in volunteers and share information, such as important school events and dates and families that need support. Mr. Jones attended a few Muslim classes at the local mosque and went to events and open houses when possible. The principal advocated for his school with the community by first knowing his families and their needs and then finding opportunities to build partnerships that supported those needs. He championed the task of advocating with the community for his families because he cared so

deeply, explaining, “I love our community. It seems to be made up of diverse families who want their children exposed to the values, beliefs, cultures, and races of others.” Mr. Jones served as a social activist for his diverse community by building bridges with local establishments and bringing resources into the school.

Connecting the School with the Community

The principal has made his wishes clear to all stakeholders explaining, “I want this to be seen as the community school. It's not my school, it's the community's. Whatever y'all want to use it for, come use it.” A staff member also relayed, “I know that Mesa being the center of our community has been one of Mr. Jones’s goals.” Mr. Jones positioned Mesa Elementary at the center of the community. He believed school was not just for children, “This idea, I think I said it, [that] schools should be places of learning for kids and adults.” He kept Mesa at the center of the community by inviting the community into the school whenever possible. The principal spoke of his work by saying, “Anything important in our community that happens, anything special, anything exciting, I want to have it here at our school. I want it to be like the center of our community. That's kind of my goal.” Mr. Jones’s vision for the school to serve the community and the community to support the school was supported by his actions to bring the community and school together.

In his interview, he excitedly listed the partnerships he has forged, “Girl Scouts, Cub Scouts, HOA meetings, we have a knitting club here, ladies come and knit in the library. Whatever y'all want to do, anything that's happening in our community that's good and positive, I want it to happen here.” To stay connected to the community, Mr. Jones put in the extra effort. “I speak at the HOA [Home Owner’s Association] Board meetings once a year for the last 13

years.” He also communicated continuously with surrounding organizations, creating a two-way pipeline for upcoming events and important reminders.

Mr. Jones prioritized serving as a social activist and connecting the school with the community to ensure the engagement of the school community. He envisioned Mesa Elementary as the epicenter of activity and celebration for the neighborhood.

Cultivating and Maintaining Culturally Responsive Teacher Pedagogy

Along with building relationships, principals leading with the intention of reducing the equity gap should develop teacher capacities for culturally responsive pedagogy. Cultural awareness and critical consciousness is crucial for teachers to cultivate their culturally responsive pedagogy. Mr. Jones encouraged a focus on culturally relevant practices by providing professional development and by implementing culturally relevant systems and instruction.

Encouraging Critical Consciousness and Cultural Awareness

Mr. Jones modeled critical consciousness and cultural awareness with the Mesa staff which encouraged staff to do the same. A teacher recounted in their survey:

He is very honest and even vulnerable when sharing about his beliefs and experiences, especially related to our current climate regarding racism and the Black Lives Matter movement. This has changed the way I view my and our culture's attitude about race. Another staff member wrote, “We look at Equity A LOT!” Mr. Jones expected his staff to stay engaged in expanding their critical consciousness and applying their learning to instruction. Another staff member believed that this goal had not been met by all teachers yet, but that they understood the expectation. This staff member reported, “Some teachers still don't see the learning and cultural difference between students and think they can continue to teach whole

group or the same way to all students.” A different teacher experienced their colleagues at Mesa in various stages of learning and implementing culturally relevant instruction, explaining that “Most teachers are open to trying new curriculum, strategies, and ideas with students.” Mr. Jones encouraged his staff to examine their practices and be open to culturally relevant pedagogy.

Providing Culturally Relevant Professional Development

The Mesa Equity Team planned culturally relevant professional development with Mr. Jones. The team’s job was to strategize means and opportunities to ensure racial, cultural, ability, and gender equity for all students. I observed a team meeting and learned that the previous month’s professional development was a chance for teachers to review books and determine how they could be used as a window, mirror, or sliding glass door for students. The team agreed that students should see themselves in the literature, to see other’s lives, or to imagine themselves in stories or alternate environments. This was an effective exercise, and the Equity Team decided to plan more time for teachers to share books they had found and successfully used in their classrooms. Additionally, they agreed to email a booklist to staff.

The Equity Team selected to use student voices for a different professional development opportunity. The fifth graders at Mesa participated in a biographical writing assignment. One student created a powerful and poignant “I Am” poem that illustrated their racial experience at Mesa. The poem was influential, and the team believed it should be shared as soon as possible. When it was presented at the subsequent staff meeting, Mr. Jones cautioned the staff about the poem, saying “it is heavy.” He asked them to stay engaged and “stay focused on the words.” Mr. Jones knew the content would be uncomfortable and valued the opportunity for growth. A video recording of the student reading the poem was played, and the staff was asked to examine how they felt and take silent wait time before discussing. The staff then somberly spoke to their

colleagues, acknowledging the student's apparent frustration at their culture and race not being recognized. Activities like this seemed to help the teachers understand the students at Mesa, create relationships, and plan culturally relevant instruction.

Implementing Culturally Relevant Systems and Instruction

Mr. Jones kept equity at the forefront in staff meetings and individual teacher growth meetings. He described his approach to one-on-one conversations with teachers during the end of the year evaluation cycle:

Tell me what you did around equity this year. . . . Again, it's pretty broad, but it has to be around CRE [Culturally Relevant Education]. We got to talk to about race, and something around Black History Month, or something; I need some intentional effort around equity.

Mr. Jones found a way to effectively use the school district's evaluation tool to drive teacher and student growth, including shifting the paradigm to become more inclusive and equity-focused. Each goal setting meeting included a target designed to increase culturally relevant instruction or critical consciousness of the teachers. When teachers came to their end-of-year evaluation meeting, he asked, "What did you do? Anything really cool around [culturally relevant education practices] CRE? Anything with equity in mind?" Thus, teachers knew the evaluation of their efforts and growth towards creating a more equitable environment for students would be included in the evaluation process.

Culturally relevant practices used in the school were evident in the participants' responses. A staff member wrote about two of Mesa's student support structures that used data to determine the best action steps. They wrote in the survey, "During our [Multi-Tiered Support System] MTSS and [Professional Learning Community] PLC Process, we try to start with

students' assets, what do students already know, what are their strengths? Then, we move on to engagement. How can we engage our students?" Another teacher felt that "If teachers work together K-5 to build on staff and student strengths/assets, we can focus more on the CRE themes and less on trying to 'find' things to teach." The staff looked for student assets to build individualized learning programs and engage students in learning.

Mr. Jones emphasized the relationship factor in culturally relevant education, "I think that's probably the one thing I would say is I expect my staff to connect with kids--build strong relationships with kids. That's a good impact." One teacher mimicked Mr. Jones's approach to relationships saying, "I feel that being a culturally responsive school begins with knowing your students at a personal level and then using that information to engage them in learning." The importance of relationships was again apparent in another teacher's comment: "I do feel that teacher-student relationships have a greater impact on reducing the equity gap than curriculum." Teachers used information gathered from student relationships to create meaningful learning environments and engaging lesson plans, instead of focusing on the prescribed curriculum.

