Disrupting the Wise Monkey Approach to Principal Preparation

Ryan Pool

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd

Part of the Educational Methods Commons

Recommended Citation

This Open Access Dissertation is brought to you by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.
DISRUPTING THE WISE MONKEY APPROACH TO PRINCIPAL PREPARATION

by

Ryan Pool

Bachelor of Arts
University of South Carolina, 1995

Master of Arts
University of South Carolina, 1998

Master of Education
University of South Carolina, 2008

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Education in
Educational Practice and Innovation
College of Education
University of South Carolina
2021

Accepted by:
Linda Silvernail, Major Professor
Russell Conrath, Committee Member
Rhonda Jeffries, Committee Member
Kamania Wynter-Hoyte, Committee Member
Tracey L. Weldon, Interim Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School
DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to the courageous school leaders, including teachers and staff members, administrators, counselors, district personnel, and community partners, who are willing to step up to the challenge of disruption on behalf of their students - especially for the aspiring principals who participated in our district’s first preparation pipeline, and for those who will follow their leadership to create more equitable schools for all students. You answered the call and said If not us, then who?
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank my wife, Britt, who is the best teacher I know, and our two children, Tyler and Logan, who have been nothing but encouraging and patient throughout this journey. I also owe gratitude to my parents and my in-laws for their constant support which allows us to be both parents and dedicated educators and learners. I thank Dr. Linda Silvernail, who has been more supportive, inspirational, and empowering than I could have ever asked for in an advisor and friend. I thank Dr. Russell Conrath, Dr. Rhonda Jeffries, and Dr. Kamania Wynter-Hoyte for their guidance in the finished product, along with all of the wonderful scholars from the University of South Carolina who assisted me during the development of this research. Finally, I would like to thank Mary, Devona, Jeff, Van, Jess, and Shannon for being the best team with whom I have had the privilege to work, while doing the most important work I have ever done. This research is the product of our collective belief that we can change the world.
ABSTRACT

An antiquated approach to school leadership preparation has resulted in a shortage of leaders equipped to confront the challenges of racism and injustice in our school systems. School districts considering significant investment of financial and human resources in leadership preparation programs would benefit from an elevated understanding of how individuals arrive at a level of conscientization, or critical awakening, regarding issues of social justice. This case study examines one district’s approach to principal preparation, focusing on how specific professional learning interventions influenced participants’ beliefs regarding the transformative responsibilities of a school leader, and the common experiences that occurred between participants. Framed through a constructivist, transformative theory of leadership, the participants’ personal narratives provide a view behind the eyes of future leaders as their senses awaken, allowing them to see, hear, and speak to their responsibilities as racial and social justice activists.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication ................................................................................................................................. iii
Acknowledgements ..................................................................................................................... iv
Abstract ....................................................................................................................................... v
Chapter 1: New Leadership for our Schools ................................................................. 1
Chapter 2: Literature Review .................................................................................................. 31
Chapter 3: Methodology .......................................................................................................... 75
Chapter 4: Data Collection ...................................................................................................... 96
Chapter 5: Conclusion ............................................................................................................. 152
References ............................................................................................................................... 183
Appendix A: Pre-Interview Online Participant Questionnaire ....................................... 192
Appendix B: Three-Part Interview Questions ..................................................................... 193
CHAPTER 1
NEW LEADERSHIP FOR OUR SCHOOLS

Dr. Bradley sighed at her desk as she glanced again at the latest principal retirement letter, submitted an hour earlier. It was 4:30 p.m. on Friday, her fourth week as the new superintendent of a large suburban school district. Dr. Bradley knew her new Board of Trustees had concerns about succession planning, but she had not expected that her entry into the district would coincide with four principal retirements within the first month on the job. In their own way, each explained that the departure had nothing to do with her, but they had been hired by the former superintendent and thought this a good time to exit gracefully, before any “new initiatives” began with a new superintendent.

With the announcement of each retirement, Dr. Bradley read the same letters of interest and resumes of long-time assistant principals from within the district. She could almost recite their instructional philosophies and lists of accomplishments at this point and was growing increasingly concerned that the school board’s succession fears were far more critical than even they suspected. Based on her initial dive into the district’s performance data, it was clear that very few of the internal candidates possessed skills that matched the emerging needs of the community’s students. After interviewing internal and external stakeholders, and triangulating a variety of achievement and experiential data, Dr. Bradley could see that her new district faced some serious
challenges, even if veiled behind traditionally high success rates according to the antiquated measures used by the state’s accountability system. Quite simply, the schools now under her charge were not systematically responding academically, emotionally, or culturally to the needs of students who deviated even in the slightest ways from the White, middle class norm that had once represented the community. She smiled as she glanced at the three “wise monkey” figurines on her shelf, a gift from a mentor, that now made total sense to her.

The current “bench” of assistant principals had focused on technical and operational aspects of the job but had few experiences or formal training in leadership philosophy, adaptive problem solving, or culturally relevant practices, and even less preparation in the field of truly systemic transformation. Dr. Bradley had been hired to move the schools of a growing community toward the future. As a new superintendent, she knew that searching for individuals who could demonstrate these skills and hiring exclusively external candidates for her aging principal fleet was neither sustainable nor politically smart, and she needed to change the current reality. If the current aspiring principals in the district could not see, hear, or speak to the real problems their schools faced, she needed to ensure that they developed those skills, for everyone’s sake including her own, but most importantly for their students.

The problem faced by Dr. Bradley is not unique. Public schools in post-industrial America must serve a greater purpose than the antiquated functions of the factory model of education, and they must effectively serve all students rather than only those privileged by membership in the historically dominant group. The modern school leader must be flexible and agile to lead through rapid transformation, both in the
community and in response to more fluid demands on the education system to prepare students for the unknown. While equipping new school leaders will be challenging, it should not necessarily be looked at as a crisis. In a new era of education design and philosophy, sparked by the convergence of information-age workforce demand and progressive education reformers, we have an opportunity to dismantle historical structures that marginalize significant groups of our nation’s children. School leaders for the future must apply a critical lens with the commitment and courage to disrupt current conditions in pursuit of a more equitable, collective bounty for our society (Shields, 2018). They must be able to recognize and address the injustices many of their students face.

To break antiquated models and construct educational systems that are equipped to serve all students, we cannot prepare school leaders through the same processes that were created for the factory model. Evans (1996) suggests reform efforts in the education industry fail because they aim at improving the existing broken system, rather than replacing or redesigning the system. He asserts that second-order change is required. Evans explains, “Second-order changes are systemic in nature and aim to modify the very way an organization is put together, altering its assumptions, goals, structures, roles, and norms” (p. 5). The absence of this sort of recognition or commitment within the education field has left public schools in a perpetual loop of stagnating results at the expense of the students who remain outside of the system’s sphere of success.

To evolve into a more results-driven industry, schools need leaders with a new skill set. The school leader of the future, specifically the building-level principal of the
future, must be heavily armed with the skills and dispositions necessary to effectively advocate for all students, particularly those who are currently placed at a disadvantage due to systemic prejudice. Among those skills is the ability to recognize and deconstruct school structures that disempower students. They must be able to see racism, hear the voices of the marginalized, and speak courageously and truthfully to compel systemic change. It is important that we understand how leaders move towards a transformative leadership orientation so that we can better foster these traits in aspiring school administrators.

The Problem of Practice

All students deserve schools that equip them to succeed in a rapidly changing future. Current school designs do not consistently provide this preparation, especially for students who have been historically marginalized based on their exclusion from the dominant group. If schools and school systems are going to evolve to better meet the needs of all students, leaders must be equipped to identify systemic barriers and lead through the complex challenges of breaking down those barriers (Mesterova, 2015). To courageously confront systemic racial inequities in our schools, leaders must empower their teams behind a transformative vision, armed with new senses and new tools.

It is important to keep in mind that improving principal preparation programs or early-career principal guidance is not the end goal. We must change the way we train, prepare, and support new principals to empower them to change the school experience, fundamentally altering our schools’ structures, which then empowers all stakeholders in a different model of education, giving all students the chance to thrive. Senge (2012) states, “We need diverse leaders of all ages and from all sectors willing to travel
Herr and Anderson (2015), while acknowledging that action research is the “new kid on the block” (p. 1), reference the work of Paulo Freire, who was “adamant that the processes of co-learning through participation was central to any attempt to work alongside the oppressed” (p.11). We must stop preparing leaders to be transactional managers or drivers of an irrelevant, inequitable system that is serving fewer of our students and fewer of our society’s needs and begin to prepare future leaders as inspirational inquirers, motivators, social scientists, and activists for every child.

Preparation for school leaders should heighten conscientization, empowering future principals to lead through transformative approaches that will break the oppressive structures of the factory model school. The problem of practice for this particular research is that current methods fail to prepare school leaders to reflect on their own beliefs, recognize systemic injustice, or challenge existing structures of oppression. Our current approaches equate to preparing and perpetuating the proverbial wise monkeys’ approach to leadership where leaders neither see, hear, or speak to the evils innate in our system.

**Summary of Background Literature**

There is a growing scope of research in the field of principal preparation grounded in theories of leadership. Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) prepared a comprehensive study with the Wallace Foundation compiling rationale and background
research for understanding the needs for principal preparation and emerging themes of best practice. In their study, they examined school systems across the nation, looking at the motivation of the system to engage in leadership development, the practices used, and the results for the students of the system. Shields’ research (2009, 2011, 2016, 2017, 2018) defines transformative leadership, combining previous theory about transformational leadership and clarifying that the next necessary evolution for school systems must include action on behalf of oppressed or marginalized populations.

There is broad consensus that the factory model of education is no longer preparing graduates with skills relevant for the information age. Numerous current researchers provide alternatives for school systems. City and Curtis (2017) examine the process by which school systems determine the what, why, and how of strategic reform, offering advice and tools to education leaders about practical efforts at reform with an emphasis on opening access to quality teaching and learning to marginalized populations. Hayes-Chriss (2017) provides three broad categories of pedagogy in terms of relevance: “antiquated, classical, and contemporary” (p. 11), asking what needs to be eliminated, adapted, or created for the needs of the modern student and greater society. Kay and Greenhill (2013) offer seven future-oriented perspectives that must be considered in place of a factory-educational system: evolving workforce demands in a new economy; the “flattening” (p. 5) of traditional economic hierarchies; a shift from manufacturing to service economy; new demands of citizenship in an increasingly complex society; the accelerated rate of change that graduates will experience over their lifetimes; greater emphasis on innovation and creativity as a life and work skill; the shift in information access, storage, and relevance; and finally, the full integration of
technology in all aspects of our lives and society. Wagner et al. (2006) propose that a knowledge economy will demand changes from the education system that can only be met through reinvention rather than continuous attempts at reform. These researchers, and many more, establish the case that schools and school systems must change to meet the demands of the future, supporting the need for adaptive leaders who can inspire and carry out significant change.

The local district hosting this research study has invested time and energy in innovative practices, recognizing that the schools within the system must be engaged in the innovative work of redesign. In doing so, district leaders have been forced to confront existing gaps in opportunity between student groups, leading them to reflect on the potential benefits of a newly designed educational system. If the district’s efforts will not benefit all students, is transformational leadership enough, or is there something more needed from leadership?

Substantial research supports the need for a critical stance towards the inequities in the education system, particularly regarding issues of race. Ladson Billings (1994, 1995) provides the overarching theory, which is supported by researchers including Singleton (2015), Tatum (2017), Boutte (2016), and Fergus (2017), among others. In The Dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children, Ladson-Billings (1994) compels her readers to acknowledge the damage done to African American children forced to bury their own identities and culture in an oppressive, inequitable system. When educators examine their practices or their systems critically, according to Ladson-Billings, they can see that “education is not an apolitical enterprise. It serves a function in the society and individual teachers can act consciously to support or oppose
those social functions or they can act unconsciously (and mindlessly) in ways that invariably support them” (p. 134). Likewise, Singleton (2015) explains that critical race theory “is grounded in evidence that indicates important shifts in racial power or systemic White racism are not gradual or unintentional” (p. 228). Singleton adds that critical race theorists reject incremental approaches to addressing racial oppression, which only perpetuates systemic White supremacy (p. 228).

Tatum (1997) provides rich resources for understanding the complexity of race, racial identity, and the societal challenges in addressing our racial divide. Boutte (2016) extends Ladson-Billings’ (1994, 1995) work, providing tools for educators along with a compelling call to action for transformative approaches to education. She cites Freire (1970, 1999) in explaining, “The role of critical, emancipatory, and decolonizing pedagogies is to emancipate people who are oppressed, not just from the oppressor, but also from their own perceptions of themselves in the oppressed state” (p. 43). Fergus (2017) offers educators practical guidance in using student data to recognize, name, and combat biased-based beliefs in our schools that lead to oppressive conditions for marginalized populations.

In addition to academic research about critical race theory, there is significant data to support the need for leadership development to confront issues of systemic racism in educational systems. The scarcity of leaders prepared to approach their work from a critical, socially activist stance indicates the need for a different approach to leadership training. Transformative leadership as defined by Shields (2011) differs from transformational leadership in its more direct, unapologetic attention to both academic and social outcomes. Although there is a distinction between transformational and
transformative leadership, Shields contends that leadership theory has long included critical or socially conscious discourses. Although transformational leadership has become associated with a more socially neutral approach to organizational effectiveness, Burns’ (1978) original definition of the transforming leader in his influential work *Leadership* was anything but morally ambiguous. Shields notes:

> It was ‘this last concept, moral leadership,’ that most concerned Burns. He described moral leadership as ‘the kind of leadership that can produce social change’ (p. 4) and suggested it is one of the most important and salient characteristics of transforming leadership. (p. 6)

Shields asserts that over time the critical and social stance that was originally embedded in Burns’ leadership work has become lost in the noise of a “convoluted and diverse” (p. 1) spectrum of educational leadership theories, while the complexity of leading increases amid growing calls for educational reform. To distinguish transformative leadership from transformational leadership may be semantic as Burns always intended an outcome of social change, but the delineation is nevertheless important to clarify the specific leadership problem of practice in this study. A common thread across transformative approaches is the necessity to disrupt frameworks that award privilege and power to some while oppressing others (Shields, 2010) and redesign them for increasingly equitable outcomes.

The problem of practice for this research is that current methods fail to prepare school leaders to reflect on their own beliefs, recognize systemic injustice, or challenge existing structures of oppression. Superintendents and school boards are investing in principal preparation or recruitment efforts to find the answers to their students’
problems but doing so without a clear picture of what they need or want. Building on the literature base of transformative leadership theory, adult learning theory, and critical race theory, this study will show what one school district learned from the stories of aspiring principals as they construct new knowledge and skills focused on transformative leadership. Their narratives share how they learned to see, hear, and speak to injustice.

**Theoretical Framework**

At the heart of the current problem with principal preparation is a question about what we expect from our school leaders, which stems from a larger question about what we expect from our public schools. The modern public school carries heavy influence from the industrial revolution, with roots in Prussian efficiency efforts and alarming resemblance to the earliest factories (Senge, 2012). Senge states, “In fact, school may be the starkest example in modern society of an entire institution modeled after the assembly line” (p. 35). These factory structures can be seen in the stages of production our students experience, the compartmentalization of the curriculum in discreet and isolated courses, and the accountability measures that look more like efficiency check points than the nurturing of potential. In a factory model of education, a principal should be a foreman or manager, potentially providing incentives or consequences to promote greater output of the desired product. Heifetz (2009) distinguishes between technical and adaptive leadership, noting the increasing need for modern leaders to confront ambiguous dilemmas that require far more adaptive approaches.

As the factory model of education has become less appropriate for our society’s needs, the role of the school leader has become less clear, begging the question – what
do we need and want from our school leaders? Evans (1996), pointing to the shortcomings of a “rational-structural paradigm” (p. 161) of management theory, states, “There is a growing consensus that the way we prepare and renew our school leaders is grossly inadequate” (p. 163). In essence, the rational-structural paradigm stems from Frederick Winslow Taylor’s organizational management approaches as a way to improve industrial efficiency (Evans, 1996). The framework of this approach is clearly visible in the current education system through structures like strategic planning checklists or overly simplified accountability measures, which build improvement efforts around assumptions of stable and predictable conditions that can be reliably quantified to communicate success or failure (Evans, 1996).

Shields (2018) counters the rational-structural paradigm stating, “I do not, will not, and cannot offer definitive answers, prescriptions, steps to follow – for those belong to a previous world of scientific management” (p. vi). Beyond rejecting a rational-structural approach to school leadership, Shields also points out inadequacies in other modern theories of school leadership. She asserts that most of these theories fall into three categories. The first category of leadership theory focuses primarily on leadership traits or certain characteristics that are common among the great leaders through history. These theories would suggest that isolating these characteristics will help us define what it means to be a leader, and thus to build leadership, these traits must be fostered and strengthened. The second category examines the processes of leadership, which could include styles like distributive or servant leadership. Even transformational and adaptive leadership fall into this second category. The third general category Shields defines is outcome-driven, which focuses less on the type of leader or the
processes used, and more on the results. For example, a leader might successfully redesign a school system, but there is not necessarily any assurance that systemic injustices or oppressive structures have been addressed. In her appeal for a more critical and socially activist approach to school leadership, she defines transformative leadership:

Transformative leaders combine careful attention to authentic, personal leadership characteristics, a focus on more collaborative, dialogic, and democratic processes of leadership; and at the same time, attend simultaneously to goals of individual intellectual development, and goals of collective sustainability, social justice, and mutually beneficial civil society (p. 63).