Relationships with students allowed teachers to differentiate instruction tailored to students' need. A teacher wrote, "We are working toward general education teachers becoming more adept at adapting their curriculum to accommodate all learners." To target student areas of growth, a teacher explained that they were intentional about "devoting disproportionate time and effort to students of color who need more help academically." Developing relationships with students allowed teachers to differentiate to the instructional needs of students below, at, or above grade level. Staff also felt relationships helped facilitate "affective, behavioral, and cognitive engagement."

The staff at Mesa Elementary encouraged students to explore their cultural identities. A teacher stressed, “We celebrate all cultures and have tried to make sure all students are represented.” The staff tried to find “opportunities for students to explore and appreciate other cultures.” Mr. Jones put effort into “trying to make us aware . . . he wants us to use . . . resources that are culturally relevant,” a teacher commented. Another teacher worked to create a “classroom to give students a chance to share about their culture and relate to other cultures in books and curriculum we teach/use.” Teachers at Mesa were focused on providing a culturally relevant environment for all students.

Mr. Jones provided leadership for teachers to cultivate and maintain a culturally relevant pedagogy through professional development and by building their understanding of their own culture and their students’ culture. Most Mesa teachers embraced this thinking and created engaging and differentiated instructional plans that promoted relationships, individuality, creativity, and cultural awareness for students.

Exercising Critical Self-Reflection and Reflective Practice

The fourth theme is the principal’s commitment to exercising critical self-reflection and reflective practice. For the purposes of this research, the term critical self-reflection was used to describe the process of examining how this principal’s personal history, experiences, and biases affected his leadership practices. The term reflective practice described the principal’s thoughts put into the effectiveness of his practices. Mr. Jones’s critical self-reflection and reflective practice led to action and learning.

Establishing Core Values

Mr. Jones spoke of his life and career goal, “I have to close the [equity] gap. I’ll close the gap then I’ll go down and do something else. ‘Til then, I’m staying put.” This dedication to equity

is a result of Mr. Jones's reflection on social inequities and his role and opportunity to impact the system. The path leading to the principalship at Mesa began early in his career when he spoke to youth at schools on behalf of the Air Force. He recognized the need for teachers when students asked him for math help. The teacher shortage had led to substitute teachers who knew little about teaching math in the highest-level math courses in a Compton, California high school. Mr. Jones remembered, "I started thinking about, just thinking to myself, I'm going to come and teach everyone. . . . I'm going to change the world and change the system. I'll go in and make a difference." Mr. Jones has kept his beginning in mind throughout his career. He stated, "I do think about the Black and Brown kids. They're on my mind all the time . . . since I first got into education back in California, [when I was] teaching in Compton." Mesa's principal demonstrated an established critical conscious awareness before joining education and has kept his focus through the years.

Over the years, Mr. Jones developed his seven "H's," or core values evolved as his leadership evolved. He explained in his interview that it was through reflection and years of experience that he gradually added onto the first two values of honesty and hard work, including humility, humor, headiness, hope, and hunger. Mr. Jones stated, "These are my own personal core values that I've just kind of adopted with the rest of the school. And I think that they've grown over the years." He detailed when each value came to him. Mr. Jones learned about the first two early in his career, "I tell people, 'As long as you're honest and work hard, you're going to be fine.'" Honesty and hard work were at the core of his value system.

Then, the principal presented his next value, "It's the idea of humility. That's a big one. The idea of being teachable, and now we're talking about cultural humility. So, I've added that into my non-negotiables." Humility was followed by humor as Mr. Jones explained, "You've got

to have fun. I want to say, you've got to have fun, working with kids. . . . Even though some things are tough, sticky things, we find ways to laugh.” After humor, the principal described a value he labeled “heady”:

I had the idea of what I want to call heady. I've gotten to a point now where, as a leader, I need to surround myself with people who know more than me. . . . As a teacher, heady is this idea of being smart, knowing stuff about kids, about curriculum, about standards. If I come to you about fifth grade, and I need to come to you . . . you're the expert. You got to tell me the answer, so I can make a decision.

The principal reflected that about seven or eight years ago, he found himself getting a little complacent. He reported that he was saying to himself, “‘Just do the best you can, it's okay.’ But I thought, ‘You know, we got to get stuff done.’” However, Mr. Jones knew complacency would not give him the result he desired, so he added hungry to his values, “I had to, for my own self, I had ‘hungry’ as this idea of staying hungry, setting goals, sticking to it and don’t let go of it.”

The last core value Mr. Jones added was hope. He referenced the COVID-19 pandemic when he stressed, “Hope. This idea that you got to be hopeful. Stay[ing] positive helps you get through hard times.” Mr. Jones then shared multiple examples of hope pulling people through tough experiences such as the landslides in Florida and the rigorous routines Olympic athletes demanded of themselves.

The principal’s core values were established from self-reflection and over a period of years and experience. He continued, “Those are my seven H's, the core values that I have adopted personally, but I've kind of put it out to the staff, too, as our school core values.” Mr. Jones’s seven “H’s” were central to his leadership.

Pursuing and Growing from Feedback

Reflection has helped Mr. Jones keep his goals in mind over the years. “I’m focused on [the idea that] the better leader I am, the more I can help the other people. . . . So I’m really focused on how do I get better as a leader?” He has wondered, “What does my staff think about me? What do my parents think? What do my students think?” So, Mr. Jones has sought these answers through continuous feedback. He has reached out to his staff and community for as much feedback as possible. For example, he went beyond the district leadership survey to gather specific and timely feedback from staff to reflect and adjust his practices: “What am I doing that’s helpful? What am I doing that’s not helpful? They [the staff] tell me the truth, man. Sometimes, it’s hard to hear but most of the time they’re right. Most of the time they’re spot on.” Likewise, the staff acknowledged the principal’s willingness to accept feedback. They reported that Mr. Jones was “genuine, understands and accepts/admits his flaws, [and] owns his mistakes.” In his interview, the principal discussed his reflective practice when considering events and issues,

Whenever something goes wrong in my building, I think about self. What can I do? What can I have done differently? I don't get mad. I don't get mad at the kids; I don't get mad at the staff. I think to myself, what did I do? What could I have done differently to prevent that.

Mr. Jones took time to listen, reflect, and learn from his experiences.

Continuously Learning

Mr. Jones embraced the learning required for continuous growth. Mr. Jones learned in many ways, one of which is seeking out guiding literature. He spoke of his learning in his interview:

For the last eight or nine years, I did a lot of learning about leadership. I have a couple of blogs that are my go-to. I might go to about three or four different ones that I read, sometimes it's more. . . . The first four to five years, I focused on instruction and curriculum. The last eight or nine years, I focused my research on leadership. Business, education, sports, anything about leadership, I read it.

As he learned, Mr. Jones adjusted his leadership and changed his practices to reflect the need of the school community. He illustrated his thinking:

You can't lead the same way in Year 1 and 2. I can't lead the same way in Year 10 and 11. I have to be a different leader. If I didn't kind of reinvent myself, rethink some things and grow as a leader, then I wouldn't be able to stay here. I'd be ready to go or [be] thinking it's time for me to go.

Mr. Jones was in continuous learning, reflecting, and growing cycles throughout the span of his leadership. He passed this idea on to his teachers when, at a staff meeting, he told teachers, “If you want comfort, that is problematic. You have to experience discomfort to grow.” The principal of Mesa spent time and energy reflecting on his actions and impact as a leader. His continuous learning and desire to receive feedback demonstrated his commitment to improving his leadership.

Critical Self-Reflection

Examples of Mr. Jones’s critical self-reflection were embedded throughout his career, including in the reason he chose to become an educator. He arrived in education with an established critical consciousness and continued work on its development. In his school, the principal examined systemic practices around him regularly. He structured parent-teacher conferences and PTCO activities to protect the family’s access to school events and information

helping them understand their child's education. Mr. Jones recognized the over-representation of Black and Brown boys sent to the office for discipline complaints. Over time, he emphasized culturally relevant practices with teachers that supported relationships to reduce referrals. Mr. Jones led with courage by finding creative solutions to student and family problems despite institutional restrictions and obstacles. Additionally, the principal was vocal and vulnerable with his staff about his personal racial experiences and reflections.

Conclusion

This chapter described findings from a case study with the goal to determine the most prevalent leadership practices used by a principal in an elementary school with a reduction in the equity gap. Data were collected through interviews, a survey, and observations that encompassed the perspectives of the principal and staff. The findings may suggest that key principal practices that reduce the equity gap are developing relationships, engaging the community, cultivating and maintaining culturally responsive teacher pedagogy, and exercising critical self-reflection and reflective practice.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

This chapter summarizes the findings from the data collected during a case study to determine effective principal practices that may contribute to a reduction in the equity gap at an elementary school. Mesa Elementary was selected for this case study due to the 13-year tenure of the principal, an extended time in the school's district, and its equity gap reduction during his time. The findings will be discussed in relation to the literature from Chapter II, and the implications of this research will be considered. The chapter will conclude with recommendations to extend this research and closing remarks.

Summary of the Study

For over 60 years, national standardized testing has confirmed a disparity in achievement scores between White and Black students. Despite continuous political and structural reforms in education, the equity gap exists today (CDE, 2022). Since leadership has been shown to significantly impact student learning (Leithwood et al., 2004), it is essential to understand leadership actions to address the disparities in student achievement. A case study was conducted to answer the question:

Q1 How do elementary school principal practices contribute to a reduction in equity gap student scores between Black and White students in elementary schools?

The school selected for the case study experienced a lower achievement gap than the state mean on state assessment scores in math and language arts over a period of five years.

Additional criteria included a principal in residence for an extended period. Mr. Jones has been

the Mesa Elementary principal for 13 years. Data collection involved surveys, interviews, and observations, and gathering information and perspectives from the principal, staff, and the community. To code data, a priori and open coding were used in tandem with the coding software, NVivo. The codes became categories, and after collapsing and expanding multiple codes, strong themes emerged from the data. The findings indicated that the critical behaviors this principal demonstrated in a school with a reduction in the equity gap were: (a) developing relationships with all stakeholders, (b) engaging the community, (c) cultivating and maintaining culturally relevant teacher pedagogy, and (d) exercising critical self-reflection and reflective practice.

Discussion of Findings

The purpose of this study was to determine the leadership practices employed in an elementary school with an equity gap reduction. Data revealed the actions that Mr. Jones practiced with the most visibility and regularity at Mesa Elementary. A dual coding method included a priori and open coding to categorize a large amount of data as accurately as possible. A priori coding was completed with Khalifa et al.'s (2016) social justice theoretical framework. Despite the researcher's theory to the contrary, much of the data needed to be open-coded, not adequately fitting into Khalifa et al.'s framework. The researcher assumed a school with a reduced equity gap would be led with a majority of social justice practices. In fact, many of the behaviors assigned to open codes related to mainstream educational literature, including Marzano et al.'s (2005) 21 leadership responsibilities, Cotton's (2003) 25 practices associated with student achievement, and Grissom et al.'s (2021) updated core leadership findings based on Leithwood et al. (2004) and Louis et al.'s (2010) work commissioned by the Wallace Foundation. Leithwood et al. (2004) addressed the difficulties of connecting specific leadership

behaviors directly to student outcomes, noting several practices must work together to be effective. To combat this, the study found meaning in the abundance of evident practices by the leader. Leithwood et al. (2004) explained that “leaders’ contributions to student learning, then, depend a great deal on their judicious choice of what parts of their organization to spend time and attention on. Some choices will pay off much more than others” (p. 13). The findings from this study are predicated on the same concept. The behaviors most often mentioned by most stakeholder groups are more closely associated with the principal’s most frequent leadership practices. The combination of these behaviors from Mr. Jones contributed to the reduced equity gap at Mesa Elementary.

Developing Relationships

The principal’s purposeful attention to and skill in developing relationships with stakeholders emerged as the most critical behavior for him to demonstrate in a school, reducing their equity gap. Although developing relationships requires an infinite number of skills, these findings focused on the four most prevalent practices cited by stakeholders that led to authentic and influential relationships. The noted behaviors were: (a) mentoring and empowering teachers; (b) connecting directly with students; (c) creating meaningful community relationships; and (d) demonstrating care for staff, students, and the community.

While relationships were listed in Marzano et al.’s (2005) 21 responsibilities of an effective leader, relationships only held a correlation of .18 to student achievement; that is to say, it was ranked as the least correlated behavior to student achievement. However, Marzano et al. (2005) elaborated that a low-ranking behavior can still be significant if practiced with increased commonness. The researchers explained the relationship between achievement and the recurrence with which a leadership responsibility is practiced, “an increase in leadership

behavior from the 50th percentile to the 99th percentile is associated with an increase in student achievement from the 50th percentile to the 72nd percentile” (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 30).

Therefore, Marzano et al. (2005) found that the more often a behavior was practiced, the higher it was associated with student outcomes. In this case study, the most commonly reported principal practices were related to relationship building. Although the principal and stakeholders described behaviors in many categories, the actions, such as the principal’s evaluation meetings with teachers, were mentioned as examples of the principal’s intentional relationship-building or the effect teachers felt because of the relationships with the principal. This study found that most of the principal’s actions were grounded in the desire to create rich, long-lasting relationships.

Mentoring and Empowering Teachers

The principal of Mesa used relationships with teachers to mentor and empower them. In Mr. Jones’s interview, he described his approach, “And then, once I've let them know I care, meet their needs, felt and unfelt, then I can start to get some mentoring and some coaching and . . . so, that’s relational influence.” Similarly, Leithwood et al. (2004) and Louis et al. (2010) published that developing people was an effective leadership practice. Grissom et al. (2021) followed up on this finding after analyzing additional literature and found that “time spent on coaching teachers is associated with higher student achievement growth” (p. 61). At Mesa, improved student outcomes were associated with connecting with and mentoring teachers.

Louis et al. (2010) also specified that providing individualized support and consideration for teachers supported positive student outcomes. Teachers at Mesa relayed that Mr. Jones knew them personally, inquiring about their kids, spouses, and health. In 2003, Cotton outlined 25 practices that contributed to student achievement which included emotional and interpersonal support which she defined as principals being “capable and caring communicators in the

interpersonal realm who are aware and supportive of the personal needs of staff and students” (p. 69). These practices were referenced by Marzano et al. (2005) and Louis et al. (2010) as reinforcement for their similar findings. Mr. Jones displayed this ability through his self-reported and staff-reported actions.