Transformative leadership theory has roots in Freire’s conscientization, or the idea that combinations of experiences, exposures, and challenges will result in both learning and an awakening of “critical awareness” (Freire, 2018, Kirylo, 2013, Shields, 2018). It is through this awakening that individuals can become better prepared to lead school communities. Curtis and City (2017) describe the challenge of this leadership belief: “We’re trying to do something that has never been done before in American education – educate all children to high levels. If that sounds inspiring and terrifying to you, you’re in good company. . . . What will it look like? Who will define it?” (p. 105). If adaptive, transformative leaders should be designing the next phase of American education, courageously disrupting the systems that have disempowered large segments of our society, how will we equip them for the difficult journey? Cambron-McCabe and Quantz, (as cited in Senge, 2012) articulated ten guiding principles that
informed their work specifically around transformative school leadership. These principles set forth the following:

1. School leadership should fundamentally be focused on transformation rather than maintenance of a status quo.

2. We educate all students primarily to be effective citizens of our democracy, rather than for the pursuit of their individual interests, which are a secondary outcome.

3. A school leader’s job requires a balance of moral imperative, technical expertise or knowledge, and craftsmanship or artistry.

4. Continuous critical reflection must be a part of the work of the leader, within the context of the cultural, political, and moral outcomes of the organization’s efforts.

5. Organizations have cultures, and within their cultures, there are political struggles, and the realities of marginalization and power. To ignore cultural politics is to ignore the reality of the leader’s work.

6. The qualities of transformative leadership are not aligned with organizational hierarchy.

7. Diversity is sought for the value it brings to an organization's learning capacity, rather than a measure of equity or equality. Diversity helps us challenge our own assumptions and disconfirm our mental models.

8. A cohesive holistic program, rather than a series of isolated experiences, will lead to the desired outcomes for aspiring leaders.
9. Community takes priority over autonomy. This implies that systems and structures are flexible enough to enable communal learning and decision-making.

10. School is the daily work, but education is the goal. There must be continuous reflection and adaptation to ensure that the work results in greater access and achievement of educated young people. (Cambron-McCabe and Quantz, as cited in Senge, 2012)

Issues of systemic racial inequity are prime examples of the types of challenges that new school leaders should be prepared to confront. Ellis and Hartlep (2012) point out, “Culturally biased instructional strategies are not perceived to be biased by aversive racists. Therefore, when instructional problems emerge, aversive racists assume that something is wrong with the student, not the educational system, and especially not with the teacher” (Gorlewski, Gorlewski, & Porfilio, p. 94). These practices must be disrupted. Racial justice goals require informed, inclusive, different models of leadership according to the Leadership Learning Community. In their 2010 Leadership for a New Era report, Keleher et al. (2010) state, “Leadership needs to be reframed as the process by which individuals and groups align their values and mission, build relationships, organize and take action, and learn from their experiences to achieve shared goals” (p. 9). Their work strongly supports a call for transformative leadership approaches, particularly in the field of racial justice.

To better understand how a school district can support school leaders to develop and apply transformative leadership, it is important to understand how adults learn. Andragogy or adult learning theory, introduced by Knowles (2012), grounds adult
learning around six principles: the need to know, self-concept of the learner, prior experiences, readiness for learning, orientation or stance toward learning, and self-motivation of the learner. Knowles adds that the individual circumstances of the learner will influence adult-learning efforts, as will the specific goals of the learning engagement. Understanding how certain experiences or interventions result in new skills or knowledge for aspiring principals will require attention to adult learning theory. In addition to new skills, the stories of awakening or conscientization from participants will provide insight into the journey towards transformative leadership.

Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) identify four levels of development for a research study: the overarching paradigm or worldview, the theoretical lens, the methodology, and data collection. I propose there is not one singular approach to awaken the social consciousness of my participants towards transformative leadership. As such, I frame the work from an interpretive or social constructionist paradigm (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). If there is not one clear method by which leaders become transformative, it is important to examine the experiences that lead participants to construct their understanding of the world, their awakening, and their beliefs about school leadership.

From participants’ stories, the themes that emerge provide a view that deepens understanding of leadership development. Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) offer that from a constructivist worldview, knowledge is developed first from individual perspectives leading to broader understandings. In addition to the interpretive, or constructivist paradigm, the research was influenced by a transformative research paradigm. Not to be confused with transformative leadership as a leadership theory, a
transformative worldview shapes the entirety of the research. Creswell and Plano Clark explain:

Transformative worldviews are focused on the need for social justice and the pursuit of human rights…. In the end, the transformative researcher works for the social world to be changed for the better so that individuals will feel less marginalized (p. 37).

The philosophical underpinnings of the work are built upon two complementary paradigms: research can lead to a more socially just world, and transformative leaders construct their own awakening, or conscientization, based on their experiences.

From these paradigms, we can apply lenses of leadership theory, adult learning theory, and critical race theory, to better understand the experiences of aspiring school leaders in the school district’s principal preparation program. Aguilar (2013) explains the rationale for overlapping perspectives when examining transformative leadership development:

The lens of systemic, or structural, oppression is premised on the assumption that oppression resides in systems and structures (such as our education system and school structures), as well as within our individual consciousness. Social inequality, therefore, is woven throughout our institutions. To transform our system, a close examination of the structures that hold oppression must be made along with our examination of the individual consciousness of those within. (p. 57).

The scarcity of leaders equipped to confront the challenges in modern schools presents a specific problem of practice. Digging deeper to understand this scarcity of leadership
leads to the realization that aspiring school leaders receive little preparation to help them identify or confront social injustice or racist practices. At the root of the inadequate preparation for leaders is a lack of consensus about what schools should be or do for our society, and buried far beneath the lack of consensus is the frightening desperation of those who seek to hold on to power gained through historic, hegemonic oppression. They rely on the inability of others to see, hear, and confront systemic injustice.

Herr and Anderson (2015) advise that a researcher should define action research explicitly within his or her study. The overlap between transformative and constructivist worldviews leads to questions about how knowledge is constructed to make a better world. In this research, practitioners led other practitioners to change their own industry. This is how I define action research. Herr and Anderson describe action research as “new strategies to face old problems, alliances and relationships with other people concerned about similar issues, the hope that they can contribute to their field and make a difference in the world” (p. ix). They assert that action research is “value laden” (p. 4). The context and theoretical framework of this research demanded an action research approach.

**Rationale and Purpose**

There is an intersection between the call for a new vision of schools and the need to recognize and correct inequitable practices -- an opportunity. As we prepare our schools to meet the demands of an information rather than industrial age, we have the chance to redesign the systems and structures that have propelled some students while holding others back. By redesigning schools, we can redesign society. Dewey believed
that “education is a process by which all individuals can participate in the social consciousness of the human race. As they share in social consciousness, they naturally adjust their own activities resulting in social reform and progress” (as cited in Kirylo, 2013, p. 30). Dewey’s stance connects to Freire’s concept of conscientization, leading back to transformative leadership theory (Freire, 2018, Shields, 2018). Shields cites Greene (1988) who advocated the mobilization of educators to address social issues:

To the end of arousing a consciousness of membership, active and participant membership in a society of unfulfilled promises – teaching for what Paulo Freire used to call ‘conscientization’ (1970), heightened social consciousness, a wide-awakeness that might make injustice unendurable. (Greene, as cited in Shields, p. 25).

In discussing school redesign as a means to address social justice, Fergus (2017) stated, “We have an opportunity to begin reconstructing school settings that behave like the moral compasses espoused in constitutions, state charters, religious deities, and local school vision statements” (p. 27).

At our intersection, there must be a new direction if the education industry is going to successfully change. Leaders must be able to see and understand why there is a need to shift and abandon the comfort of a technical or transactional approach to leadership for the uncharted territory of transformative leadership. All of this must be done with a courageous acknowledgement that race has been a significant factor affecting the opportunities afforded to students in the current school system. The new school leader must understand and communicate a vision of a new school system that
works for all students, support and empower educators to actualize the vision, and courageously confront the barriers of the status quo.

School systems seeking transformative leadership would benefit from an elevated understanding of how individuals reach a level of conscientization, or critical awakening, specifically regarding issues of social justice (Freire, 2018). School systems that decide to invest significant financial and human resources in leadership preparation programs must also consider their understanding and application of adult learning theory (Knowles, 2012). My research examined one district’s approach to principal preparation, focusing on the following research questions:

- How did professional learning interventions influence participants’ beliefs regarding the transformative responsibilities of a school leader?
- What common experiences occurred between participants who experienced levels of conscientization around issues of social justice?

Closely examining the experience of aspiring principals who engaged in a very targeted, yearlong training program designed around transformative leadership theory allowed for a deep investigation of these research questions and yielded insight useful for aspiring leaders and the school systems that are seeking these leaders.

Positionality

Before probing into the specific research and the methodologies used, it is important to consider the unique and complicated issue of positionality. Herr and Anderson (2015) note that in action research, positionality presents a challenge that can be confusing or even undermining to the research. As I began research with a group of aspiring principals in the same school district in which I had previously supervised
principals, I recognized that the border crossings to which Herr and Anderson referred were present in the work. Citing Thompson and Gunter (2011), Herr and Anderson explain, “Even the notions of insider and outsider are multilayered and fluid, and can shift at various times during the research study” (p. 37).

According to the continuum of positionality provided by Herr and Anderson (2015), my role is best characterized as “insider in collaboration with other insiders” (p. 40). One of the first and most important warnings they provide is that “power relations in a setting operate even when insiders think they are being collaborative” (p. 45). My role at the onset of the research was a supervisory role to both principals and aspiring principals, with implications for formal evaluation on job performance and influence regarding placement and promotion. Although I changed jobs and shifted into a non-evaluative role during the data collection phase of the research, I remained cognizant of the multiple positions I held in relation to the participants - former supervisor, coach, evaluator, colleague, and researcher. Selecting participants from the principal pipeline program who have already been promoted to the principal role for my sample helped minimize positionality issues, as these individuals are no longer lobbying for promotion. I also documented my participation in interviews through transcripts and reflection notes, which allowed regular review of issues of positionality.

Another issue related to my own position in the work is the close connection I have to the work of both school leadership and reform for equity. Because I have my own strong beliefs about the purpose of school and the shortcomings of our current practices, I had to be aware of the possibility of my own confirmation or desirability biases. Likewise, as leadership development has been part of my regular work, I ran the
risk of co-optation, failing to view the work from a critical lens or identifying potential disconfirming evidence in the research (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Because positionality presented potential conflict in my research, it was important to be very transparent throughout the study. Herr and Anderson recommend “one way to deal with bias is to acknowledge one’s presence in the study and build in methods of self-reflection” (p. 45).

Efron and Ravid (2013) suggest that pure objectivity is not intended in most qualitative research, and the researcher must find a “disciplined subjectivity” (p. 57). To do this, the researcher must provide transparency in disclosing information that is influencing either the interventions or the potential outcomes or conclusions, and how relationships might be changing because of interventions. Specifically, Efron and Ravid point to disclosure around “(1) your own values, beliefs, and commitments that are related to the study; (2) your past involvement and experience with the topic; and (3) your relationship with the participants” (p. 57). I used this framework to include regular reflection in a research journal about each of these three areas throughout the research process and through the conclusions. Using the three-part framework provided structure that helped balance the story of the research. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) warn, “One can go overboard in discussing these issues, so that it appears that the study is more about the researcher than the participants and the findings of the study” (p. 65).

**Research Design and Data Collection**

The research study is framed primarily as a case study of members of a cohort of aspiring principals, who were chosen from assistant principals in the district through a rigorous selection process. Through an examination of the program curriculum, the interventions used, and interviews with a sample of participants, the case study provided
individual stories and documented aspiring principals’ progression toward more transformative approaches to leadership, particularly regarding issues of race and social justice in schools. To paint a richer picture of the journey, I included parts of the participants’ narratives from their own words and from the perspective of the researcher (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Combining the case study approach with aspects of a narrative approach created a compelling story that has value for leadership efforts beyond the cohort of aspiring principals participating in my research. Herr and Anderson (2015) state:

A dissertation may represent the documentation of a successful collaboration and be used as a case study of not only the process but also the product of the collaboration. This becomes public knowledge to the extent that the knowledge is transferred to someone in a receiving context that is similar … to the sending context that produced the study (p. 6).

The work embodies the quality criteria of action research, which I believe is the best methodology for achieving the ultimate goals of the study. Mertler (2014) explains that the intent of action research is to create better conditions for practitioners and their students in the specific setting of the research. This study for example, examines the growth or changes that took place among a sample of school administrators to understand how conscientization can occur within the local principal pipeline program. Herr and Anderson (2015), recognizing that traditional measures of validity may not apply to all action research, developed quality criteria for use by practitioner researchers. They explain that action research is valid when the specific goals of the research can stand up to several validity measures.
Regarding the generation of new knowledge for the researcher, the field, or the participants, process and dialogic validity assesses the quality of the research. Process validity refers to the degree to which the researcher’s evidence aligns with his or her conclusions, while dialogic validity asks how well the research resonates with the community of peers (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Catalytic validity refers to the transformational impact of the research process on both the participants and the researcher.

In participant and practitioner-driven research, it is an expectation that constructs of reality and knowledge will evolve or change throughout the course of the research (Herr & Anderson, 2015). The degree to which this occurs speaks to the quality of the research. Democratic validity measures the degree to which the research included or represented the specific locality. For example, if my research study results in transforming social justice views to disrupt a system that has no interest in changing, the research may be impactful, but it could not necessarily be considered democratic, as I was making a choice in my work in which the local community had little to no input (Herr & Anderson, 2015). As the goal of the principal preparation program aligned with the problem of practice, it is possible to assess the research through this measure.

Finally, Herr and Anderson indicate that high quality action research seeks to use methodology that is appropriate for the problem at hand, which comes back to process validity and results that align with the intent of the research. Throughout the research, these validity criteria guided the development and analysis of the study. The rich, descriptive accounts of participants’ experiences provided confirming and disconfirming evidence toward the ultimate conclusions, along with the application of reflective
strategies to test my own biases. Emerging themes from participants’ stories were considered from various angles to triangulate findings.

To examine a shift in leadership style to a transformative approach within the context of leadership challenges around racial justice, I documented the stories of program participants, describing their journeys as they prepared to become principals. Efron and Ravid (2013) state, “Case study research aims to understand a particular phenomenon (such as a program, process, event, organization, or concept) by selecting a particular example of that phenomenon as the focus of the study” (p. 41). The case study approach suited the research goals in that it allows the reader to follow the experiences and reflections of participants in a principal preparation program, documenting their starting point and progress when asked to apply transformative leadership approaches to complex problems around racial inequity in schools. The intent of the program is to produce school leaders committed to confronting racial and social injustice. Evans (1996) describes the challenge of culture change within a school as a long, arduous process that cannot be accomplished or observed overnight. With this in mind, the primary evidence collected in this study lives in the personal narratives of the individuals rather than artifacts or quantifiable changes in student outcomes.

The research took place in a fast-growing suburban school district. Identifying information from the district has been excluded in these findings and in the reference list to protect the confidentiality of participants. According to district sources as of 2019, over thirty schools serve approximately thirty thousand students. The district is among the fastest growing in the state, where enrollment has increased by an average of 500 students per year, resulting in the construction of numerous new schools over the past
fifteen years. During the 2017-18 school year, growth surpassed 600 students, and programs have been added for approximately 1100 three to four-year-old students.

While student achievement in the district has been above state averages in most measures, there is a significant gap in achievement and opportunities for students of color. Internal district enrollment data shows disparities in academic opportunities between White students and African American or Latinx students represented in accelerated or honors coursework (38% Black or Latinx to 54% White) before high school. Upon entering high school, the opportunity gap deepens with AP or IB enrollment limited to 62 African American and 67 Latinx students compared to 1064 White students across the district enrolled in these enriched college-readiness courses, according to district sources. A review of the district’s data reveals that disproportionalities exist in graduation rates at all the district’s high schools, retention rates, special education and RTI participation, school discipline referrals, in-school and out-of-school suspensions, and parent participation.

Initially, district leaders began conversations about creating a “strong bench” to ensure that new schools or vacancies from retirements would be filled with high quality internal candidates. This conversation led to larger questions about what characteristics were ideal for a new principal which led to a deeper examination of the specific challenges in the current approach to serving students. In addition to a new approach to leadership development, the school district is pursuing other strategies including professional learning around bias-based beliefs, data analysis, and culturally relevant pedagogy, but each of these strategies requires a different knowledge base from school leaders than has previously been expected in the district.
The school district has developed a pipeline program for aspiring principals that
can serve up to ten participants per cohort in an intense training experience that includes
a highly rigorous, competitive recruitment and selection process, the completion of a
summer intensive experience around a school simulation, formal weekly training outside
of the school building during the school year, and a year-long residency experience with
a site coach and mentor principal. As a founding faculty member of the pipeline
program, I had the opportunity to engage with and observe participants from the
beginning through completion and potential placement in a principalship. Recruitment
begins each year in January for new cohorts, with adjustments to the curriculum based
on the prior year’s experience or in efforts to personalize for the needs of the incoming
“aspirings.” Across three cohorts who have completed the program, there is a balance of
elementary, middle, and high school administrators, and about half have moved into
principal positions after the program. Each participant engages in several common
experiences and has personalized training for his or her specific needs. The shift to
adaptive, transformative approaches in the context of social justice is an explicitly stated
intended outcome for all participants.

Fraenkel (1996) describes data collection in qualitative research as ongoing,
consisting of observation, recording of notes, conversations, and formal interviews. He
explains that analysis will be driven by heavy description and synthesis of the
observations, interviews, or content from the study. Data for this study was collected
through interviews with participants. The construction and design of the interviews
relied on my own knowledge of the program and the interventions the participants
experienced.
Weekly writing assignments and projects are submitted by program participants with ongoing assessment of their recognition of issues of equity and social justice, which are two distinct terms the participants collectively define through consensus approximately two months into their program. Different projects or engagements expose participants to scenarios that allow them to confront issues of both equity and social justice. Participants have a mentor faculty member and mentor principal who work closely with them on their personalized development against defined standards, including a standard on equitable practice.

Their reactions, their written and oral assignments, their interactions with peers in the program, faculty, students, and community members are all subject to observation and used in reflective exercises. For this research, participants shared how their own beliefs about leadership and social justice changed as a result of the program. Interventions in the program included student work protocols, equity audits of schedules and school practices, ghost walks through schools to search for signs of equitable or inequitable systems, a privilege walk with cohort members, a deep study of the standards movement from a civil rights perspective, training in data literacy, and multiple reflective opportunities.

At all times, the program functions in a cohort model, where individuals are in constant, close interaction with their fellow participants. The goals, however, are focused on individual growth for each participant. The most significant aspects of the program surfaced through the interviews and became themes in the analysis of the data to find answers to the research questions.
Significance and Limitations of Study

Over the past three years, my work has focused on leadership preparation with special emphasis on developing the transformative skills and dispositions needed by school leaders to recognize and address disproportionalities in our students’ experiences. This work has provided evidence that supports my claim that if we train, support, and charge building-level school leaders differently, we will see a positive impact for all students, especially those currently marginalized.

To further develop this line of inquiry, it was important for me to examine the impact of leadership development efforts on participants in a school district’s principal pipeline program using an action research methodology. Bogiages (2018) states:

Action research is an opportunity to disrupt the idea that the most valuable knowledge about teaching and learning is generated by academic researchers. Action research proposes a counter-narrative that the knowledge generated by insiders, the practitioners in the field, is profound and valuable” (personal communication, July 25, 2018).

While the study is unique to the local school district, it is intended to inform and elevate efforts to support all students by examining one district’s attempt at principal preparation that was driven by a need for increasingly transformative leadership. Capturing the first-hand accounts of program participants, coupled with their own descriptions of the meaning they assigned to experiences, generated insight that can potentially inform efforts to build greater capacity for transformative leadership.

Positionality posed some potential limitations for the study. As previously stated, in conducting research with aspiring principals while also being heavily involved
in the selection and hiring of principals, it was necessary to carefully consider the
validity of interviews or observations. Participant responses could have been skewed by
several factors, including my position within the same district. Likewise, my own biases
or prior experiences could lead to analysis or conclusions that are not purely driven by
the facts. Ivankova (2015) provides suggestions that were useful in addressing these
potential limitations, with her categories for measuring the trustworthiness of qualitative
research - credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Organization of the Dissertation

This research study will be presented in several sections that build on the
theoretical framework of transformative leadership applied to the challenges school
leaders confront, particularly around issues of social justice and racial equity. Chapter
One establishes the problem of practice, specifically a school system whose students do
not currently have the leadership support needed to disrupt systems of inequity. The
research design and questions are included with rationale for the study, including details
about the sampling and methods used.

Chapter two provides a literature review including the major research around
transformative leadership, stemming from the work of Shields (2009, 2011, 2016, 2017,
2018). The literature review includes sources that support the need for transformative
approaches in school leadership. Chapter two describes adult learning theory as well as
the constructivist paradigm. The study also includes supporting materials to better
understand critical race theory, as this topic provided a lens to examine the participants’
conscientization. Chapter Three describes the study’s methodology, explaining the
value of the action research approach and explaining how the case study was constructed
and examined. Chapter Four includes the interviews of the participants and my findings related to their experiences. The final chapter will provide conclusions from the research study and potential next steps in the field based on the research.

**Key Concepts and Term:**

**Conscientization:** the idea that combinations of experiences, exposures, and challenges will result in an awakening of “critical awareness” (Freire, 2018, Kirylo, 2013, Shields, 2018).

**Critical Race Theory:** Recognition that systemic inequities create disproportionate results based on unearned privilege and unequal distribution of power and resources based on race and racism (Ellis & Hartlep, 2012, p. 94).

**Transformative Leadership theory:** An approach to leadership emphasizing personal leadership characteristics that primarily result in outcomes of social justice (Shields, 2009).
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Problem of Practice

In our current education system, and specifically in the school district at the center of this research, not all students equitably benefit from their educational experience. There are disparities in achievement at all grade levels, disproportionate representation in accelerated or college-level courses, and overrepresentation of minority students in suspensions and expulsions (Fergus, 2017). It is important to recognize that these disparities do not reflect a failure to effectively implement the educational system but a flawed design that requires reinvention (Wagner et al. 2006). Efforts to improve a system originally designed to produce efficiency in an industrial age will inevitably fall short of the new goals of a more inclusive information age (Senge, 2012, Wagner et al., 2006).

A commitment to serving all students equitably was never the intent of the factory model approach to education, and thus efforts for educational reform on behalf of underserved communities have only stalled and further polarized our communities and nation, with much of the blame falling on teachers and school leaders (Ravitch, 2014). While the goals of the school system may be evolving with the rapid changes demanded by our economy, the methods used by our schools and the measures by which we measure our schools’ success have not kept pace. This is troubling, not only for the students and communities most underserved, but also for our larger society, which is
inextricably linked to the success of the public-school system (Ravitch, 2014). Wagner et al. (2006) recognize that efforts to redesign our school system will demand a new kind of school leader:

. . . . we believe the adaptive challenge of reinventing American public schools versus merely trying to reform them has profound implications for those who lead them. This challenge requires all adults to develop new skills -- beginning with leaders at all levels -- and to work in very different ways. And there is no school for leaders that will teach them exactly how to make their district into one that will leave no child behind (p. 11).

The system level changes that are necessary will require courage, commitment, creativity, and the ability to effectively lead practitioners in a disruptive movement (Shields, 2018). It is increasingly important for school systems, and practitioners, to examine the methods by which we can most effectively develop or equip our leaders with the skills needed to create a new vision of school that serves all students for the benefit of our collective futures.

**Purpose of the Study**

Similar to many districts across the nation, the host district for this research project identified significant disproportionality in students’ opportunities and progression, most visibly based on race. Student achievement results, participation in advanced coursework, and disciplinary records all indicate an inequitable school experience for students of color according to school district records. A needs assessment by the district led the school community to study numerous factors impacting students of color and ultimately highlighted a need for new approaches and
skills for many of the district’s employees. However, re-envisioning the district’s approaches and asking principals and teachers to examine their own methods, dispositions, and biases presented a large challenge. It was quickly evident that the leadership skills needed at the school level for this difficult work had never been developed, defined, or even communicated to school leaders or aspiring school leaders. Supporting all students and teachers through transformation for a more socially conscious and equitable educational experience urgently needed to be a part of the job expectation for the system’s principals. Coupled with an aging principal workforce approaching retirement, the call for transformative, socially, and racially conscious school leaders would require intentional strategic recruitment and professional development for leaders who could address the district’s needs.

There are numerous examples of principal preparation programs across the country, but there are inconsistent aims across these programs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). The district featured in this study developed a theory of action that an increased commitment to issues of social justice and cultural competence by school leaders will lead to greater educational access and success for students from historically marginalized groups. An internal team from the school district, including the superintendent and several division directors, worked with stakeholders to examine common challenges faced by principals in this new, transformative work and the anticipated challenges for implementation of more aggressive change efforts.

As part of the planning for a new approach to school leadership, the district partnered with the New York City Leadership Academy (NYCLA), whose mission centers on building capacity for school leaders to combat inequities and improve
conditions for all students, but especially those who have been historically underserved (NYC Leadership Academy, 2019). This partnership resulted in the creation of the district’s Principals Preparation Program (PPP), launched in the summer of 2017. Since that time, three cohorts of aspiring principals have completed the year-long training, which includes a common summer “intensive” simulation, followed by eight months of high rigor, high support residency. The residency includes weekly professional learning, assignments, projects, and reflection activities with a faculty of district-level leaders coupled with support and feedback from a PPP site coach and the resident’s building-level mentor principal. Specific leadership standards, designed for the district’s new transformative commitments, drive all assignments and feedback for the program with special emphasis on the aspiring principals’ ability to name and respond to systemic racism and lead for social justice.

As the district continues its work toward more equitable learning conditions for all students, it is important to understand how professional development through the principal preparation program impacts the participants. A deeper understanding of the PPP experience, through the stories of the participants provides valuable insight about how hearts and minds align to a new vision of the principal’s role. These stories also inform our understanding of how adults develop and evolve their own sense of justice, identity, and professional beliefs.

With many examples of preservice principal preparation programs across the nation, this practitioner inquiry seeks to answer two important questions about principal preparation programs:
● How will professional learning interventions influence participants’ beliefs regarding the transformative responsibilities of a school leader?

● What common experiences occur between participants who experienced levels of conscientization around issues of social justice?

My research captured the unique stories of the participants of one school district’s attempt to prepare a new kind of school leader who, through engagement in the district’s interventions, became more critically aware of the needs of the underserved students who most urgently rely on their leadership.

The Importance of the Literature Review

A comprehensive literature review helps the researcher develop the framework for further study or advancement of the research field. It also synthesizes an existing body of knowledge and outlines a defense for the researcher’s thesis (Machi & McEvoy, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe the literature review as highly interactive, rather than a purely linear process. Rather than simply identifying a problem and solving it through established research, the literature review is more like an ongoing dialogue between the researcher and those who have already established the foundational knowledge about the topic or problem.

Efron and Ravid (2013) state that action research should attempt to “link theory to practice and connect what happens in their educational settings with the broader knowledge about teaching and learning” (p. 17). They define the literature review as a “summary and synthesis of research put forward by others that is pertinent to your own inquiry” (p. 17). They explain, specifically from the lens of qualitative research, that immersing oneself in the body of knowledge prior to starting the new research will allow
the researcher to position the new research in the existing body of work, link the work to
the conceptual chain that includes prevailing themes, questions, or controversies within
the field, to ground the work in the appropriate historical context, justify the need for the
research, identify appropriate methodology, and further clarify the research question
(Efron & Ravid, 2013).

Approach to the Literature Review

Machi and McEvoy (2016) provide structure to approach the literature review,
with steps for organizing and communicating the body of literature effectively. First, the
researcher must narrow a topic of interest into a defined problem. Next, the researcher
develops a process or logic chain to sequence the concepts to form a stance or
argument. At this point, the collection and filtering of information can truly begin with
intentionality toward the researcher’s goals (Machi & McEvoy, 2016). Once collected,
the information is filtered to determine the most compelling evidence to support the
claim or inform the project. Critique, triangulation, and possibly examining
counterpoints helps the researcher draw defensible conclusions, at which point, the
writing of the review can begin (Machi & McEvoy, 2016).

In developing the literature for this research study, I followed the Machi-
McEvoy (2016) model, with some organic movement between sections as I discovered
new concepts or rerouted based on additional findings. Exploring broad topics to
identify key concepts and terms helped me develop several categories for the research
starting with curriculum theory, leadership, principal preparation programs, social
reconstructivism, and critical race theory. These terms and categories helped narrow the
search, which allowed me to dig more precisely and deeper to establish a foundation for
my research. Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) recommend drawing a literature map, or visual representation of the key ideas and concepts to help position the information logically within the larger body of research. This method allowed me to examine multiple ideas, each with conceptual components, to organize a logical sequence for exploration.

Herr and Anderson (2015) encourage a balanced approach to a literature review, which establishes an appropriate familiarity with the material by the researcher to guide the study and make meaningful connections, but they caution against overreliance on research that could narrow the researcher’s perspectives or conclusions. Using several academic databases and resources such as the University of South Carolina Thomas Cooper Library’s Digital Research Service, ERIC, ResearchGate, EBSCO, and Google Scholar, I identified current scholarly material in the broader topics. Partnering with NYCLA on several projects provided me access to their “equity catalog” consisting of current voices in the fields of leadership and equity, including Heifetz (1994, 2009), Burns (1978), Fergus (2017), and Singleton (2015). Diving deeper into these resources opened doors in new directions in the various themes of my research, introducing me to Darling-Hammond’s (2007) work with the Wallace Foundation, and Ladson-Billings’ (1995) critical race theory.

As a student at the University of South Carolina, coursework focusing on curriculum and instruction, leadership, social justice, and critical theory provided me with an expansive collection of texts and interaction with scholars who have been central to the literature review. Texts, articles, and research studies naturally fell into several categories that matched research topics and generally were separated into works.
focusing on curriculum theory, research methodology, public school transformation or reform efforts, leadership practices, social justice and equity, or critical race theory.

Several current publications provided important information to direct my research, including Eberhardt’s (2019) *Biased: Uncovering the hidden prejudice that shapes what we see, think, and do*; Kendi’s (2019) *How to be an antiracist*; and Singh’s (2019) *The racial healing handbook: Practical activities to help you challenge privilege, confront systemic racism & engage in collective healing*. Attending the University of South Carolina Center for the Education and Equity of African American Students (CEEAAS) 2019 and 2020 Annual Conference introduced new research, scholars, and discourse that guided my research path and expanded my understanding with important information and discourse about racial identity, culturally sustaining pedagogy, the disruption of systems stemming from and perpetuating White privilege, and my own positionality as a White, male researcher.

After investigating these themes for more than a year, I found a shortage of principal preparation research that speaks specifically to individual stories of aspiring leaders during their preparation. I was particularly interested in getting behind their eyes as they confronted their own beliefs or biases about race and social justice. Not finding the stories from school leaders of their awakening to critical consciousness, I felt compelled to pursue these research questions. Most closely related to my work is the research of Carolyn Shields (2012, 2015, 2016, 2017), who introduces a form of transformational leadership that is more intensely focused on advancing social justice. She uses the term “transformative leadership” to distinguish this brand of leadership and provided some of the most significant research for my work.
Organization of the Chapter

Presenting the literature review is the researcher’s opportunity to present the significant body of knowledge that supports the research project. It is important that the information be presented in a logical, compelling sequence that best supports the researcher’s claim (Machi & McElvoy, 2016). As I began to make sense of the body of research that I have collected over approximately eighteen months, I found the literature review, much like my research methodology, relies on a powerful story, that included a beginning, middle, and end. The story from the literature aligns with and supports the research questions.

The literature review for this research will be organized into 1) a brief history of the educational system leading up to the present structures and curricular approaches; 2) dominant theories of leadership and the history of leadership preparation in schools; 3) alternative curriculum theories that present a more equitable and successful approach to school; 4) the critically conscious approach to leadership and the moral obligations of the school leader; 5) the rise of new approaches to principal preparation; and 6) the moral imperative for change including critical race theory.

The chapter will include an explanation of the theoretical framework for the research, including my own epistemological position that through constructivist and transformative approaches, aspiring principals can create new meaning based on their experiences that leads them to an awakening of critical consciousness. Finally, I provide evidence from literature to uphold my methodological approach of a qualitative case study using narrative inquiry and the research supporting the selection of established qualitative approaches.
Historical Perspectives

Modern leaders of public schools have a different job than their predecessors. Historically, it is not difficult to follow the evolution of the American school system, in part because there has not been much in the way of significant change (Evans, 1996). The school of the information age, however, must move beyond the constraints of a factory approach to meet the demands of the future (Senge, 2012). Beyond the economic implications of an antiquated school system, there is also a social obligation to meet the demands of the society served by the system. America’s population will continue to grow more diverse -- ethnically, racially, linguistically, and culturally -- along with meaningful shifts in median age, income, and needs of the populace (Johnson, 2018).

Entering the 21st century, researchers, demographers, and educators began to increasingly take notice of the population shifts and implications for the way we serve our students. Young (2008) points out that by 2050, the non-Hispanic, White population of the United States is projected to increase by 7%, compared to 188% for people of Hispanic origin, 71% for the Black population, and 213% in the Asian population. Young (2018) points out, “However, as the nation’s population grows increasingly diverse, school teachers and educational administrators are increasingly White” (p. 1). The racial and gender makeup of the teacher workforce is just one example of the systematic divide between our students’ needs and our schools’ ability to successfully meet those needs.

Our current school system is a product of the industrialization of society and the need to standardize operations for broad efficiency (Senge, 2012). Throughout history,
many of the structures we now see as a normal part of the educational experience did not exist. From tribal customs leading to rites of passage or through classical civilizations, learning was not a standardized process (Senge, 2012). The use of time in current high schools, much like the isolation of subject matter, and the assessment systems we use, came as a result of efforts of early industrialists and a distorted interpretation of the Report of the Committee of Ten (Kay, 2013).

Examining the historical development of American curricular approaches, Kliebard (2004) documents that prior to the Committee’s report, American schools functioned from a “mind as muscle” approach carried over from European tradition, in which young, often poorly prepared teachers drilled students with monotonous skill routines, similar to exercising muscle groups (p. 5). The students in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century schools were those whose parents could afford to hold them out of the workforce, and when asked about their preference, one group of students overwhelmingly explained that they would prefer to be working in harsh factories than face the humiliating and torturous experience of school (Kliebard, 2004).