The principal of Mesa also used the connections he made with his staff to develop trust. A Mesa staff member recounted in their survey, “He allows his staff to be who they are and trusts them to do their jobs.” Mr. Jones developed trust with his teachers, believing in them to know what he did not know. He described his reliance on teachers for their knowledge, “If I come to you about fifth grade, and I need to come to you . . . you're the expert. You got to tell me the answer, so I can make a decision.” Mr. Jones’s belief in his teachers’ competence and connection with the teacher created a foundation for trust between the principal and his staff. These findings were consistent with Jayavant’s (2016) social justice leadership or CRSL research that deduced student achievement stemmed from the trust between the principal and staff because it “allowed all members of the school community to make a significant difference in student academic progress” (p. 21). In contrast to Jayavant (2016), Khalifa et al. (2016), another group of CRSL authors, spoke of connections with students, parents, and the wider community, but did not delineate the need to build trust or connect directly with teachers.

Connecting Directly with Students

The principal’s ability and willingness to connect directly with students were noted often in the findings by teachers, through observations, and by the principal himself. Mr. Jones looked back, “And what I found was . . . every time there was a difficult situation for me, I saw it as a chance to build relationships with people, with kids.” Mr. Jones was observed in hallways and outside, informally stopping to talk to students, calling them out by name, and following up on

previous conversations. This pattern of connecting directly with students aligns with Cotton's (2003) findings about visibility and accessibility to students as effective behaviors to improve student achievement. Cotton detailed, "Successful principals make themselves available to teachers, students, and others in the school community" (p. 68). In Marzano et al.'s (2005) meta-analysis, "having frequent contact with students" as part of being visible was a behavior with a relatively low correlation ranking of .20 to student achievement. This was another example of one of Marzano's lower-rated behaviors being noticed with more occurrence in Mr. Jones's profile of practices. In contrast to mainstream educational leadership literature, Khalifa et al. (2016) deduced two behaviors that led to successful student outcomes: "building relationships and reducing anxiety among students" (p. 1283) and intentionally "connecting directly with students" (p.1284). Khalifa et al.'s (2016) findings align with Mr. Jones's actions to work one-on-one with students to build relationships and trust.

Creating Meaningful Community Relationships

Mr. Jones's commitment to building deep and meaningful relationships went beyond the school building and extended to the Mesa Elementary community. The school's events were well attended. He was present and available to his families and went above and beyond what some would consider his normal job responsibilities to create bonds with families. Educational leadership and social justice leadership scholars agreed that creating strong, meaningful bonds with the community supports student achievement (Cotton, 2003; Grissom et al., 2021; Khalifa et al., 2016; Leithwood et al., 2004; Louis et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005).

Mr. Jones showed dedication to relationships and commitment to being face-to-face with families. He believed strongly that all parents should attend fall conferences, and if they did not, he conducted a home visit. Likewise, Grissom et al. (2021) wrote about the importance of home

visits to create relationships between home and school. Khalifa et al.'s (2016) analysis included relationships in the context of the community as important CRSL leader behaviors such as, learning and accepting local identities, and "using the community as an informative space to develop positive understandings of students and families" (p. 1284). Mr. Jones's relationships became so solid that they continued after students left the school. The community looked to him for help because of his long-term bonds with students and families. These findings are supported by Marzano et al. (2005) and Cotton (2003), who agreed that parent and community outreach were behaviors of successful principals.

Demonstrating Care to Staff, Students, and Community

Another element of Mr. Jones's relationship building was demonstrating care for staff, students, and the community. Examples of caregiving such as providing staff time to catch up on overdue "to-do" items, administrators monitoring classes, and personalized coffee deliveries were evident during observations. This finding was aligned with Cotton's (2003) practice of emotional and interpersonal support described by principals being "sensitive to teacher's needs, giving them support and reinforcement" (p. 17). Additionally, Marzano et al. (2005) agreed that "being aware of personal needs of teachers" contributed to relationships (p. 59).

Mr. Jones's care was evident in the way he handled discipline. He ensured students were treated fairly and knew he cared about them, even if they received consequences. While not addressed in mainstream studies, Khalifa et al.'s (2016) CRSL study addressed care by including "nurturing and caring for others" as a part of the effective principal behavior to engage students and parents (p. 1284).

In summary, relationship building in this school with a reduced equity gap involved mentoring and empowering teachers, connecting directly with students, creating meaningful

community relationships, and demonstrating care for stakeholders. These relationships allowed Mr. Jones to exercise what he called “relational influence” and what a staff member referred to as motivation. Although Louis et al. (2010) did not include the demonstration of care by a principal as an effective practice; they wrote, “School leaders have an impact on student achievement primarily through their influence on teachers’ motivation and working conditions; their influence on teachers’ knowledge and skills produces less impact on student achievement” (p. 56). The relationships Mr. Jones developed with students and families fostered trust and engaged the community.

Engaging the Community

The findings were clear that engaging the community was integral to Mr. Jones’s leadership. These results are consistent with effective principal behaviors for mainstream education (Cotton, 2003; Grissom et al., 2021; Louis et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005) and CRSL leadership research (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Serving as a Social Activist

Mr. Jones chose teaching and, ultimately, administration because he was attracted to the inclusive nature of public education. Students and their different neurological and physical abilities, socioeconomic status, race, gender, or culture can create a variety of student needs. Mr. Jones realized that he would need to look outside the school for additional resources to support students’ needs. The principal wrote grants to fund an after-hours literacy program and partnered with major organizations. Mr. Jones’s actions aligned with CRSL and mainstream education research. Khalifa et al. (2016) found that social justice leaders curated “partnerships and other resources [that] were all leveraged in ways that responded to student needs” (p. 1291). Agreeing with the CRSL findings, Marzano et al. (2005) referenced Cotton (2003) when they wrote about

the principal's responsibility of outreach to be "the extent to which the leader is an advocate and a spokesperson for the school" (p. 58). Marzano et al. (2005) calculated a .27 correlation between outreach and student achievement, the third highest correlation in their 21 responsibilities. Also in alignment with this research is Grissom et al.'s (2021) conclusion that principals should "build purposeful connections with families and community groups to better meet schools' obligations to serve marginalized students" (p. 77).

Mr. Jones relied on the surrounding community and outside organizations for resources and information to better understand and engage his families. He sought out community leaders, visited businesses and religious organizations, and learned about his students in the context of their community. This finding reflected Khalifa et al.'s (2016) reasoning that school leaders should "use the community as an informative space from which to develop positive understandings of students and families" and "develop meaningful, positive relationships with the community" (pp. 1283-1284). The finding that Mr. Jones's advocacy for his school in the community was important to his work was congruent with previous mainstream and CRSL research.