America’s entry into a new economic era, coupled with the reality that students would rather face dangerous sweatshops than be enrolled in schools, inspired new curiosity about curricular approaches. Kliebard (2004) explains, “The question emerging in many people’s minds was whether a curriculum that could trace some of its origins to the courtly life of Renaissance Europe was appropriate to the demands of the new industrial society” (p. 6). Much like the present, a convergence of unsatisfied customers along with new economic interests opened the door for a new educational model. Despite the fact that schools were not designed to meet all of society’s needs,
the early twentieth century saw large increases in enrollment, partly as a result of technological advances that made employment more difficult to find for unskilled young people, and partly because jobs required students with slightly more technical education. Schools began to grow, and alongside the rising enrollment, skepticism over schools’ approaches began to rise (Kliebard, 2004).

The Committee of Ten, led by Harvard president Charles Eliott, provided the dominant influence in school reform. Although Eliott, a humanist educator, believed in high quality education for all, the Committee’s efforts to modernize education were misinterpreted, not necessarily accidentally, and became the backbone for more of a social-efficiency model of education. The Committee’s recommendations were used to justify compartmentalization of content areas that ultimately manifested in a system that sorted students into stratified groups in service of an industrial economy (Kay, 2013; Kliebard, 2004; Senge, 2012). Kliebard offers:

As the twentieth century progressed, the Committee of Ten became a kind of symbol of the failure of the schools to react sufficiently to social change, the changing school population, and to the crass domination exercised by the college over the high school. The academic subjects the committee saw as appropriate for the general education of all students were seen by many later reformers as appropriate only for that segment of the high school population that was destined to go on to college (Kliebard, 2004, p. 13).

It was ironic that Elliot’s humanist intentions actually became the historic justification for a more utilitarian, social efficiency approach to schooling. In fact, Fallace and Fantozzi (2017) provide a compelling case that many progressive education and
curricular theories, including even Dewey’s work, have been hijacked to support social efficiency models of school that do not at all represent the intent of the original proposition. These radical revisionists co-opted progressive curricular ideas “leading to a bureaucratic, racist, and inequitable education system” (Fallace & Fantozzi, p. 64).

The Committee of Ten Report became a prime example of this, and regardless of their intention, helped build the factory system that largely remains intact today (Kliebard, 2004). Senge (2012) describes why the factory model has been so dangerous and damaging:

It operationally grouped kids into two categories: smart kids and dumb kids. Those who did not learn at the speed of the assembly line either fell off or were forced to struggle continually to keep pace; they were labeled ‘slow’ or, in today’s more fashionable jargon, ‘learning disabled’ (Senge, 2012, p. 36).

Almost a full century later, The National Education Commission on Time and Learning (1994) recognized that the shift continues to impact our nation’s students, stating:

Under today’s practices, high-ability students are forced to spend more time than they need on a curriculum developed for students of moderate ability. Many become bored, unmotivated, and frustrated. They become prisoners of time. Struggling students are forced to move with the class and receive less time than they need to master the material. They are penalized with poor grades” (p. 13).

School processes like scheduling, curricular approaches, discipline structures, and grading systems stem from a clear historical evolution that effectively excluded a large and growing population (Keleher et al., 2010). Wagner et al. (2006) explain,
“America’s system of public education, especially at the secondary level, was deliberately designed to be a sorting machine” (p. 9). High numbers of college graduates were not necessary in a primarily industrial system, and blue-collar workers were able to support themselves and a family, while serving the economic needs of the society. As we shifted from an industrial to a knowledge economy, the need for college educated workers rose (Wagner et al., 2006). To say that the system is failing is actually a false representation. It is in fact succeeding in its original purpose. College-readiness for all students was never the goal of the system, despite Eliott’s original intent with the Committee of Ten, and current results show that the system continues to work exactly as it was designed (Kliebard, 2004, Wagner et al., 2006).

Throughout the history of American schools, humanist and strong progressive approaches have been promoted and defended but not widely adopted, especially for students from disadvantaged or marginalized populations. Educators like Counts (1932) and Freire (2018) provided a theoretical foundation for reconstructivist theory supporting the idea that school could be a powerful force for social justice (Kliebard, 2004). These scholars envisioned schools as a major, perhaps the principal, force for social change and social justice. The corruption and vice in the cities, the inequalities of race and gender, and the abuse of privilege and power could all be addressed by a curriculum that focused directly on those very issues, thereby raising a new generation equipped to deal effectively with those abuses (Kliebard, 2004).

The fact that the American school system never predominately resembled this socially conscious model, or even the progressive child-centered model of Dewey, can
help us understand why modern school leaders still do not learn to confront entrenched practices of social or racial justice. This has not been expected of them.

Curriculum orientation is always influenced by socio-political forces. In the case of Black educational history and curriculum orientation, the historical context of subjugation and oppression, as well as structural barriers within the education system and greater society have inevitably influenced the Black curriculum ideology and schooling experience (Watkins, 2017). Six curricular orientations emerged to describe Black educational history. The functionalist orientation derives from a culture of slavery when education was developed for African slaves to accomplish the most minimal goals, always with limitations to avoid empowerment. The accommodationist orientation pushed Blacks towards vocational training and directed Black students toward jobs that White society would not perform (Watkins, 2017). The outcomes of this approach to education were damaging and influential far into the future and are likely still alive in many hearts and minds today. A liberal education orientation, rooted in Christian abolitionism, sought to build the capacity and potential of students. While this orientation was enlightened, it also emphasized gradual changes. Black Nationalism produced leaders like Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X who sought a unification and strengthening of Black Americans through an emphasis on Black culture and independence. Stemming from Black Nationalism, Afrocentric Theory rejected a Eurocentric or White American social norm, recognizing the cultural value of African history and cultural identification (Watkins, 2017). Finally, a blending of Black curriculum orientation and reconstructionist liberation ideology seeks to balance historic injustice (Watkins, 2017). Understanding that these evolving approaches and
orientations have provided a fragmented, unstable educational history for Black Americans gives even more context to the current need for an activist approach to reforming and leading schools.

History shows a lack of clarity in our nation’s educational mission. Behind my research questions is a fundamental inquiry into what we expect from our schools and school leaders. Overlapping or conflicting curricular discourses have competed and driven educational decisions in multiple directions with varied aims and intentions, all as teachers and principals continue to make daily choices about teaching, learning, and school organization with very real outcomes for children (Schiro, 2013). As the leaders of the school community, principals execute their plans in pursuit of objectives that may or may not align closely with any dominant ideology. In fact, in introducing their collection of curriculum essays, Flinders and Thornton (2010) suggest that most schools may not be able to clearly articulate what they do and why they do it, which may explain why our schools have been impotent in their attempts to improve.

**Leadership Preparation in Schools**

If schools are to successfully address social issues and fulfil a reconstructivist purpose in our society, the evolution from current practice is unlikely to occur naturally. Change movements can be tied, positively and negatively, to leaders and the strategies they use to bring about reform (Evans, 1996). Brooks, Jean-Marie, and Normore (2009), and Shields (2018) offer a descriptive timeline to better understand dominant leadership theories that can inform our understanding of school leaders, their decisions, and their behavior. The differences between technical and adaptive leadership, transactional versus transformational leadership, and finally the activist
connotation of transformative leadership are all significant aspects of the research (Heifetz, 1994, 2009; Shields, 2012, 2015, 2016, 2017). Most critical in the framework is the rejection of the “rational-structural paradigm” of management theory stemming from industrial management approaches (Evans, 1996, p. 161). Shields’ transformative leadership theory embodies the same ideals found in reconstructivist approaches to curriculum, building on Freire (2018), Counts (1932), and (Shields, 2018). Transformative leadership will be essential to the theoretical framework of the study, as the research questions test the interventions that are most likely to lead aspiring school principals to conscientization, followed by a commitment to activism.

Shields (2011) provides a useful, summarized account of leadership theory over time and asserts that none have provided the charge or direction to effectively “solve the challenging problems of accountability, community, achievement, diversity, and so forth that confront today’s educational leaders” (p. 56). Among the contributors are leadership theorists such as Bass (1974), Burns (1978), and more recently Heifetz (1994, 2009). Shields identifies leadership theories focused on traits, processes, and desired outcomes, all of which fall short in acknowledging the culture of power and supremacy that subjugates some children to the advantage of others (Shields, 2018). Shields grounds transformative leadership in Freire’s (2018) notion of conscientization. Following Freire, she credits Burns with the development of transformational leadership theory, in which leaders apply their understanding of power relationships within an organization to the actions taken in pursuit of their goals (Shields, 2018). It was Burns also who began to examine the importance of looking outward as the leader, to the impact on the greater society (Shields, 2018). Although
transformational and transformative leadership are often mistakenly used synonymously, Shields’ transformative leadership approach has roots in a large body of research examining the broad public purposes of education and connections to issues related to social justice.

Brooks, Jean-Marie, and Normore (2009) produced relevant research connecting educational leadership to efforts toward social justice to examine both the commitment and capability of principal preparation programs to address these difficult issues in pursuit of a transformed world. They state, “The scholarship of social justice supports the notion that educational leaders have a social and moral obligation to foster equitable school practices, processes, and outcomes for learners of different racial, socioeconomic, gender, cultural, disability, and sexual orientations backgrounds” (p. 4). Given that connection, there is an understood implication within the literature that an equitable experience for marginalized populations does not currently exist in the public school system, and therefore, part of the job of the school leader is to uproot or dismantle current aspects of the school system to design a new, more equitable reality. This is not done primarily through improvements, but through the disruption and reconstruction of our school system.

The current structures of our American public-school system play a significant role in determining a student’s individual trajectory. This sorting function of the school system leaves the schools with significant influence in the stratification of our society and the possibility of perpetuating larger societal inequities (Ayscue et al., 2016). As such, school leaders have far greater responsibility than traditional preparation programs would suggest. Recognizing the potential social impact of the school principal during
the preparatory stages would be a shift from historical perspectives on school leadership and should profoundly influence the design of the programs that train school leaders (Shields, 2018).

Much like the curricular approaches adopted in the early 20th century, historical development of principal preparation programs followed a scientific management approach, to regimenting curriculum and mechanizing the school experience (Schiro, 2013; Brooks et al., 2009). The technical or operational aspects of leadership, such as organization, budgeting, procedural aspects of personnel management, or supervision dominated the university approach. The historical development of school leadership can be categorized into four distinct eras – the ideological, prescriptive, scientific, and dialectic (Brooks et al., 2009).

Whether influenced by leading industrial managers, professors, or high-level school administration, the first three eras (and arguably the modern era) were heavily influenced by the voices of White males in positions of authority (Brooks et al., 2009). A more critical approach to leadership theory and leadership preparation arrived with the dialectic era, in which social movements along with accountability measures collided to create new interest in leadership development. This new interest resulted in a changing approach to principal preparation based on defined standards by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC). The standards, however, focused on exposure to specific experiences involved with the principalship, but have faced criticism for their failure to address issues of social justice (Brooks et al., 2009).

The Southern Regional Educational Board (SREB) recognized the inadequacy of the internship-based approach that partnered aspiring principals with experienced
mentors, exposing them to events such as school board meetings, without adequately preparing them for the challenges of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century (Southern Regional Educational Board, 2007). Shoho (2006) found that an emphasis on managing rather than leading has dominated principal preparation, noting that those administrators who failed to accomplish tasks and operation goals may face concerns over job security. This managerial approach to school leadership perpetuates a status quo approach in schools (Shoho, 2006). This tendency toward the status quo, through the policing of students, curriculum, and teachers has continued to be present in the approaches of school leadership even as greater calls for political or social advocacy in the school leadership role have increased (Shoho, 2006).

The infusion of critical ideology, including critical race theory, queer theory, and feminist post-structural theory, into principal preparation programs has been a much needed shift in the path to school leadership for a modern era, according to Brooks et al. (2009), who state, “Given this perspective, school leaders are potentially the architects and builders of a new social order wherein traditionally disadvantaged peoples have the same educational opportunities, and by extension social opportunities, as traditionally advantaged people” (p. 4).

**Critical Curriculum Theory**

With the onset of the information age, we have an opportunity to rethink our education structures and bravely redesign a system that meets the needs of tomorrow rather than yesterday. Learning is not naturally broken into set blocks of time, and students should not be sorted into those who memorize most quickly to least. It is increasingly clear that our schools need to evolve from a factory model experience to an
inclusive, intentional space where students can grow towards the needs of the future (Wagner, 2006). This is documented through substantial research on school reform efforts, as well as data on the disproportionate experience students of color or poverty have in the current education system (Griffin, 2015). With this need comes an opportunity to become much more intentional about school reform and clarify our position about desired outcomes for students, schools, and school systems. Freire (2018) appeals to the opportunity inherent through the school system, stating:

Problem-posing education, as a humanist and liberating praxis, posits as fundamental that the people subjected to domination must fight for their emancipation. To that end, it enables teachers and students to become Subjects of the educational process by overcoming authoritarianism and an alienating intellectualism; it also enables people to overcome their false perception of reality. The world—no longer something to be described with deceptive words—becomes the object of that transforming action by men and women which results in their humanization. (p. 11)

Freire (1968) believed that there is an opportunity to liberate all students through an educational approach that empowers and engages them in their own learning.

The belief that schools can and should address the burden of continuous improvement for the greater society lives in a variety of ideologies about education and can be seen throughout progressive education reform movements. Whether in attempting to use education to prepare students for the workforce of the future or to advance the academic disciplines for the sake of greater knowledge, modern curriculum philosophers study the methods through which our education system can advance our
societal goals (Flinders & Thornton, 2017). Early social reconstructivist scholars such as Counts (1932) and Freire (2018) provide a foundation for the ideological approach of this research study. Counts stated, “There lies within our grasp the most humane, the most beautiful, and the most majestic civilization ever fashioned by any people” (p. 260). There is a critical lens by which we can examine our current state to discover opportunities for improvement, particularly for those who are stripped of their access to knowledge or resources. Through this critical lens, we awaken to an obligation to constantly change our system for the betterment of man. This awakening is at the heart of my problem of practice with school leaders.

**Critically Conscious Leadership**

Mesterova (2015) concludes that systemic change will require the development and encouragement of leaders who are equipped to break down the barriers many children currently face in our educational structures. These leaders will bring a transformative approach to our work. Senge (2012) agrees, asserting that effective future schools will be those that can serve all students, disrupting the traditions that have historically sorted students into the advantaged and the marginalized. The new school leader, in addition to being adaptive and creative, must be equipped to face difficult and sometimes personal challenges arising from a changing social order (Heifetz, 1994). At the nexus of demographic and economic shift, school leaders have both an opportunity and a mandate to disrupt the systems and structures that have excluded many of our students for far too long (Shields, 2018). Finding school leaders ready to take on this work or equipping a new generation of school leaders with these transformative competencies will be a challenge for school districts.
Shields (2018) provides the most significant literature connected to this particular research in her work on transformative leadership. Shields asserts that a scientific-management style is often the type of leadership our students and teachers receive, despite the inappropriateness and irrelevance of this approach (Shields, 2018). She provides the acronym VUCA to describe both the challenges facing new leaders – volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, as well as the leadership competencies required of the 21st century principal – vision, understanding, clarity, and agility (Shields, 2018). These competencies equip the leader to face challenges of uncertainty and moral or systematic ambiguity. Within VUCA is the ability to take a stand and lead for a new type of future, rather than incremental improvements to an already broken system (Shields, 2018). In a series of vignettes, Shields (2018) attempts to paint the picture of the transformative leader as a real person rather than an ideal, stating, “In each case, however, we see a leader who accepts his or her role as requiring more than ensuring that the school meets accountability measures. Each one acts with moral courage, either implicitly or explicitly challenging inequities, and offering hope and promise to the students in his or her care” (p. 272).

It is through the stories of transformative leadership that this research is inspired and guided. Scholars leaning on the approaches of progressive curriculum ideologues to challenge our system for a better future are well documented in a wide scope of literature and research in the field. Among these are Counts (1932), Freire (2018), and more current scholars such as Ladson-Billings (1994, 1995), Shields (2018), and Singleton (2015). In seeking to better understand the journey of aspiring school
administrators toward transformed and transformative leadership, there is a well-paved road of important literature to guide the way.

**New Approaches to Principal Preparation**

There are efforts underway to reconsider the preparation of leaders for a new approach to school. Organizations like the Wallace Foundation have committed significant resources to studying what needs to be changed and what actions will be necessary to make the changes. Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) studied principal preparation for the Wallace Foundation, examining best practices and the rationale for investment in such programs. They found encouraging results that preparation programs with specific characteristics can have clear, positive correlation with school success. Specific outcomes of their study showed that principals who had received high quality preparation programs were more likely to successfully implement effective shared visions with their school communities and faculties and were more successful in their instructional improvement efforts (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007).

The study also showed greater capacity for more meta-level leadership, in their efforts to increase collective organizational capacity and manage transformative efforts. Principals in these programs reported significantly higher rates of efficacy, positive attitudes toward their work, and application of high leverage strategies and tactics (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). The principals who were part of the effective preparation programs reported higher than average job satisfaction and longevity, despite working in schools with greater challenges than the national sample (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). The widely shared Wallace Report concluded that principal preparation indeed matters.
The Wallace Foundation supported further development of the research in the field, resulting in ongoing research for the University Council for Educational Administration’s (UCEA) Program Improvement Project, for the following purpose:

Research suggests that successful school leaders influence student achievement in several important ways, most powerfully through their influence on staff to promote improved teaching practices and their organizations, in their commitment to learning and growth. With these priorities in mind, it is essential that leadership preparation programs provide leaders with the requisite knowledge and skills essential to quality leadership practice (UCEA, 2019, http://www.ucea.org/initiatives/program-improvement-work/).

The Handbook of Research on the Education of School Leaders (Young et al., 2009) and its subsequent editions collect much of the most relevant research on principal preparation. In following up on research in the handbook, Crow and Whiteman (2016) synthesize several findings from the field. Among these findings are the significance of high level, intentional recruiting for preparation programs; the context and intentionality of the preparation program’s designed outcomes; the selection and preparation of program faculty; specificity of curriculum; design and delivery choices; appropriate pedagogy; internships with advisors and mentoring; ongoing student assessment; and continuous program evaluation (Crow & Whiteman, 2016). These findings were also noted as significant in Darling-Hammond’s et al. (2007) nationwide case studies. Despite the difficulty of the work, Darling-Hammond et al. encourage that these efforts are “made worthwhile by the importance of developing a generation of strong,
savvy leaders who can create schools that provide expert teaching for all students in settings where they can succeed” (p. 153).

What the Wallace Foundation report did not provide was a specific focus on race and social justice issues as a program goal for principal preparation, although Crow and Young (2017) introduce the revisions of The Handbook with a call to action to acknowledge the changing demographic of American schools, “making it essential that educational leaders be prepared to meet the diverse educational, language, and social needs of the families and students” (p. 3). They also note that while growing recognition of these needs is occurring in academic fields, there have been no significant, systematic attempts to determine whether school leaders are getting better at responding to diverse needs (Crow & Young, 2017). Keleher et al. (2010) provide helpful research to complement the Wallace Report and The Handbook in the Leadership for a New Era series. Their report supports that leadership “can play a critical role in either contributing to racial justice or reinforcing prevailing patterns of racial inequality and exclusion” (p. 3). As such, if we are not examining and sharing our collective knowledge and beliefs about leadership, we miss opportunities to use this lever to confront racist practices, or even worse, we perpetuate racism by bolstering policies of exclusion and dominance (Keleher et al., 2010). Their call to action speaks to the need for expanded research in school leadership practices from an antiracist stance:

Changing the behavior of individuals is not enough: it will not support a system intervention that addresses the root causes of structural racism. Having a systemic perspective and a focus on leadership as a process, leads us to ask not
only which individuals to support but also how to embed racial justice
competencies in the ongoing practice and culture of organizations, networks, and
communities (p. 6).

Closely connected to the research questions, Keleher et al. (2010) recognize that
leadership for social justice must start with introspection and self-study, stating, “Active
commitment to racial justice requires a deep knowledge of oneself and others, and is
core to working together on racial justice in organizations and communities. This
involves making meaning of one’s own experience with issues of power” (p.
6). Through these scholars’ work, further justification and direction is provided for the
proposed research study. They conclude by noting that thousands of people engage in
leadership development each year, but a change in approach for racial justice must be
accompanied by a changed consciousness. They challenge that it is up to each of us to
decide if we are willing to engage in the work (Keleher et al., 2010).

Although research confirms there are many who agree with this charge, there is
also a research gap in understanding how to do the work. Swanson and Welton (2019)
provide research documenting the attempts of two White principals to lead racial equity
work with their faculties, noting the principals’ struggles and challenges stemming from
a lack of sufficient training. Despite the principals’ commitment, they experienced
setbacks, discomfort, resistance, and even career endangerment (Swanson & Welton,
2019). The researchers found that through the examination of the stories and
experiences of school leaders who address issues of race with their faculties, we can
better understand how to construct both preservice and inservice professional learning to
equip our leaders better (Swanson & Welton, 2019). The gap in the research is the
reflective narrative of the leaders who courageously attempt and sometimes fail in the work, and the stories that will tell us why they were willing to try. Swanson and Welton (2019) offer, “There is a body of literature on the preparation that teachers and preservice teachers need to facilitate professional development, but more research is needed that considers how leadership preparation programs can equip principals to lead high-quality professional development on antiracism” (p. 54). Despite the increase in attention to leadership preparation, more direct understanding of the experiences and motivations of preservice principals is needed to better develop effective next steps.

**Leadership for Antiracism**

Opportunity gaps in educational experiences for students of color persist despite the population shifts that make these students the majority rather than the minority (Swanson & Welton, 2019). Examples of de facto segregation in schools include disproportionate assignment of experienced teachers, inequitable disciplinary consequences, underrepresentation in high level coursework, lower graduation rates, and disproportionately low college enrollment (Swanson & Welton, 2019). Systemic racism plagues schools across the United States, stemming from historical structures and continuing biases that go unrecognized or unaddressed by educators and school leaders (Tatum, 2013).

Howard (2010) described the achievement gap between students of different races as the most significant problem in 21st century education. The discrepancy in the quality of education received between White students and persons of color is an urgent problem that continues to go unaddressed in our school system (Fergus, 2017). Swanson and Welton (2019) state, “Principals have the fundamental responsibility to lead their
staff through both the process of uncovering and resolving the systemic problems that are associated with racism within their schools” (p. 733). A significant body of research in critical race theory establishes a lens to examine how transformative leaders can change the current schooling structure. Critical race theory grounds an understanding of what must be done to reform our schools for all students, and only then can we examine the practices that are most likely to influence and inform new school leaders (Howard, 2014).

An examination of the leadership responsibilities of transformative principals will inevitably bring us back to race, which as previously stated, presents the largest challenge in the American education system. Critical race theory in education was born from the critical race theory applied in legal settings, which asked for, or demanded, an examination of the impact of race in the American justice system (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In education, Ladson-Billings posed the same questions, influencing a new critical race discourse (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Howard, 2010).

Transformative leaders in education will be willing to confront the complex challenge of race and racism and will thus need to be well-versed in critical race theory. Howard (2010) states, “Critical race theory presupposes the historical and contemporary role that racism plays and has played in education, and asks a more penetrating question: ‘How has racism contributed to educational disparities, and how can it be dismantled?’” (p. 99). It is through critical race theory that we begin to really see, hear, and speak to the social justice issues that affect our students. Related research will show parallel efforts to develop administrators in new and increasingly effective
ways, but for purposes of this study, the focus will be transformative leadership, as described by Shields (2018), with particular attention to critical race theory.

Howard (2010), acknowledging that the gap in achievement between culturally diverse students and their White counterparts has persisted over time within and across school systems, points out that DuBois recognized this same problem as early as 1903. Numerous scholars have provided a foundation from which to understand the relationship between race and education, and ample data supports the need to study this relationship (Fergus, 2017). Despite this evidence and data, the impact of race has been inconsistently ignored over time. Howard provides an overview of the different ways race has been included, or sometimes excluded from the education conversation.

The first and most conservative approach chooses to ignore the impact of race as a contributing factor in a student’s successful or unsuccessful school experience. This orientation suggests that race is not a contributing factor to disparities in educational performance, dismissing historical barriers and evidence of continuing racism as contributing factors to low performance by students of color (Howard, 2010). This group would argue that individual effort and personal choices lead students to underperform, regardless of race or racialized school systems. A second position would claim that race has been important and significant in the past, but we have moved beyond race as a real issue for students (Howard, 2010). Bonilla-Silva (2006) refers to followers of this belief as “racial-optimists” who do not want to look backwards but rather focus on the positive gains made by our society over several generations (p. 3). The racial optimist does not acknowledge the systems left in place from historical structures that were designed to uplift some students at the expense of others. At the
other extreme, there are those who believe that essentially every outcome hinges on race and racism, and all of the discrepancies between student performance stem directly back to racist structures within the system (Howard, 2010). Howard notes that this perspective does not account for changes in the system over time and the progress that has been made to open opportunities for many non-White students.

A more balanced perspective is what Bensimon et al. (2007) describe as a balance between individual accountability and equity-mindedness. They define equity-mindedness as “a multi-dimensional theoretical construct derived from concepts of fairness, social justice, and human agency articulated in several disciplines, including philosophy, critical race theory, feminist theory, psychology, organizational behavior, economics, and education” (p. 6). This approach would seek to improve organizational culture, values and norms that promote inclusive and culturally sustaining practices while also building systems in which each individual is held accountable for upholding those beliefs and fulfilling his or her own responsibilities, fully embracing their own identity (Howard, 2010).

Tatum (2017) provided a foundation in understanding racial identity that is helpful in understanding equity-mindedness. Her seminal work Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria: And other conversations about race provided a resource to better understand race and racial identity (Tatum, 2017). Tatum, in introducing the complexities of race, states, “At the center of these conversations is an understanding of racial identity, the meaning each of us has constructed or is constructing about what it means to be a White person or a person of color in a race-conscious society” (p. 77). This concept supports the previously discussed absence of
this approach in principal preparation. School administrators, particularly White administrators, do not systematically spend time trying to understand how their Whiteness impacts their own interpretations of reality, or their ability to get behind the eyes of the students they are supposed to serve (Tatum, 2017).

Helms (1990) developed a useful model to understand the stages of White racial identity development, which include contact, disintegration, reintegration, pseudo-independence, immersion/emersion, and autonomy. This model provides a tool to evaluate or diagnose one’s own journey toward identity consciousness. At the contact level, individuals fail to acknowledge the impact of race and do not accept or recognize White privilege (Helms, 1990). As experiences take place that bring privilege more into view, the individual may move toward disintegration. At this second stage of racial identity development, the awareness of privilege or even racist behaviors or beliefs may lead to guilt or shame (Helms, 1990). Reintegration, the third stage, occurs when the White person reacts to, or rationalizes, the privilege, possibly blaming the victims for their circumstances. If the individual can move past these reactions, he may enter pseudo-independence (Helms, 1990). At this stage, the White person enters a positive phase of racial identity but continues to grapple with their role in combating racism, putting most of the burden on the person of color. The next stage of progress is emersion, during which the White person will become more actively focused on confronting racism, possibly aligning with other White individuals who have recognized racism, privilege, and prejudice (Helms, 1990). The final stage of racial identity development is autonomy. Autonomy occurs when the White person can positively connect to his or her own White identity while also confronting and fighting racism.
(Helms, 1990). Howard (2010), in referring to racial competence, states, “Perhaps the most important aspect of developing cultural competence, critical reflection, and the adaptive unconscious, and of dismantling privilege, is to recognize that neutrality is equivalent to acting against equity, fairness, and justice in the classroom” (p. 119).

Ladson-Billings (1995) asserts that teaching can never be a neutral act and will always be political -- an important concept in understanding critical race theory.

When making the case for a critical race theory in education, Ladson-Billings (1995) established three propositions. The first of these is that race continues to be central to the inequities that exist for our society. As evident through statistics such as school completion, economic prosperity, or incarceration, lines can continue to be drawn clearly by race (Griffin, 2015). Unlike gender or class, race had never been a top priority for social science research, despite clear correlations with societal struggles (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Ladson-Billings states, “The point we strive to make with this meta-proposition is not that class and gender are insignificant, but rather, as West suggests, that ‘race matters,’ and, as Smith insists, ‘Blackness matters in more detailed ways’ (p. 52). The second pillar of the critical race theory justification is based on the economic implications that grounded the legal argument for a critical race theory. In a democratic, capitalist society, one cannot discount the impact of economic advantage, expressed through property ownership, in its relationship to access or power (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

In the education field, this same logic is true, in that property likely will relate to the type of school and the quality of education received by children across our system. This is seen in the relationship between affluence and high-quality education,
and poverty and less effective education settings, across the United States and across rural, urban, and suburban boundaries. (Ladson-Billing, 1995). The third principle of critical race theory is that when we examine race and property together, we construct a tool to better understand societal and educational inequity (Ladson-Billings, 1995). There is a very significant difference between critical race theory and previous efforts toward multicultural recognition or awareness that connects to the problem of practice for this research. As Ladson-Billings states, “As critical race theory scholars we unabashedly reject a paradigm that attempts to be everything to everyone and consequently becomes nothing for anyone, allowing the status quo to prevail” (p.62).

Howard (2010) provided an organized approach to understanding issues of race and racism in education and attempted to construct solutions for educators. While not providing a full blueprint for solving all challenges presented by race, he categorizes the work that needs to be done into manageable chunks. Important starting points in racial equity efforts include understanding cultural competence, racial identity, and critical race theory, including exemplars of best practice for educators and schools (Howard, 2010). Equally influential and pragmatic, Fergus (2017) and Singleton (2015) provide research-based guidance for disrupting the structures in schools that perpetuate inequitable outcomes for our students.

Fergus’ (2017) research acknowledges that while the civil rights movement, along with key legislation, were instrumental in breaking down barriers, they did not actually provide the tools people needed to effectively integrate into an equitable society. His research centers on the identification of the biased-based beliefs and practices that continue to exist in our modern school system, decades after Brown v.
Topeka Board of Education. In examining the demographic trends in education, Fergus provides data showing that White teachers make up the vast majority of the teaching workforce in a system that grows increasingly more segregated, despite the integration efforts of the past fifty years. The same holds true for principals, with White principals holding 80 percent of the positions across our school system (Fergus, 2017). His research points out that our society does not effectively encourage meaningful experiences and interactions between races. This suggests our static trend toward White teachers and White school leaders leaves our students of color in potentially dangerous circumstances. Fergus (2017) identifies the need for, “the development of teachers and principals that embrace equity as a core belief system for doing educational practice and policy….I refer to equity that contains three components – numerical representation, social justice perspective, and culturally inclusive beliefs” (p. 27). Fergus’ first step to preparing practitioners is to identify common public and private biased-based beliefs, the most common of which are color-blindness, deficit-thinking, and poverty-disciplining.

Another pragmatic approach to the work of reform is provided by Singleton (2015), who provides a field guide to equity work in schools, built primarily on the notion that we must first be able to talk about race. Singleton’s research defines three consistencies that must be present to move practice to a more equitable state – passion, practice, and persistence. The passion manifests in the connectedness educators experience to issues of racial justice, which results in the ability to confront institutional barriers that arise daily for students of color (Singleton, 2015). The practice refers to the actions that, if performed by educators, are likely to make a difference for their students
and community. Finally, the persistence required to confront systemic racism will require “the seemingly oxymoronic combination of patience and urgency” (Singleton, p. 15).

Persistence includes a steady focus on the work of racial justice amid distractions and possible confrontation. The school leader willing to commit to racial and social justice must be willing and able to identify and confront the systems that work against their students of color. Singleton (2015) suggests that there is a central message of blame from White people to people of color, and that any existing race issue originates from the inability of Black people to successfully conform to the mainstream. This reliance on the American ideal of individualism downplays the historic barriers placed in front of people of color (Singleton, 2015).

Singleton (2015) provides six guiding conditions for school leaders to effectively lead for racial justice. The first of these conditions is to make the work personal. One cannot confront the reality of the race issue from a purely academic or hypothetical stance. The first confrontation must be with self. The second condition is to spotlight race, regardless of the distractors that may be in the way. If one can isolate race, the ability to confront other issues will become easier. The third condition involves the commitment to see beyond one’s own racial perspective and hear through the lens of someone else’s experience. Singleton’s fourth condition is to create a courageous space that intentionally keeps multiple voices and multiple racial perspectives in the conversation (Singleton, 2015). To do this, it is important to understand the construct of race, what it means and what it doesn’t mean, which is the fifth condition. Finally, the sixth condition is to address Whiteness, which includes discussing White privilege.
(Singleton, 2015). This sixth condition links back to the previously discussed research by Tatum (2018) and Helms (2010), which highlights the importance of establishing racial identity.

Aspiring school administrators should also understand but not necessarily excuse the concept of White fragility as defined by DiAngelo (2018). In considering the cost of addressing oppressive systems in the education setting, school leaders must recognize some of the factors that will work against them, among these – White fragility. DiAngelo finds that efforts to address racism in school systems will be met with reactions like anger, anxiety, withdrawal, hostility, or even incapacitation, as White people do not typically possess the psychosocial stamina to confront these issues. DiAngelo’s research will be a valuable mirror for the White administrator and also provides approaches to confront the individuals who are hesitant or resistant to change, but it will depend on the administrator’s ability to move toward racial autonomy before addressing systemic racialized problems in the school setting. As Singleton (2015) advised, it must get personal first.

The Theoretical Framework

The constructivist and transformative worldviews influenced my research, as I anticipated the combination of experiences and exposures of my sample group to influence their understanding of their world and in this case construct within them a belief that their actions can, in fact, lead to a more just and equitable future for all students (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) state, “The framework of your study will draw upon the concepts, terms, definitions, models, and theories of a particular literature base and disciplinary orientation” (p. 86). As described
for this study, there is a scaffold system of knowledge within the examined literature that establishes the frame for the research.

From an historical perspective, participatory action research has grown in popularity since the 1980s but has roots as far back as the early 20th century, with advocates like Dewey, who saw an important place for practitioners to address the local problems they confronted in schools and school systems (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Participatory action research, its methods and historical development, played a significant role in shaping the study. As action research is constructivist by nature, it is important to understand the historical origins of constructivism, which will lead to an examination of Knowles’ andragogy as well as the transformative worldview. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), constructivism, and more specifically social constructivism, stems from the work of social scientists who related the way people gain knowledge to the way they experience the world through their senses. In a nearly perfect connection to my own approach, Patton (2015) describes Husserl’s beliefs, “His most basic philosophical assumption was that we can only know what we experience by attending to perceptions and meanings that awaken our conscious awareness” (as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 9).

Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) identify prolific voices in the constructivist worldview, naming researchers such as Mannheim, Berger and Luekmann; Lincoln and Guba; Mertens; and Crotty. Building from the social constructivist position, I lean in my research toward a transformative worldview that adds a critical element to examine how social constructivism can apply to improvements in learning and better conditions for those historically marginalized. For example, how can we use constructivist
approaches to awaken our consciousness to the structures working against vast portions of our society? Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) note that this doctrine has been less clearly defined, but identify several key contributors to the work, stating, “Historically, the transformative writers have drawn on the works of Marx, Adorno, Marcuse, Habermas, and Freire (Neuman, 2009). Fay (1987), Heron and Reason (1997), Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998), Kemmis and McTaggart (2000), and Mertens (2009, 2010) are additional writers to read for this perspective” (p. 38). In the application of constructivist principles to a transformative worldview, it is necessary to examine beliefs about how adults learn, as it was adults who were central to the local problem of practice. Knowles (2012) provided the most widely accepted understanding of adult learning, andragogy, identifying key assumptions and principles for constructing learning.

Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) provide additional research to support effective strategies for adult learning, building off Knowles’ (2012) research to better understand how specific strategies can result in shifts in beliefs or behaviors for educators. Specifically considering principal preparation programs, three key elements are present in successful programs for adults. The first of these elements is a clearly established theory of leadership that works as the scaffold and conceptual framework for the leadership program (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). An example would be Shields’ transformative leadership theory, which would be the central design element from the overt learning objectives to the interwoven theme of activities or interventions.

The second element is the carefully selected application of appropriate strategies to “maximize learning, learning transfer, and leadership identity formation” (Darling-
Hammon et al., p. 11). Examples would be a cohort model, simulations or other student-centered engagements, one-to-one mentoring, and chances to practice or apply theory in an authentic performance setting. The third element is the use of highly relevant interventions such as one would experience in an internship or residency. In these settings, participants are immersed in complex, rigorous challenges with real consequences but coupled with support and opportunities for reflection (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007).

Although research is not readily available to understand with complete accuracy what makes one program more effective than another, there are commonalities emerging that can be positively associated with greater outcomes for adult learners, many of these falling into experiential or constructivist approaches (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). This is supported by Knowles’ (2012) theory, which provides a framework for understanding how adults will acquire new competencies. Understanding the process by which adults learn allows us to tell the stories of their growth, and in this research study, their responses to specific events or interventions designed to impact their beliefs and behaviors.

**Methodology**

The research is situated in a midsized suburban school system that has experienced a rapid expansion over the last ten years, growing by approximately 500 students per year. The practices employed by teachers and school administrators have not changed as rapidly as the student enrollment and the increase in diverse students and learning needs. As such, the traditional approaches that led to success are not meeting the students’ needs. As the school district looks inward to understand why performance
is declining, there is a recognition that the local system is ideally designed for some students but fails for almost any student outside of that norm.

The problem of practice for this study is best met through an action research approach. Among the goals of action researchers, according to Herr and Anderson (2015), are “fresh insights, renewed relationships and personal connections, new strategies to face old problems, alliances and relationships with other people concerned about similar issues, the hope that they can contribute to their field and make a difference in their world…” (p. ix). They explain that participatory action research is an orientation to research from within the problem. As a practitioner within the local system, this explanation describes my research efforts.

Specifically examining the impact of the district’s preparation program can be best accomplished through the stories and descriptions from the participants. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) state, “Qualitative research is based on the belief that knowledge is constructed by people in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of an activity, experience, or phenomenon” (p. 23). As such, a case study specifically examines the meaning constructed within a singular, bound experience, such as the principal preparation program (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Employing elements of a narrative inquiry in a qualitative study in which participants shared detailed, first-person accounts of their experiences in stages from beginning, middle, and end, the research can provide a new understanding of the principal preparation program and its effects on the aspiring principals and their approaches to their work (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Efron and Ravid (2013) describe a narrative approach in a qualitative study:
The use of narrative complements the desire to recapture past experiences and to describe the teacher’s professional and personal self within the context of his or her practice. As an example, a researcher may ask teachers to use storytelling narratives to share their experiences or memories. The teachers then analyze how these past experiences have contributed to informing their moral world, values, and beliefs (p. 42).

Qualitative researchers have gained increased academic acceptance and credibility over time by turning their perceived limitations into advantages, arguing that rich descriptive accounts of their subjects provided greater clarity and generalizable knowledge than the thinner context provided in a traditionally accepted quantitative study (Herr & Anderson, 2015). With origins from the fields of sociology and anthropology, holistic studies of how individuals or groups make meaning of their world have been produced and valued long before qualitative research gained wide acceptance (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Chicago School sociologists in the 1920s produced notable work telling stories captured from the point of view of societal outsiders, or those in the margin of mainstream thinking (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Glaser and Strauss’ 1967 publication *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* and Guba’s 1978 work *Toward a Methodology of Naturalistic Inquiry in Educational Evaluation* provided the foundation of what is now understood as qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The body of research and knowledge about qualitative methods grew substantially through the 1970s and 1980s across multiple disciplines and gained more broad acceptance, offering multiple methods and philosophical orientations for qualitative researchers to approach their research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).
Conclusion

As described, this qualitative case study provides a deep examination of the experiences of a specific sample of participant aspiring principals in one district’s attempt to prepare a new kind of school leader. The schools of the future cannot continue to function from a flawed design that does not serve all students’ needs. The body of collected research tells the story of how our schools came to be what they are and supports the thesis that they must be redesigned. In the research, varied approaches to understanding leadership and stages of leadership preparation demonstrate that leadership is complex and must be understood from more than one perspective (Shields, 2018). Research on school leadership shows an increased attention across the nation to effective preparation methods, but within the research, it is understood that local needs and local design will be essential in any successful efforts (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). Shields (2018) synthesizes the transformative approaches to school leadership, building on the historical foundation of Burns (1978), Counts (1932), and Freire (2018).

The transformative approach to leadership, including a commitment to leadership for social justice, matches the needs of a school system that is inherently unjust. A review of research about the continuing state of racial inequity in the school system shows that we must have leaders who can disrupt racism in our schools. Ladson-Billings’ (1995) critical race theory, and supporting research, is an important part of the construction of the research study. Building on the body of research, it becomes easier to see how a qualitative practitioner-inquiry research study can advance knowledge to address the problem of practice. Through an examination of the individual stories of aspiring school leaders, who have participated in a principal preparation program
designed to build capacity for transformative leadership, we are better able to understand our possibilities.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

Purpose

School administrators seeking to implement system-wide improvements will be better positioned to dismantle inequitable structures if they employ nontraditional approaches in their work with a well-developed understanding of transformative leadership theory and critical race theories (Mulder, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Courageously confronting racial inequity in public education presents multiple, complex challenges for school leaders and teachers across the nation. In the local school district hosting this research, district leaders have acknowledged a shortage of leaders or candidates for leadership who are effectively prepared to challenge or even identify the systems that are leading to inequitable outcomes for marginalized groups of students. This participatory action research examined the impact of a specific principal preparation program for a local cohort of aspiring school leaders seeking future assignment as principals, with an emphasis on their journey toward transformative leadership to confront the racial inequities that exist in their district’s schools.

A substantial body of literature and research on leadership theory, both within and outside of the education industry, combined with research on adult learning theory provides a platform for this case study of the leadership cohort. The term “transformational leadership” stems from the work of James Burns (1978) and Bernard Bass (1974) and is further developed by Heifetz (2009) research from Harvard
University. Heifetz provides an important distinction between adaptive and technical leadership. Building on his description of adaptive leadership principles, Shields’ (2016) work establishes a connection between the role of school leaders and the need to disrupt existing power structures that systematically exclude some children from educational success. Shields’ (2016) distinction between transformational leadership and transformative leadership was a fundamental building block for the research conducted with the cohort.

Local evidence of inequitable practices within the host district, confirmed by aggregate data across the state’s education system, affirmed the calls for action found in critical race theory research. Researchers including Boutte (2016), Fergus (2017), Howard (2010), Kendi (2019), Ladson-Billings (1995), Singleton (2015), and Tatum (2017) provided insight and a knowledge base upon which the problem of practice could be better articulated. The research study relied on the broad foundation of research establishing the inequitable approaches and outcomes of the current public education system. From this research foundation, the relationship between leadership and conditions fostering equitable outcomes became clearer. Boutte, Fergus, Ladson-Billings, and Singleton among others provided practical building blocks to understand how individuals can do the necessary work of redesigning the educational experience to benefit all students. Aguilar (2013), City (2017), Hayes-Chriss (2017), Senge (2012), Shields (2012), and Wagner (2006) each provided a broader context for the rationale to change education systems for the future. The intersection of research about educational equity and broad educational reform leads to greater clarity about the research questions
that needed to be examined, particularly from the perspective of educational leadership and leadership preparation programs.

Linda Chrisson (2019), in her recent study of the impact of principals who completed the New Leaders principal preparation program, found a positive correlation between program participation and intended outcomes such as student achievement, adult leadership, and what she calls “cultural leadership” (p. 4). She cites RAND researchers, who advise “to overcome the fact that studies on principal preparation programs tend to have small sample sizes, the researchers also recommend looking ‘at a range of outcomes’ in order to compile ‘a rich characterization of the ways in which principal-preparation programs influence districts and their schools and students’” (p. 5).

A growing consensus is emerging that principal preparation programs can impact student outcomes, which leads to the need to better understand the experiences of participants in such programs. The Wallace Foundation (2007) reported:

Our nation’s underperforming schools and children are unlikely to succeed until we get serious about leadership. As much as anyone in public education, it is the principal who is in a position to ensure that good teaching and learning spreads beyond single classrooms, and that ineffective practices aren’t simply allowed to fester. Clearly, the quality of training principals receive before they assume their positions, and the continuing professional development they get once they are hired and throughout their careers, has a lot to do with whether school leaders can meet the increasingly tough expectations of these jobs (Darling-Hammond et al., p. 2).
As more school systems consider the pros and cons of a significant investment in dollars, personnel, time, training materials, and even disruptive philosophical shifts that accompany principal preparatory pipelines, it is important to consider the perspectives and realities that emerged for the aspiring leaders who lived through such programs, particularly in their adaptive versus technical leadership style as it relates to challenges such as race and racism in school systems. An awakening to the social justice responsibilities inherent in the principalship was an important outcome in the preparation of any new school leaders for the host district for the study. The problem of practice was the shortage of school leaders prepared to see, hear, and speak to the problems that face marginalized communities in the school system. Better understanding of how an awakening occurred among aspiring leaders in the research study provides broader understanding of how principal preparation programs can succeed.

**Research Design**

This study approached the problem of practice through action research. Among the goals of action researchers according to Herr and Anderson (2015) are “updated or refined skills, fresh insights, renewed relationships and personal connections, new strategies to face old problems, alliances and relationships with other people concerned about similar issues, the hope that they can contribute to their field and make a difference in their world…” (p. ix). They explain that participatory action research is an orientation to research from within the problem. As a practitioner within the local system, this explanation describes my research efforts. The stories of the participants in a principal preparation program provide insight into the impact of specific professional
learning strategies. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) state, “Qualitative research is based on the belief that knowledge is constructed by people in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of an activity, experience, or phenomenon” (p. 23).

Given the complexities involved in racial identity as it relates to the school experience, a qualitative case study provided an opportunity to collect valuable takeaways from the research. Narrative inquiry allowed the participants to tell their unique stories of the principal pipeline experience from the insider’s perspective. Mertler (2014) asserts that some research questions require a broad examination of the situation or phenomenon to begin to develop a more complete understanding of the problem.

Because the participants were constructing meaning about their leadership role with special emphasis on leading towards racial equity as part of their program participation, it was important to consider how their reactions and responses to specific programmatic interventions impacted their beliefs and behaviors. Yin (2014) states, “A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (p. 16). The principal pipeline program is inseparable from the specific learning or responses of participants in the study, thereby making the program a bound system. While such programs are not unique to the selected school district, it was valuable to get behind the eyes of a sample of participants to understand how the program influenced their perceptions and beliefs about leadership.

Researchers approach a case study from a specific epistemological orientation, such as positivist or constructivist (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Yazan (2015) explains:
Researchers’ views about the nature and production of knowledge, their epistemological bent in brief, underlie the inquiry project they conceptualize and operate. It permeates every step of the entire investigation process, from selection of the phenomenon of interest that is put under scrutiny to the way the ultimate report is composed” (p. 136).

In considering the case study approach, the research orientation of this study is constructivist. The value in the proposed study is not a singular answer that will be observed in the participants’ behavior or a statement of their beliefs, but an examination of their experiences from their own descriptive stories. This is the knowledge that is shortchanged in current research on principal pipeline programs. Stake (1995) asserts: “How case study researchers should contribute to reader experience depends on their notions of knowledge and reality” (p. 100). From Stake’s viewpoint, constructivism and existentialism (non-determinism) should be the epistemologies that orient and inform the qualitative case study research since “most contemporary qualitative researchers hold that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered” (p. 99). The construction of new knowledge and skills was the intended end-goal of the principal pipeline program, and it merited a deeper dive into the experiences of the participants.

In addition to the constructivist research orientation, the transformative worldview as described by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) led the research down a very specific path to determine how a more morally just world can be understood and achieved. The research stance is intentionally not neutral, but grounded in the belief that schools must be transformed through new leadership approaches that recognize and disrupt systems of exclusion and inequity. Creswell and Plano Clark explain:
A transformative worldview holds that research inquiry needs to be intertwined with politics and a political change agenda to confront social oppression at whatever levels it occurs (Mertens, 2010). Thus, the research contains an action agenda for reform that may change lives of the participants, the institutions in which individuals work or live, and the researcher’s life. Moreover, specific issues need to be addressed that speak to important social issues of the day, issues such as empowerment, inequality, oppression, domination, suppression, and alienation.

The problem of practice for the school district in this case stems from the inequitable experience received by students of color and the shortage of leaders equipped to address the problem. The district, acknowledging the problem, committed to training and supporting leaders differently to better serve all students. However, the training and interventions would be more effective if there was a clearer understanding of how specific interventions impact the participants, specifically in the district’s principal pipeline program. Through a transformative-constructivist approach to examining a case study, a deeper understanding of participants’ experiences was revealed, specifically around two questions:

- How did professional learning interventions influence participants’ beliefs regarding the transformative responsibilities of a school leader?
- What common experiences were shared between participants who experienced levels of conscientization around issues of social justice?

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) point out that “stories are how we make sense of our experiences, how we communicate with others, and through which we understand the
world around us” (p. 34). The emphasis on narrative inquiry in the research design aligns with a constructivist orientation as a researcher.

**Intervention**

The problem of practice is situated in a mid-sized suburban school system in South Carolina that has experienced a rapid expansion over the last ten years, growing by approximately 500 students per year. Historically, the district’s schools performed above average in end-of-year statewide exams, outperformed state averages in ACT and SAT, and had higher graduation rates than most other districts across the state. Several schools in the district serve mid- to upper-income families. Teacher recruitment has not historically been a challenge for the district outside of a few small rural schools on the edge of the attendance zone. As recently as twenty years ago, the district’s demographic makeup was over ninety percent White, according to district resources. As of 2017, extensive growth shifted the district’s demographic makeup increasing minority enrollment to approximately 25% made up of 11% African American, 7% Hispanic, 4% two or more races, and 2% Asian or Pacific Islander (ProPublica, 2017). While state accountability measures continue to show above average performance and achievement for the district overall, significant disproportionality can be found between White students and Black or Hispanic students, according to annual state accountability reporting. The same disproportionality can be found in student discipline records, participation in high level coursework, and college-career readiness as measured by the state reporting system.

The practices employed by teachers and school administrators have not changed as rapidly as the student enrollment and the accompanying increase in diversity. As
such, the approaches that had been leading to previous success are not meeting all students’ needs. As the school district looked inward to understand why performance was declining, there has been a recognition that the local system is ideally designed for some students but fails for almost any student outside of that norm. Numerous strategies have been put in place to try to improve the district’s response for all students. Among these is the commitment to hiring and training principals who can address systemic barriers for students whose identity groups have been marginalized. The district initiated its Principals Preparation Program (PPP) with the help of the New York City Leadership Academy (NYCLA) in 2017 with heavy emphasis on leadership for racial and social justice. To better understand how the preparation program was impacting the aspiring principals and their awareness and commitment to racial justice, it was important to get behind their eyes and understand the aspects that were most impactful from the program. This was best accomplished through a qualitative case study.

The case study focused on a sample from the aspiring principals who had successfully completed the principal preparation program. The PPP serves individuals while they are simultaneously serving as assistant principals in the district. The participants in the PPP are identified through a rigorous selection process. The program can serve up to ten participants annually in an intense training experience that includes a highly competitive recruitment and selection process, the completion of a summer intensive experience around a school simulation, formal weekly training outside of the school building during the school year, and a year-long residency experience with a site coach and mentor principal. The shift to adaptive, transformative approaches in the context of racial equity is an intended outcome for all participants, and the program
scope and sequence provides a series of interventions designed to lead to awakening to race-related social justice issues.