Connecting the School with the Community

This research found that connecting the school with the community was a behavior practiced with regularity by Mr. Jones. In his interview, Mr. Jones hoped Mesa Elementary would be "seen as the community school." He said, "It's not my school; it's the community's." Educational leadership and social justice literature aligned with this finding (Cotton, 2003; Grissom et al., 2021; Khalifa et al., 2016; Louis et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005). Louis et al. (2010) wrote about the importance of "connecting the school to the wider community" (p. #). Likewise, Grissom et al. (2021) wrote that "another tangible resource is external social capital.

Some evidence suggests that principals who spend more time interacting with parents, community members, and other stakeholders outside the school see higher reading growth in their schools” (p. 68). Finally, Cotton’s (2003) book cited Scheurich’s 1998 study and his quote, “the school exists for and serves the community—there is little separation” (p. 19). Researchers agree that the principal should connect the school with the community, positioning it at the center of the families’ lives.

Cultivating and Maintaining Culturally Responsive Teacher Pedagogy

Khalifa et al. (2016) deduced from their analysis of social justice leadership research that developing culturally responsive teachers was essential practice for a principal charged with creating a more equitable school. Many writers included elements of developing teachers with professional development and acting as a change agent to move teachers’ learning forward (Cotton, 2003; Grissom et al., 2021; Louis et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005).

Encouraging Critical Consciousness and Cultural Awareness

The findings detailed the components of Mr. Jones’s encouragement of teachers’ critical consciousness and cultural awareness. He asked teachers to seek to understand their students in the context of the student’s world, acknowledging alternative perspectives from their own. This required teachers to be vulnerable and willing to try new classroom skills and strategies. Mr. Jones expected progress, not perfection, supporting the need to be open and able to take risks. Risk-taking allowed staff to open themselves to new ideas and understandings about their impact on students and the school environment.

Marzano et al. (2005) found agreement with other researchers in the quote from Silns, Mulford, and Zarins (2002) that “effective leadership involves ‘the extent to which staff feels

empowered to make decisions and feel free to experiment and take risks” (p. 45). Cotton (2003) and Grissom et al. (2021) agreed that effective principals support teachers in taking risks without fear of failure. Khalifa et al. (2016) addressed the process of supporting teachers’ vulnerability while encouraging the learning of students’ cultural context by including “developing teacher capacities for culturally responsive pedagogy” in their effective school leadership responsibilities (p. 1283).

Providing Culturally Relevant Professional Development

Researchers agreed that providing professional development is crucial to effective school leadership (Cotton, 2003; Grissom et al., 2021; Khalifa et al., 2016; Louis et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005). Khalifa et al. (2016) discovered professional development could be facilitated by “creating a CRSL team that is charged with constantly finding new ways for teachers to be culturally responsive” (p. 1284). Mr. Jones assembled and empowered a collaborative and mission-focused equity team. The team met monthly to build culturally responsive professional development designed with the needs of Mesa Elementary staff and students in mind. This professional development aligned to encourage critical consciousness and cultural awareness by using student voices to illustrate student perspectives at Mesa.

Implementing Culturally Relevant Systems and Structures

Mr. Jones deliberately designed systems and structures to move the school towards equity for all students. Understanding the students in their classroom through relationships and professional development helped the staff plan lessons and activities with an equity lens, including asset-based components of culturally responsive education such as engagement, rigor, and cultural identity. Additionally, he created protected times for data-driven staff conversation

and discussion to integrate culturally responsive strategies. Social justice and mainstream education leadership authors agreed that principals should allocate resources to build structures promoting the individualized examination of student data, needs, and supports, such as multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), response to intervention (RTI), and PLCs (Cotton, 2003; Grissom et al., 2021; Khalifa et al., 2016; Louis et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005). In these structures, teachers collaborate to examine student results and brainstorm ways to support student differentiation. Differentiation was determined based on data and student knowledge gained from relationships. A teacher relayed Mr. Jones's beliefs and instructional expectations that "being a culturally responsive school begins with knowing your students at a personal level and then using that information to engage them in learning." The findings in this study aligned with current research on implementing systems and structures to support student growth and social justice leadership literature requiring principals' dedicated support of culturally relevant teaching.

Exercising Critical Self-Reflection and Reflective Practice

Culturally responsive leaders make it a priority to reflect on how their beliefs and background affect their actions in the school environment, as well as reflect on the effectiveness of their practices (Khalifa et al., 2016). In his meta-analysis, Khalifa et al. (2016) said that principals must "display a critical consciousness on practice in and out of school and display self-reflection" (p. 1283). Reflection helps align actions and goals by establishing core values, by pursuing and growing from feedback, and by continuously learning; all practices found in Mr. Jones's leadership (Marzano et al., 2005).

Establishing Core Values

The findings in this study indicated a leader in a school reducing the equity gap established and promoted their core values. Mr. Jones chose education as his second profession after realizing his mission to help teach children, especially “the Black and Brown kids. They're on my mind all the time.” He spoke of his goal in his interview, “I have to close the [equity] gap. I'll close the gap, then I'll go down and do something else.” This goal set his path, and through time, experience, and reflection, Mr. Jones developed what he called the 7 Hs: honesty, hard work, humility, humor, headiness, hope, and hunger. Teachers reported that he applied these values in his work at Mesa Elementary.

Mr. Jones’s creation of goals and core values were consistent behaviors of successful principals (Cotton, 2003; Grissom et al., 2021; Khalifa et al., 2016; Louis et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005). Marzano et al. (2005), Cotton (2003), and Bennis and Goldsmith (2010) wrote about the need to take responsibility for the school by having well-defined values, sharing those with stakeholders, and demonstrating them with consistency. Louis et al. (2010) found importance in “modeling appropriate values and practices” (p. 75). Furthermore, Jayavant (2016) found that culturally responsive school leaders “acknowledged that educational situations were not morally neutral and in every situation where leadership decisions were made, their axiological underpinning motivated their actions” (p. 12). While mainstream literature agreed to establish goals and values was critical, social justice leadership authors explained that values molded through critical consciousness and with equity in mind guided culturally responsive principals’ actions.

Pursuing and Growing from Feedback

The findings suggested Mr. Jones often solicited feedback from his stakeholders to adjust his leadership and grow his abilities. The principal valued the comments and used them to continuously recalibrate his leadership practices to meet the needs of his school. Mr. Jones's approach was inconsistent with most leadership literature. Several authors mentioned the principal providing feedback to teachers (Grissom et al., 2021; Khalifa et al., 2016; Louis et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005), but only Cotton (2003) spoke specifically about "soliciting information from all groups in the school community" (p. 69). Marzano et al. (2005) found that "systematically considering new and better ways of doing things" (p. 45) was the behavior of a change agent, but again, did not speak to the principal pursuing stakeholder feedback to make changes. Mr. Jones possessed a growth mindset that pushed him to gather information from stakeholders about his leadership. This specific finding was unique to the research.

Continuously Learning

Providing intellectual stimulation to staff is noted as an effective behavior for the principal by Cotton (2003), Louis et al. (2010), and Marzano et al. (2005). Still, few authors addressed the principal's intellectual stimulation and continuous learning that Mr. Jones sought for himself in this case study. Marzano et al. (2005) found it was important for the school leader to "keep informed about current research and theory on effective schooling" (p. 53). While Mr. Jones did say he sought to stay informed on new educational curricula and literature, he spoke of expanding his learning to leadership and motivational scholars outside of education as well. He found blogs, articles, and published articles to expand his knowledge, "The last eight or nine years, I focused my research on leadership. Business, education, sports, anything about leadership, I read it."

Khalifa et al. (2016) wrote that culturally responsive leaders are “committed to continuous learning of cultural knowledge and contexts” (p. 1283). Although Mr. Jones spent time listening and learning to students, parents, and in community, establishments to understand the contextual world of his students, these findings noted a preponderance of learning framed around successful leadership practices. Marzano et al.’s (2005) research most closely aligned with the principal’s behavior of continuous learning. Mr. Jones presented fewer behaviors associated with Khalifa et al.’s (2016) learning of the students’ cultural context than Marzano et al.’s (2005) generalized leadership learning.

Conclusion of Discussion of Findings

Since the Coleman Report documented the achievement gap between Black and White students, educators and researchers have worked to identify factors that influence student learning outcomes and adjust those to close the race-based gap in K-12 schools. In 2022, according to the Nation’s Report Card, a race-based achievement or equity gap persists (NCES, 2022). This research was designed to study a school making gains in reducing the equity gap and examine the leadership behaviors of the principal. This researcher held a broad assumption that the leadership behaviors of a school successfully reducing the equity gap would align with the behaviors recommended by social justice leadership authors and be less consistent with mainstream educational leadership research. Overall, the findings aligned with a combination of mainstream educational leadership and culturally responsive leadership behaviors, with a few exceptions.

The findings in this study indicated the most prevalent behaviors of a principal at a school reducing the equity gap are developing relationships, engaging the community, cultivating and maintaining culturally responsive teacher pedagogy, and exercising critical self-

reflection and reflective practice. Mainstream educational leadership and culturally responsive literature was reviewed to find congruencies and evidence of inconsistencies with current research. In general, behaviors identified as effective by educational leadership and culturally responsive authors aligned with the findings (Cotton, 2003; Grissom et al., 2021; Jayavant, 2016; Khalifa et al., 2016; Leithwood et al., 2004; Louis et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005). Mr. Jones's actions portrayed a unique combination of behaviors that may have contributed in smaller achievement gaps between White and Black student populations.

Developing relationships was identified as Mr. Jones's most prevalent and influential practice. Mainstream leadership and CRSL literature assigned relationship-building a lower priority, and each author included only elements of relational skills, such as mentoring or building trust with teachers (Cotton, 2003; Grissom et al., 2021; Khalifa et al., 2016; Leithwood et al., 2004; Louis et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005). These same researchers agreed community relationships were crucial. Still, few addressed connecting directly with students except for Khalifa et al. (2016). A nuance noted in the findings and less in the literature is the impact relationships had on other recommended practices (Cotton, 2003; Grissom et al., 2021; Khalifa et al., 2016; Leithwood et al., 2004; Louis et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005). Mr. Jones used relationships to facilitate his leadership, not as a behavior practiced alongside other behaviors. Deep, meaningful relationships were his vehicle to influence all areas of the school and affect change through stakeholders. All literature agreed that engaging the community by serving as a social activist and connecting the school to the community was a successful principal practice (Cotton, 2003; Grissom et al., 2021; Khalifa et al., 2016; Leithwood et al., 2004; Louis et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005).

Noteworthy findings emerged regarding the principal's behaviors of cultivating and maintaining culturally responsive teacher pedagogy and exercising critical self-reflection and reflective practice behaviors. Both mainstream and CRSL literature found the foundations of these skills to be essential. Social justice authors (Jayavant, 2016; Khalifa et al., 2016) and the most recent version of the Wallace Foundation (Grissom et al., 2021) study reported that principals needed a strong focus on incorporating an equitable perspective when establishing goals and values and implementing systems, structures, professional development, and curriculum as well as when engaging in self-reflection and reflective practice.

Lastly, the greatest departure from the research reviewed for this study was the continuous feedback that the principal sought from stakeholders and his constant yearning to improve his leadership. Mr. Jones believed in continuous improvement to stay current, meet the needs of his staff and families, and keep himself motivated. Based on the prevalence that this behavior was mentioned by stakeholders, the findings indicated seeking information to learn was a high priority for Mr. Jones. While Cotton (2003) indicated seeking input from stakeholders was necessary and Marzano (2005) wrote about keeping current on research, they cited these as subskills of other practices. Mr. Jones's desire to continually improve his leadership by seeking feedback and professional sources to support learning went beyond the principal actions described in previous studies. He sought wisdom from research and practitioners, but did not solely search for equity-focused content. Instead, he looked to leadership experts, in and outside of education, applying an equitable lens molded from critical self-reflection to make the learning meaningful for his social justice leadership work.

The principal at Mesa diligently served his community for the past 13 years, learning and building his professional practice. He developed his moral compass and effective leadership

toolbox through experience and personal development. While the leadership literature provides descriptions of principal actions associated with culturally responsive leadership, Mr. Jones demonstrated these behaviors in ways that centered equity and may have contributed to a reduction in the equity gap in his school.

Based on Mr. Jones's actions, I offer a continuum of leadership behaviors aligned with culturally responsive leadership (Khalifa, et al., 2016) in Table 5. Mr. Jones' actions align with the mastery column. Leaders who want to intentionally focus on closing equity gaps might self-assess their behaviors and skills in each behavior category and align their leadership actions more closely with those of Mr. Jones.

Table 5*Leadership Behavior Continuum for Closing Equity Gaps*

Behavior Category (Khalifa et al., 2016)	Beginning	Mastery
Developing Relationships	Surface-level collegial connections with staff, students, and community	Relationships drive decision-making and behaviors such as mentoring and empowering teachers, connecting directly with students, and demonstrating care
Engaging the Community	Inviting partnerships Communicating information	Connecting the school to the community Serving as a social activist
Cultivating and Maintaining Culturally Responsive Teacher Pedagogy	Providing professional development Implementing student progress monitoring systems	Encouraging critical consciousness and cultural awareness in others Providing culturally relevant professional development Implementing culturally relevant systems and structures
Exercising Critical Self-Reflection and Reflective Practice	Developing an equity mindset Reflecting on leadership	Foundation of equity as a moral imperative Continuously learning Seeking constant feedback from various stakeholders Adjusting leadership based on feedback

After analyzing and compiling decades of educational leadership research, Grissom et al. (2021) concluded,

We propose that the adoption of an equity lens inspires school leaders to reconsider their leadership behaviors in light of equity considerations, asking questions such as how their actions will remove barriers and create opportunities for historically underserved groups, how their behaviors will promote access to critical resources and support for the success of all students and how their practices will confront institutional factors that may be currently inhibiting certain members of the school community from achieving their full potential. (p. 74)

Just as in the case of Mesa Elementary and Mr. Jones, the work of leading change to reduce the equity gap starts with the principal and their journey in creating an equity lens. They must use

the lens as a compass to guide their relationships with stakeholders and implement everyday leadership practices. Mr. Jones came into his education profession with a developed racial consciousness that he used to filter his leadership decisions and guide his everyday actions. He built meaningful relationships with staff, students, and parents and engaged the community, among other things, with purpose. These combined actions allowed him to create a more equitable system and environment for students, resulting in a reduced equity gap at Mesa Elementary.