The school district reviewed my research application and granted approval for the study in April 2020. The approval process required a description of the research, including the names of the potential participants, and the timeline for the research. Subjects received invitations to participate in May 2020, and interviews began in June 2020 continuing through September 2020. Completing the interviews was more problematic than anticipated due to the unexpected change in school practices and principal responsibilities that resulted for the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Participants**

This qualitative case study utilized two-tier sampling. First, the school district met Merriam and Tisdell’s (2016) description of a “typical” sample, in that there were similarities with many comparable mid-sized suburban school districts (p. 97). Generalizing the studies’ findings was not the intended goal of the research, and as such the specific attributes of the school district were not the most important aspect of the research design. Efron and Ravid (2013) state, “The meaning assigned to school experience is varied, shaped by individuals’ subjective interpretations, and influenced by their personal, cultural, and historical background” (p. 40), which is an accurate description of the type of data collected in this study. They go on to state, “Thus, qualitative research results cannot be generalized across time and locations” (p. 40). The first tier was the selection of the bounded study, or the case. In this study, the bounded system was the Principals Preparation Program, and only those school leaders who have completed the Academy would be considered for inclusion in the research.
The second tier was the selection of a sample within the bounded system. Within the school district, aspiring principals are selected through a defined identification process and invited to participate in the preparation program. To present, there have been three cohorts selected totaling 26 participants. At the time of the study, seventeen individuals had completed the program and nine were completing their residency. All participants in the program experienced a common curriculum focusing on adaptive and transformative leadership behaviors with special emphasis on leading for racial equity and social justice. As such, they all used materials from Harvard’s Graduate School of Education (2019), resources from the New York City Leadership Academy (NYCLA), and racial equity resources built around Glen Singleton’s *Courageous Conversations about Race* (2015).

There are a variety of considerations that influenced the selection of a sample from the cohort participants. I sought to maximize variation in the participants, but I was particularly interested in telling the stories of participants who identified as White, to examine their own awakenings to racial identity and recognition of racism in school structures. There were significant considerations regarding my own positionality that informed the participant selection. As a former faculty member of the principal pipeline team, I was involved in both the selection and evaluation of cohort members. Even more importantly, I was involved in the selection of school principals in the same district, often interviewing cohort participants for principal openings. Participants in the cohort who had not yet been appointed to a principal position could certainly connect their potential for professional advancement to their interactions with me as both a
district leader with influence in job placements, and as one of their former instructors in
the preparation program, blurring the lines as an objective researcher.

For this reason, sample selection was limited to those participants who were
already promoted to principalships within the district. To vary responses, I invited one
White male high school principal, one White male middle school principal, and one
White female elementary principal. There was some concern that the participant
experiences of these particular individuals could be skewed in that they were among the
most successful participants as they were promoted to principalships very quickly after
program completion, but I would counter this claim based on documentation of their
growth, challenges, and professional work that demonstrates they were not atypical
among the preparation program participants. This can be triangulated by the cohort
participant selection standards and their documented individual growth plans during
their time as cohort participants, as well as their own stories of struggle and growth.

Data Collection

The data for the study was collected through a three-part series of interviews
with the sample participants. Fraenkel (1996) describes data collection in qualitative
research as “ongoing. The researcher is continually observing people, events, and
occurrences, often supplementing his or her observations with in-depth interviews of
selected participants and the examination of various documents and records relevant to
the phenomenon of interest” (p. 445). He goes on to explain that the analysis will be
driven by heavy description and synthesis of the observations, interviews, or content
from the study. (p. 445). The interviews documented the participants’ journeys through
early education experiences, motivation to become an educator and an education leader,
and then their participation in the PPP. Within each story there was a parallel timeline of their journey of racial identity awareness, experience with racism, and their own unique understanding of the role of the school principal in racial and social justice. Familiarity with and examination of the interventions used by the program, and the scope and sequence of the PPP, served as triangulation to confirm the participants’ memories of their experiences and compare the data they provided. While the program curriculum provided important context and a check against the narratives, the research data came from the person-to-person interviews. As cited by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), Patton states: “We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. … We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world (p. 109). Seidman (2006) expands on Patton’s thinking:

Every word that people use in telling their stories is a microcosm of their consciousness (Vygotsky, 1987, pp. 236–237). Individuals’ consciousness gives access to the most complicated social and educational issues, because social and educational issues are abstractions based on the concrete experience of people (p. 7).

Seidman recommends a three-interview series that aligned with the purposes of this case study. In the Seidman method, the interviewer predominantly relies on open-ended questions. The researcher then uses the responses to build on and probe deeper into the experience of the participant, which should lead to a participant-driven reconstruction of the experience within the bound case-study experience (Seidman, 2006). Where a phenomenological study focuses on the topic of study, the case study focuses on the participant’s experience within the bound system. Prior to beginning the
interview series, I asked each participant to complete an online questionnaire as a pre-
interview to collect individualized baseline data that was used to guide the subsequent
interviews and lines of inquiry (See Appendix A). In the questionnaire, I asked them to
1) describe their early experiences with school, both positive and negative, from primary
years, elementary school, middle school, and high school; 2) recall when they
determined they wanted to become an educator and then, an education leader; 3) share
their first memory of race and their first memory of racism, and 4) summarize their
leadership narrative that was developed during the PPP.

I limited each participants’ responses to these questions to 100 words or less for
each question, to limit overwhelming the participants and to streamline their
responses. Using Google Forms allowed me to collect and store data securely, which
was easily accessed and analyzed. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) list advantages to
asynchronous online interviewing such as the easy collection of written data, without
having to transcribe. One disadvantage of this approach is the loss of personal
interaction which can be important in building rapport (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As I
had a pre-existing relationship with the participants, this particular disadvantage was not
as concerning as it may have been for an outside researcher.

The first interview in the synchronous interview series (See Appendix B) was a
focused life history, which served to both forge a new relationship between the
participant and researcher and give context to the participants’ unique backgrounds that
could shed light on some of their later reactions to the interventions in the preparation
program.
The second interview asked participants to recount specific details from their experience in the principal preparation program. The questions for the second interview were semi-structured, which allowed movement between open-ended questions and specific details the participants recalled from their experiences as early career educators and beginning school leaders. The semi-structured interview allowed me to respond to the participants and the new perspectives emerging from their stories, while also maintaining consistent elements between each participant (Merriam & Tisdell, p. 110). Within a topic like leadership development, the mixture of specific recall and open-ended experiential questions kept the participants from drifting too far away from a factual account of their real experiences.

Finally, the third set of interviews pushed participants to reflect more deeply on the meaning of their experiences during the PPP. This was the most important interview, as it got to the heart of the research questions. Seidman states:

Making meaning requires that the participants look at how the factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their present situation. It also requires that they look at their present experience in detail and within the context in which it occurs. The combination of exploring the past to clarify the events that led participants to where they are now, and describing the concrete details of their present experience, establishes conditions for reflecting upon what they are now doing in their lives” (pp. 18-19).

The research plan was designed to elicit a greater understanding of where the participants started their journeys, what they experienced from their own recollections, and how their own sense of self and reality changed as a result of their participation in
the pipeline program. This is the crux of the research – understanding what happened to the leaders who engaged in the district’s leadership development experience, and how specific interactions or interventions resulted in a greater conscientization, both individually and collectively.

To assist with data collection and social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted using Zoom, recorded, and stored securely on my protected drive. Using Sonix transcription services, I uploaded each set of interviews to obtain a written record for coding and analysis. Because there were concerns about positionality, a research journal was maintained to capture my own personal reflections so that I could test my assumptions and check for biases during the analysis stages. This research log consisted of immediate written recording of my own reflections following each interview, along with a second reflection upon reading the transcriptions. Participants in the sample were provided an informed consent form, which is standard for research approved by the school district. Throughout the research, data collected was stored securely on my personal computer and personal Google drive, which is only accessible by me and password protected. Printed materials used for coding and data analysis were stored and locked in a file cabinet in my home office. Pseudonyms for participants, schools, and the school district were used in the presentation of the research. Because the sample size is small and widely known within the school district, extra caution was taken to ensure that participants are appropriately protected as minor identifying details were modified in ways that did not impact any of the research analysis.
Data Analysis

The case study provides a narrative to document participants’ lived experiences in a principal preparation program. The interviews give insight into their backgrounds, formative experiences prior to the program; specific descriptions of their memories from various aspects of the program; and their emotions, reactions, or beliefs stemming from program participation. The interview data revealed a story from each participant that illustrates his or her own understanding of transformative approaches to leadership, particularly regarding issues of racial equity in schools. Participants’ narratives are included in the body of the research study to paint the picture from the eyes of both the researcher and the research subjects (Efron & Ravid, p. 41-42). Grosland et al. (2016) describe their approach to narrative inquiry: “We do not position the inquirer as inherently more knowledgeable or experienced than the narrator, nor do we subscribe to the notion that the inquirer’s role is to unmask an absolute truth or set of social structures that are beyond the awareness of the narrator” (p. 3). This constructivist stance promotes a specific epistemological position in the study, by seeking to better understand each participant’s truth from his or her own experiences. As such, the narratives move back and forth between the researcher and participant as storyteller.

Grosland et al (2016). encourage the researcher to read each narrative deeply to find emerging codes from the stories that can then be used to develop larger themes. Efron and Ravid (2013) provide a useful sequence to approach data analysis, suggesting that the research begin with a set of predetermined categories (p. 169). For this research, some predetermined categories included the various stages of the participants’ career, including their early experiences with school and their decision to
enter school leadership, along with early recognition of race and racism in their lives and work. Setting up categories that followed a chronological narrative allowed an examination of change over time, along with a side-by-side comparison of experiences of the participants.

I understood that the interviews would lead to data that could be grouped in several overlapping groups: formative experiences prior to entering the principal preparation program, cognitive dissonance during the program, reactions to racial equity work in the program, descriptions of leadership beliefs or orientation, reflection on various tasks or interventions from the pipeline program, and additional open categories that would emerge from the interviews. Interviews were transcribed, read multiple times, and coded into categories, and through inductive analysis, coded into more specific categories. After each interview, transcripts were reviewed to determine key information that aligned with the research questions. With each additional interview, overlapping themes became more evident and crossover between different participants became increasingly common, leading to more specific emerging themes. Axial coding involves the generation of more specific categories, codes, subcategories or subcodes within the collected data (Allen, 2017).

Consistent with a constructivist worldview, an inductive approach allows the participants’ broad experience to generate the data to be interpreted. Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) explain, “In constructivist approaches, the inquirer works more from the ‘bottom’ up, using the participants’ views to build broader themes and generate a theory interconnecting the themes” (p. 37). Efron and Ravid (2013) describe themes as “ideas,
points of view, or experiences that run through the category” (p. 171). From this point, synthesis or the assembly of a larger picture can begin, which leads to interpretation.

Interpretation takes place through four stages: pattern identification; concept mapping; linking evidence that supports the data; and validation of the researcher’s interpretations, through cross-checking and validity measures (Efron & Ravid, 2013). This process was less challenging than I originally anticipated. The structured method used in the data collection and the process used to analyze each transcript helped with the identification and organization of codes, while still allowing the individual’s unique stories to be honored.

I followed these four steps to analyze the participants’ narratives and then connected the findings to the larger constructivist framework. From the interviews, it was possible to better understand how meaning was constructed for program participants around transformative leadership, with specific examples stemming from leadership challenges confronting racial inequities in schools. Because the number of participants was small, coding and theme development was completed manually rather than using qualitative coding software. A system of color coding and sorting allowed grouping to become increasingly specific.

Accurate rich descriptions written through the perspectives of the firsthand narratives and the researcher’s summaries strengthened the reliability and validity of the study. This back-and-forth movement between the researcher and the participant’s own words depicted the reality as experienced by the participants of the study so that the reader understands the findings in their truest form. Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) define validity “as how accurately the account represents participants' realities of the
social phenomena and is credible to them” (p. 124). He goes on to state: “The qualitative paradigm assumes that reality is socially constructed and it is what participants perceive it to be. This lens suggests the importance of checking how accurately participants' realities have been represented in the final account” (p. 125).

It was essential to consider the orientation of the researcher in determining the best ways to ensure validity and reliability (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). In this study, the real experiences and constructed reality for aspiring principals as related to leadership, specifically around issues of race and racism in school settings, is the most important data to collect and interpret. From the constructivist orientation, Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) recommend the researcher seek disconfirming evidence as a method of ensuring validity. As the researcher engages in interviews and observations to find the categories that will become conclusions, checking against one’s own assumptions will increase validity and reliability of conclusions.

From the perspective of the participants, “prolonged engagement in the field” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018, p. 126), allowed for a more authentic picture of their experience in the intervention, followed by thick, rich descriptions that will allow the reader to better understand the participants’ reality in a valid and authentic way. In addition to these methods, use of member checking increased the validity of the process by documenting the researcher’s reflections and position in the study. Ivankova (2015) suggests that no step is more critical in establishing research credibility than member checking, as it gives the participants a chance to confirm the interpretations made from their contributions. For this study, summaries of research findings, my notes from the interview transcripts, questions, and initial emerging themes related to the research
questions were shared with the participants, with a request for review and confirmation of both the transcripts and the researcher’s initial interpretations. Journaling my own reflections and questions following each interview helped in the development of codes and interpretations incrementally throughout the research. The most significant responses as they related to the research questions were color-coded, including additional confirming evidence in the same color. Crossover between participants was also color-coded to begin to determine themes to answer the second research question. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) advise that a key factor in establishing researcher credibility is the ability to show how we have arrived at our conclusions.

The qualitative case study approach provided the most appropriate platform for this problem of practice, as I sought to understand how individuals construct their own meaning around the significance of social justice in the principal’s job (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My own constructivist and transformative orientation aligns with the research methodology (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Through a carefully choreographed research plan, participants helped construct new knowledge about their own experiences in a principal preparation program designed to awaken them to a more activist, transformative approach to leading schools. Caution and protection for participants was built into the research design, as were steps to ensure that the research met criteria for high quality qualitative research. Most importantly, the stories of new school leaders have been documented and shared, giving us a glimpse into their own responses to preparatory interventions and allowing us to accompany them in a path toward conscientization.
CHAPTER 4
DATA COLLECTION

The opportunity to shift our approach to education and open truly equitable opportunities for students of color and historically marginalized groups has never been riper than in the present. A shift to an information economy, along with growing demands for racial reckoning, provide a platform for change that could catalyze the most significant shift in American education history since the onset of the factory model approach (Senge, 2012). This shift, however, cannot actualize without well-equipped school leaders who possess both the mindset and skill set of transformative agents of change. The work of dismantling well-established school structures requires leaders to demonstrate courage, unwavering commitment, and a sense of urgency on behalf of the students they lead, all while nimbly evading the opposition from those who stand to lose the advantage granted them by the current education model. This type of skill set has been previously neglected by school leadership programs at the university and district level (Shields, 2012).

As educators grapple with the shortcomings of traditional preparation programs, researchers and designers of more transformative approaches recognize the need for an expanded knowledge base in the field. Organizations such as the Wallace Foundation have invested in and supported research efforts to broaden understanding of best practices in principal preparation (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). Additional research is needed to address the problem of practice - a shortage of leaders equipped to confront
and change the existing systemic barriers in our school systems, and a lack of understanding about how to prepare leaders to effectively serve schools from a transformative stance. As school systems increasingly reflect a more diverse population, mirrored in the demographic shifts across the nation (Johnson, 2018), the call for more equitable approaches for all students will only grow louder as the need for equipped leaders becomes even more urgent.

This chapter will dive more deeply into the search for answers to the established research questions - how did professional learning through the principal preparation program influence participants’ beliefs about their responsibilities as school leaders and social justice change agents, and what common experiences did they share in relation to conscientization? The problem of practice is revisited but from a more local perspective as we begin to see behind the eyes of the study’s participants. A brief restatement of the theoretical framework for the study provides rationale for the selected research methods, and a description of qualitative action research along with the selected methods sets the groundwork for sharing the heart of the research - the narratives of principals who participated in the school district’s principal pipeline efforts. Shared through direct transcripts as well as summary recounts of their testimony, the participants’ narratives provide data to directly respond to the research questions. Analysis, interpretation, and new questions are strategically interwoven through the narratives to provide a lens to draw conclusions from the data and also document the research process. Through the interplay of participant narrative and researcher analysis, there is an intent to substantiate the findings and provide transparency about the way in which data was interpreted.
Zooming in to examine the problem at the local level allows for closer scrutiny of the specific problems faced in schools and school districts, while also allowing a more accurate understanding of the experiences of aspiring school leaders engaged in the work. The school district serving as host for this research has experienced the challenges referenced in the broader research about the problem of practice. A medium-sized district in their state, the school district serves a rapidly growing suburban community covering a large geographic area including rural, high poverty school attendance zones as well as affluent, waterfront school zones. Demographic trends show increasing diversification across the district where neighborhoods and communities that were historically White are seeing more families of color and diverse backgrounds move into the rapidly expanding housing developments.