Implications

Culturally responsive or social justice education leadership is well researched, as is mainstream educational leadership. Leadership theories and best practices are taught in preparation programs and written in articles for professional learning. This study contributes to a gap in the literature that combines both educational leadership and social justice leadership practices for effective school leadership. More specifically, the findings of this study imply that educational leaders working toward equity should focus on and deepen their critical consciousness and maintain an equity lens that is applied to all decision-making. Additionally, principals might concentrate on creating authentic relationships with staff, students, families, and the community to facilitate their leadership.

The findings of this study imply that leadership students need to investigate their positionality within their community and political and social environment. Additionally, they might adopt strategies that support examining their critical consciousness. Leadership students can begin their journey of establishing core values to support equity-driven problem-solving and decision-making. Of course, technical skills such as evaluating teachers and managing resources are important. Still, these findings suggest these technical tasks may prove more effective in

reducing the equity gap if undertaken from a well-defined moral perspective. Finally, for these students, spending time, in class and outside of their program, improving relational skills, such as trust building and caring for others, could be valuable to their leadership outcomes.

Principals and leadership preparation program students can apply these findings by developing relationships and nurturing their critical consciousness journey. Mr. Jones spent much of his time conversing with stakeholders, listening to their concerns, thinking about how to meet their needs, and demonstrating care for them. These relational efforts were noticed and rewarded with trust and motivation from staff members. While it can be difficult for acting leaders to set aside time for their learning and reflection, the findings are compelling that time for personal leadership development could be fruitful in producing desired student outcomes. Lastly, in alignment with the literature and the findings, engaging the community and acting as a social activist to meet school needs should be prioritized (Cotton, 2003; Grissom et al., 2021; Khalifa et al., 2016; Leithwood et al., 2004; Louis et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005).

School district leaders that support building principals might use these findings to construct efficient professional development to maximize the limited time principals have outside of their buildings. District leaders can provide principals time and space to reflect on and develop their critical consciousness, realizing that some leaders may need more guidance, specific activities, or coaching to develop these skills. Additionally, district leaders may consider increasing the tenure of building principals to allow for deeper relationships and social connections with their staff and communities.

In sum, these findings suggest that current principals, leadership students, aspiring leaders, and district leaders might take steps that leverage a strong critical consciousness and healthy stakeholder relationships so that leaders can connect with students, engage the

community, grow teachers, implement culturally relevant structures and curricula, and seek feedback. These behaviors may contribute to the reduction of the equity gap.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study was predicated on studying research theory vs. practitioner application. Research provides leaders with best practices, but there is value in studying how the research is applied effectively in a school experiencing a reduction in the equity gap. Given that this is a case study of one principal in one elementary school, more information is needed about leadership behaviors that affect the equity gap. Additional studies could be conducted in schools that positively affect equity for a variety of demographic factors, such as socio-economic, cultural, language, or geographical diversity. Research conducted at multiple school levels, including elementary, middle, and high school, could provide further delineation of effective leadership behaviors needed in each age group.

Furthermore, a cross-case analysis could provide a rich data field for analysis. Researchers could conduct several case studies and “attempt to build a generalization explanation that fits all the individual cases” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Because of the many factors affecting student outcomes, a wider sample of cases could help separate out common and effective principal behaviors.

A question emerging from this research is the connection between the principal’s equity mindset, feedback, and critical consciousness development. When a leader steps into their role, their mindset and consciousness are developed to a point, whether or not they are aware of this. Understanding the principal’s critical consciousness starting point, the equity mindset they developed before taking the position, and how feedback affects that growth could provide further information on how leaders can curate the most effective leadership practices to reduce the

equity gap. This could be accomplished by interviewing multiple principals who are reducing the gap at their schools, which would provide a way to learn more about the connection between critical consciousness, an equity mindset, and feedback for growth.

Limitations

Many factors influence a school system. Isolating principal leadership skills from other influences based on the perception of staff members was difficult. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) wrote that case studies are most appropriate when "it is impossible to separate the phenomenon's variables from their context" (p. 38). For example, a teacher may consider a decision to implement a K-2 reading program as a sign of the principal's instructional and curricula knowledge, while the decision may have been a school district mandate.

Researchers agree several factors influence student outcomes, such as access to higher-level classes, poor teacher quality, implicit bias in classrooms, and poverty (Alexander, 2020; Bell, 2005; Blankstein et al., 2016; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Kendi, 2016; Kozol, 2012; Nieto, 2010). Yet some factors, including student achievement, can be affected through indirect principal leadership (Leithwood et al., 2004). For example, principals can influence teacher training and maintain adequate facilities. Alternately, students' socioeconomic status remains out of the principal's sphere of influence. Although socioeconomic status affects student outcomes, Mesa Elementary School has experienced a relatively stable Free and Reduced Lunch population and community environment throughout the previous decade.

This qualitative case study relied solely on the researcher to collect and analyze data, which is a limitation and a strength. While a sole point of view maintained the consistency of interpretation, the lack of other researchers during analysis required the researcher to adhere to protocols to ensure integrity in the findings.

Concluding Remarks

The questions remain: How do we close the race-based achievement gap and ensure equitable education for all students? How do we combat racism and discrimination embedded in the history of the United States and interwoven in our policies and systems? The disadvantages of people of vulnerable race, color, identity, ability, and gender for the last 400 years have compounded to create a nearly inescapable wave of inequity able to pull even the strongest people and organizations in its undertow (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Institutional racism in education is evidenced by the consistent gap between Black and White students' math and literacy assessment scores. Scholars have looked for solutions to this problem for decades in multicultural instruction and curriculum, professional development for teachers, and best practices for leadership (Blankstein et al., 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2004). The gap in student achievement between Black and White student scores persists, so research must continue.

Leithwood et al. (2004) found that school leaders influence student outcomes. To understand the impact of their actions on the educational environment, and specifically on the equity gap, their actions must be analyzed. This study was conducted to shed light on practices currently being employed by a leader in a school making progress towards equity, hoping to find a connection between research and application. Besides the findings validating social justice leadership literature and mainstream educational studies, it informed my practice as an administrator. As I prepare for the upcoming school year, my focus has shifted to building strong relationships with students, families, and staff, as well as increasing my efforts to engage the community. These two major takeaways and the need to develop my critical consciousness while constantly seeking feedback to grow are now incorporated into my practice and pedagogy.

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APPENDIX A
STAFF SURVEY PROTOCOL

Staff Survey Protocol

Hrovat Research Survey Protocol
Qualtrics Dates: _____
RQ: How do elementary school principal practices contribute to a reduction in equity gap student scores between Black and White students in elementary schools?
Recipients: All Certified Staff
<p>Introduction email:</p> <p>Hello, my name is April Hrovat. As a part of my doctoral program through the University of Northern Colorado, I am completing research for my dissertation. You are invited to participate in a survey regarding the leadership practices employed by your principal. The purpose of this survey is to identify the leadership practices that may have influenced your school's positively trending data towards reducing the Equity Gap. The information you provide and your identification, and that of your school will remain confidential. The first question of the survey is consent. You will have the option to decline participation at that time. If you want to participate in a follow-up interview, please leave your contact information in the space provided.</p>
<p>Informed Consent embedded in Qualtrics: See attached</p>
Survey Questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe your principal's most successful qualities/skills/attributes? • Describe the essential components of a culturally responsive school? Can you provide examples of these within your school? • What expectations does your principal hold for teachers when supporting diverse learners? • How has curriculum implementation contributed to a reduced equity gap in your school? • How are your community's values, beliefs and culture reflected in your school? • Is there anything else you feel is important to report that would help explain your school's reduction in the equity gap between Black and White students? • If you would like a follow up conversation regarding any of these questions, please leave your name and contact information.

APPENDIX B
PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Principal Interview Protocol

Hrovat Research Interview Protocol	
Place: _____ Activity: _____	
Length: _____ Date: _____	
RQ: How do elementary school principal practices contribute to a reduction in equity gap student scores between Black and White students in elementary schools?	
Interviewee: Interviewee Position:	
Reminders: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overview of the project • Turn on recording device • Thank the participant 	
Interview Questions and Descriptive Notes	Reflective Notes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How was your summer? Did you get a chance to unwind and recharge? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me about your background and experience serving as a school leader. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe your time as a leader at this school. What have been your major concerns, initiatives, and celebrations? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you provide examples of your most frequent and relied upon leadership practices? In what ways have they changed over the years? What were the catalysts for these changes? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • During your term as a principal, did you challenge the norm? If “yes,” please specify 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What qualities/skills/attributes of a leader do you believe positively affect the Equity Gap? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are these skills learned? Are they best learned through prep programs, professional development or individual pursuits? 	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Please share any lessons learned or other information you perceive important for other principals to know when guiding teachers towards narrowing the Equity Gap? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describe the school's role within the community. What steps have you taken to develop this role? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This school and your principalship were selected due to positive data trends in reducing the Equity Gap for Black students. If it has not been covered, what do you perceive as the reason for this outcome? Is there anything you would add that was not asked? 	
Reminders: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thank the participant Remind the participant of the promise of confidentiality Turn off recorder 	

APPENDIX C
OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

APPENDIX D

**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD INTERVIEW
INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

Interview Informed Consent



Institutional Review Board

CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Project Title: School Leadership Practices Effective in Reducing the Equity Gap

Researcher(s): April Hrovat

Phone number:

Email:

Purpose and Description: The primary purpose of this research is to determine what leadership practices a school leader with student testing data trending towards reducing the equity gap employs in their professional practice.

You are invited to participate in a research project that studies effective school leadership practices that affect the Equity Gap. This interview has been designed to collect information on your leadership and perception of best practices you employ.

If you agree to participate in the voluntary interview, you will take part in an interview that occurs at a mutually agreed upon location or over the phone. The interview will take approximately 45 mins to an hour to complete. You will be provided with contact information from the researcher should you have further questions. Participation is voluntary. If you agree to participate, you may stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected.

There are no risks for participation beyond those that would occur during a conversation regarding your leadership practices. Your responses, identification, and the identification of your school will be kept confidential. Your interview will be transcribed using a pseudonym with a copy stored in a password protected account. All information linking you with the transcribed interview will be stored in a separate secured location. Upon research completion, all identifiable data will be destroyed.

If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact Sherry May, IRB Administrator, Office of Sponsored Programs, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-1910.

APPENDIX E

**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD INFORMED
CONSENT STAFF SURVEY**

Informed Consent Staff Survey



Institutional Review Board

CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Project Title: School Leadership Practices Effective in Reducing the Equity Gap

Researcher(s): April Hrovat

Phone number:

Email:

Purpose and Description: The primary purpose of this research is to determine what leadership practices a school leader with student testing data trending towards reducing the equity gap employs in their professional practice.

You are being invited to take a survey regarding your perception of the leadership practices of your administrator. All building certified staff will be surveyed. The survey is an eight electronic question survey developed by Qualtrics. You will receive an invitation through email. The survey consists of open-ended questions. Only the researcher and the other course instructors will examine individual responses. The survey responses will be collected to analyze by the researcher. Results of the study will be kept anonymous and all original paperwork will be kept in locked cabinets on campus. The participants will be given the opportunity to provide their contact information within the survey for a follow up interview.

For the survey, you will not provide your name but will be asked your position. Therefore, your responses will be anonymous. If you are a teacher, you will be asked the grade level you teach. The survey will take you approximately 15 minutes.

There are no foreseeable risks. Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to take the survey and if you decide to begin the survey you may still decide to stop and not complete the survey at any time. Your decision will be respected.

Having read the above and have had an opportunity to ask any questions, please complete the survey if you would like to participate in this research. By completing the survey, you will give us permission for your participation. You may keep this form for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact Sherry May, IRB Administrator, Office of Sponsored Programs, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-1910.

APPENDIX F
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
NOTICE OF EXEMPTION



Date: 01/31/2022

Principal Investigator: April Hrovat

Committee Action: **IRB EXEMPT DETERMINATION – New Protocol**

Action Date: 01/31/2022

Protocol Number: [2107027709](#)

Protocol Title: An Elementary School Principal's Practices and a Reduced Equity Gap: A Case Study

Expiration Date:

The University of Northern Colorado Institutional Review Board has reviewed your protocol and determined your project to be exempt under 45 CFR 46.104(d)(702) for research involving

Category 2 (2018): EDUCATIONAL TESTS, SURVEYS, INTERVIEWS, OR OBSERVATIONS OF PUBLIC BEHAVIOR. Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: (i) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; (ii) Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or (iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by 45 CFR 46.111(a)(7).

You may begin conducting your research as outlined in your protocol. Your study does not require further review from the IRB, unless changes need to be made to your approved protocol.

As the Principal Investigator (PI), you are still responsible for contacting the UNC IRB office if and when:



- You wish to deviate from the described protocol and would like to formally submit a modification request. Prior IRB approval must be obtained before any changes can be implemented (except to eliminate an immediate hazard to research participants).
- You make changes to the research personnel working on this study (add or drop research staff on this protocol).
- At the end of the study or before you leave The University of Northern Colorado and are no longer a student or employee, to request your protocol be closed. *You cannot continue to reference UNC on any documents (including the informed consent form) or conduct the study under the auspices of UNC if you are no longer a student/employee of this university.
- You have received or have been made aware of any complaints, problems, or adverse events that are related or possibly related to participation in the research.

If you have any questions, please contact the Research Compliance Manager, Nicole Morse, at 970-351-1910 or via e-mail at nicole.morse@unco.edu. Additional information concerning the requirements for the protection of human subjects may be found at the Office of Human Research Protection website - <http://hhs.gov/ohrp/> and <https://www.unco.edu/research/research-integrity-and-compliance/institutional-review-board/>.

Sincerely,

Nicole Morse
Research Compliance Manager

University of Northern Colorado: FWA00000784