As the school district has diversified, the demographic makeup of the teaching staff and the school leadership has not proportionately kept pace with the change, resulting in increasing numbers of families and children served by teachers and leaders who do not share their backgrounds or experiences. Likewise, the instructional and leadership practices used in the district’s schools have not evolved at the same rate as the changes in the student population. Instructional practices including student tracking and reliance on a heavily Eurocentric curriculum continue to make up a very visible part of students’ experience in the district. Practices that guide academic advisement, course catalogs and course selection, and disciplinary practices have not significantly changed in the recent history of most of the district’s schools, and the results have led to exclusionary approaches that disproportionately exclude students of color from the most relevant college and career readiness experiences at the schools. Students of color are
more frequently removed from the learning environment when behaviors do not conform to the district’s standard expectations including subjective policies around issues such as dress code and “respectful behavior.” In addition, parent involvement opportunities and feedback show disparate experiences between White, economically advantaged families and Black, Latinx, or economically disadvantaged families. The district seems to be designed to produce opportunity gaps.

Over the past five years, the school district has recognized the existence of the problem and initiated strategies to better understand the specific challenges and generate solutions. The district researched potential partnerships that could help provide training and support for school leaders. After several months of researching and meeting with different groups, the district partnered with the New York City Leadership Academy (NYCLA) to design a comprehensive leadership development program that would include a “Principals Preparation Program” (PPP). The program included a highly structured recruitment and selection process, a mandatory intensive summer simulation experience and a yearlong residency. Each participant received weekly professional development and standards-driven coaching by an assigned mentor and program faculty advisor from the district’s central office.

Inherent in the program design was the notion that the leaders who will be able to effectively confront the problems of the district will be equipped not only with technical or even adaptive leadership skills, but transformative leadership competencies that add a moral imperative around issues of equity as a driver for their daily work and decision making. Given the intersecting needs for more progressive information age approaches to school and the demands for a more racially and socially equitable society, the school
district’s attempt at transformative leadership development for aspiring principals provided fertile ground for relevant, new research. While principal preparation programs are not a new concept, nor particularly neglected in the body of research on educational practice or leadership, the firsthand accounts of the participants who are being asked to shift their professional and personal paradigm add a narrative that reveals important themes that should be considered by school districts and instructional designers when constructing such programs. The research goal is about capturing the participants’ journeys from their own memories and emotions.

The theoretical framework that would support data analysis throughout the study stemmed from transformative leadership theory that asserts that leadership can derive from the recognition of social responsibility, justice, and liberation (Weiner, 2003, Shields, 2010). Shields (2010) states, “Transformative leadership begins with questions of justice and democracy; it critiques inequitable practices and offers the promise not only of greater individual achievement but of a better life lived in common with others’ (p. 559). Interwoven with a clear understanding of transformative leadership throughout the research process was an application of adult learning theory as defined by Knowles (2012). To better understand how education leaders can move from a technical or adaptive leadership stance to one of transformation, it is essential to examine how specific interventions or conditions result in a change in the adult learner.

In this case study, the change that would be monitored was best described by Freire's conscientization, or the development of “a critical awareness of one’s social reality through reflection and action” (Freire Institute, 2020). This led to two research questions surrounding the district’s principal pipeline program:
● How will professional learning interventions influence participants’ beliefs regarding the transformative responsibilities of a school leader?
● What common experiences were shared between participants who experienced levels of conscientization around issues of social justice?

While not entirely generalizable, an examination of these questions yields valuable insight for the development and implementation of similar programs within the district and for others considering similar strategic efforts.

To begin to answer these questions, it was necessary to create conditions and space for program’s participants to tell their stories as individuals, educators, program participants, and leaders. This included not only recounting participation in the district’s program, but also their own stories of choosing to enter the education field, their prior experiences with issues of race and social justice, and their views on leadership both before and after program participation. Data collected through a three-part interview series with three of the program participants revealed an insider’s look into their experiences as part of the PPP.

This chapter provides the stories of three program graduates who are now current principals in the school district. Research study participants include one middle school principal, one high school principal, and one elementary principal. Each of the principals graduated the program within three years of their interview and each has completed at least one year as a school principal. The interview series captures participants’ narratives in three parts. The first section focused on the decision to become an educator as well as their early awareness of race or racism. The second interview tried to capture the shift from teacher to administrator, exploring the reasons
why the individual pursued a school leadership path, the professional learning or training they experienced to prepare to be a school administrator, and their first experiences leading through issues of race, racism, or social justice in their role as a school administrator. Within the second interview, we explored the degree to which each considered social justice or antiracism leadership to be part of a school administrator’s job prior to participating in the PPP.

The third interview focused on the decision to apply for the aspiring principals program, their memories of the interventions used in the program, and their perceptions of the impact of interventions. The third interview also allowed the participants to reflect on whether their beliefs about the relationship between school leadership and social justice changed as a result of program participation. It is worth noting that all participants in the study identify as White, which through the development of the study became an intentional part of the selection process. Further study into these research questions with school leaders of color would be worthwhile and I suspect reveal a very different story in relation to the research questions.

The goal of the three-part interview was two-fold. First, and most importantly, it was to allow the narrative to demonstrate a shift, if there was any, in the participants’ beliefs about the principal’s role and responsibilities regarding issues of racism and systemic inequity after they participated in the aspiring principals program. Secondly, using a three-part interview structure allowed me to look for consistencies or discrepancies within the individual stories, which helped draw out themes, validate the data, and assess for reliability from each participant.
Each section of the interview provided important data to help answer the research questions, including a chronological educational and leadership journey for each participant, as well as a timeline of the development of individual racial identity and social activism for each. Comparing these stories side by side reveals the unique individual journey each participant traveled to arrive at the principalship, as well as some of the commonalities they experienced prior to intersecting as part of the Principals Preparation Program. The retelling of their stories yields important insights to better understand how and why specific events or interventions shifted the trajectory of their leadership, and what emerging themes were common among their experiences.

I am sharing the stories of these leaders, Megan, Andy, and Chris (pseudonyms), through their own narrative vignettes, to both tell their individual stories and to draw out connections between their participation in the district’s principal preparation program and their conscientization as transformative leaders. Through both an inductive and abductive approach to the analysis of their narratives, I have drawn conclusions about the impact of the district’s principal pipeline program on the transformative leadership orientation of the principals it seeks to empower.

**Megan - See No Evil**

Megan has just started her second year as an elementary school principal in the district and is completing her twentieth year as an educator. Having started her career as a middle school teacher, she has worked at the middle level as a teacher and administrator, the high school level as an administrator, and at the elementary school level as an administrator. Megan’s expansive career and successful longevity in education did not begin with a lifelong dream to work in schools. Although her mother
was a teacher, Megan planned to follow in her father’s footsteps as a doctor. In fact, as she entered college majoring in biology on a pre-med path, she saw no future in any other direction. The shift to education was not one determined or decided based on an inspired educational experience or a desire to serve societal needs through the school system.

It was the summer between her third and fourth year in college that Megan describes having somewhat of a breakdown, feeling completely overwhelmed and on the verge of failure. She recalls the frustration she felt in her upper-level science classes like physics and organic chemistry. As Megan continued to struggle, she was left with a decision about her future. When she looked over her transcript, she recognized that she had done very well in her math classes and recalls her reasoning for switching to education being mostly about the credits she had earned and the desire to finish college quickly.

Looking back at the decision, Megan describes her experience after the change as positive. Through her success in her mathematics courses and the accompanying education courses, she started to feel like education was a natural fit for her. When she became a student teacher at both the middle and high school levels, she had a very positive professional experience, but doesn’t remember any altruistic or socially driven motivation for her choices.

In her stories of her decision to become a teacher, her pre-service experience, and her first job, Megan never mentioned students. She also did not mention any issues of race, racism, or being inspired by a moralistic mission. She recalls some economic differences between the middle school and high schools where she student-taught but
cannot recall noticing much about the racial makeup of either school. When interviewing for her first jobs, she interviewed at one suburban school and one urban school and recalled discussing basketball when the urban, majority African American school’s principal asked her what she knew about the school. She remembers intentionally omitting that she has watched the news about a shooting that had taken place at the school just prior to her interview. Her memory is that she was thinking more about getting hired than about the school’s racial makeup.

The second part of the interview focused on early experiences involving race, racism, and social justice. When asked to recall her first awareness of race or racial identity, Megan struggled to respond, stating, “I don't know. I don't know,” but then described not being aware of any classmates of color until around third grade, when one Black boy was in her class. Megan recalls, “He was just our friend. I didn’t think any more about it.” It was not until high school that Megan’s memories shifted to something more impactful for her:

Megan: I remember in high school, there were a handful of girls who were White who dated Black boys or hung out with Black boys, and I remember thinking Why, why? Why is that happening? I don't understand. Like, why, why, why, why, why, ... why do the Black boys like these White girls and vice versa. But looking back, in our friend group there was a Hispanic girl and an Indian girl, and if either one of them had been dating a White person, I don't think I would have thought anything about that. Had she been dating a Black person, I think I would have still been like, I don't understand -- which is interesting, right?
When asked if “color-blindness” is an accurate representation of her early life and early years as an educator, Megan’s responses indicated that she probably was living with a degree of color-blindness. She acknowledged struggling to determine if she was overly self-centered as a young person and novice educator because it was so difficult to remember many significant events involving race in her early life. She could not remember race or racism being a part of her conscious awareness and acknowledged that as probable color-blindness.

Megan made the decision to pursue a school administration certification soon after beginning her teaching career. Having offered previously that education was not part of her original career plans, it was important to understand why she came to the realization that she should be a leader in the school system. Megan explained that an administrative path had always been part of her plan after she decided to teach, but it was not really tied to a desire to lead, a motivation to help students, and certainly not related to social justice or her own awareness of racial identity. She knew that advancement and salary would be tied to her continuing education. She did not see a future in an advanced degree in mathematics, and administration courses were affordable and accessible.

Megan waited approximately two and a half years after beginning her teaching career to start an administrative program. Recalling her preservice preparation to become certified as a school administrator, she could not name any memorable experiences or learning and describes the preservice requirements as “just classes that you had to pass to get the certification” that had to do with school finance and legal precedents. She recalls, “It was definitely not about children.”
At the end of her program, Megan completed a practicum experience with her principal, during which she organized the schoolwide fundraiser. She remembers thinking that it must have been very important to be able to sell wrapping paper as a school leader because that is what every administrative intern she knew was doing. In Megan’s first administrative job, she was the sole assistant principal with a principal she described as a strong instructional leader. She recalls having few opportunities to learn from her principal, as the organizational structure of the school kept her busy with discipline, textbooks, transportation, and technical or operational duties. When her district reorganized, Megan accepted a position as a high school assistant principal where she remained for fourteen years, serving under four different principals, before beginning to aspire to the principalship herself. When asked if her purpose or motivation to be in this work had changed over fifteen years in administrative jobs, Megan reflected for a minute before responding.

Megan: So the original why was that I wanted to get a better paycheck. Like, you get your master's degree in administration and then once you've got it, you might as well use it . . . over time, and with different mentors, I guess I started to ask How do I become better as a leader? How do I better serve others? . . . I came to a point where I said if I’m going to do this, then I’ve got to go all in, and that’s around the time the Principals Preparation Program came along.

Megan was asked about her professional experiences in relation to issues of race or racism in the role of assistant principal. She was also asked to explain to what degree issues of racism or social justice influenced her professional goals or motivation. She explained that in her recollection, it played no part in her approach to her work. She
remembers while working at what she described as a fairly diverse high school, there were a lot of situations where race came up. She said she would get phone calls or students reporting instances that could be connected to race or racism, especially with certain teachers. Sometimes students or parents would suggest that racism was impacting them somehow.

Megan: I can tell you at the time, I struggled with how to answer. I didn't know what to do and I struggled . . . I think I usually just wanted to support the teacher and not create a greater adversarial situation or not create a lawsuit or something. I mean, really, these are the things that went through my mind and I can remember that early on. I just had no concept of what to do or even what to feel. I know I didn’t want anyone to be mad at me or mad at each other. I wanted everybody to get along and be happy in their classes. I think I defined right as conflict-free, with no negativity.

During almost twenty years as an educator, Megan recalls receiving professional development about poverty and the needs associated with students in poverty but does not recall any significant or impactful training to do antiracism work. She remembers participating in a leadership conference around the time she decided to apply for the Principals Preparation Program, where other participants were passionately discussing issues of racism in the school system, and how she felt unprepared and uncomfortable.

Megan: I felt like the people that I was in the room with had more knowledge and experience in recognizing, understanding, and addressing inequities among various groups of people or individuals. I’m not saying I hadn’t been exposed to
those same types of situations, events, or experiences -- I had somehow just totally missed it.

In following up on this response, Megan was asked if that experience made her see things differently when she went back to her building. She became emotional in her response.

Megan: I don’t know. I don’t know. I think I just insulated myself in such a way that -- I don't know. I hate that sometimes I feel like What did I miss? What did I not see? It was right there, and somebody was being hurt and I just didn't even see it.

The third interview focused on the subject’s participation in the school district’s Principals Preparation Program and the interventions that were included in the program’s curriculum. We started the interview by talking about some of the activities the cohort completed during the program. Megan was asked to explain how specific interventions affected her. We started by first focusing on the work around self-awareness.

Megan talked about working through the activities designed to force introspection, public vulnerability, and core values. Among her memories, Megan talked about how important it was to find out more about the people in the program, to find out what motivated them, and to understand how differently they all approached the work. She recalls wide differences in both the backgrounds of the people in the cohort and significant variance in each participant’s understanding of the most basic purposes of education, which she found interesting given that each participant was pursuing the same positions as school leaders in the same school district.
The attention she gave to the heterogeneous makeup of the cohort is something she described as impactful even now, explaining that she regularly thinks about her cohort when confronting the disconnect different people may have in their perspectives about school. She recalls the emotional response she had as her program cohort members each shared their individual journeys towards the beginning of the program. She reflected on her own journey that had been paved with significant advantage in comparison to many of her colleagues. She also recalled an intervention involving core values that required each person to abandon a “value” until they were left with the one they were unwilling to relinquish. For Megan, that value was her faith. For her, she connects this intervention with a change in her understanding of the connection between leadership and values.

Megan: So you start by looking at it as a salary -- it's just a job. You know -- you clock in, clock out. The PPP experience gave me confidence to be open to the fact that I can have a belief set, and because I feel confident in my values, I can find the strength to listen and be open minded. I recognized that other people have knowledge that I don't have and experiences that I don't have; and I can admit to that and I can learn from them. It doesn't matter if that person is different from me. It's okay to seek to understand so I can do differently. And that's not a weakness --that's a strength; and now I know how to use it, so it made me stronger.

The assignment of intense, time-sensitive, high pressure tasks followed by consistent, low inference coaching was a new and initially uncomfortable strategy for Megan, but one that she found impactful because of the changes she saw in her own motivation and
confidence. She originally had high anxiety about performing well and remembers fixating on the notes the facilitators recorded about her participation. Over time she said that changed and she began to crave the feedback and the challenges the program presented. She wanted to really listen and hear their thoughts about leadership and the decisions she was making in the program.

Megan: In the beginning, it was about wanting to do well for the program . . . by the end, it was just about being better.

A significant part of the summer portion of the program centered around the development of a personal narrative, which was drafted based on core beliefs but evolved into a story of self, a story of us, and a story of now, which was designed to be a charge from the leader to the school community. This intervention was developed through multiple steps and drafts, with public practice and feedback, often accompanied by additional obligations and time constraints. The culminating activity of the summer intensive was the delivery of the final version of the personal narrative in front of the cohort and on camera. Asked about this intervention, Megan described how it impacted her.

Megan: It has stayed with me so much more than I thought it would. Even now, at various times these issues will come up and I find myself coming back to it. I mean, there is this constant connection. In my personal narrative, I talked about leading beside people and believing in people -- essentially having faith in them. And we all have to do the work together, the kids, the teachers . . . everyone; and it’s not easy for anyone - not for a kindergartner, not for me, not for anyone.
She went on to explain how surprised she was that the personal narrative has become so connected to her daily work. She laughed because of how she felt about the activity during the PPP.

Megan: I hated it. I mean . . . I barely got through it and even after I practiced it repeatedly, I still wanted to cry while I was delivering it the last time . . . but it hits me emotionally because it is just so personal.

The second goal of the program revolved around equitable practice in schools and antiracism. The confrontation of racism within the curriculum stems from the belief that by directly addressing this issue, the leader can be equipped to face it, as well as any other form of marginalization in their school setting, without opting for “equity detours” as described by Gorski (2019). Grounded in Fergus’ (2017) work about disportionalities and Singleton’s (2015) *Courageous Conversations*, participants engaged in facilitated discussions with their peers about historical and current marginalization of students.

Megan was asked to describe her experience learning about race and racism in the program. Knowing she would get emotional, she acknowledged the cliche of White women who cry when they have to talk about racism, but said her tears are not about having to face the issue; rather, they were about the pain she now sees and feels that she never saw or felt before. She described her growth as heart wrenching and eye opening. She talked about a conversation she had with a Black male member of her cohort who described for her the experience of shopping in a jewelry store as a young Black man.

Megan: The fact that this wonderful colleague doing the same work that I do has to think about going to get his watch fixed because of the way people talk to him and respond to him . . . I look at him and think my own kids would never have to
think about that, and it never even crossed my mind that he would have to think
about something like that, and I cry.

Megan was asked how she would have explained the job of the principal in
relation to antiracism and social justice before the program and then after the
program. She admitted that before participating in the preparation program, she would
not have been able to answer the question very well. She thinks she probably would
have said the principal’s job is to make sure the school day runs effectively, and all of
the various aspects are clicking efficiently. Now she sees that it is the principal’s job to
make sure all students have access to learning that prepares them for anything they
might want to do in the future.

Megan: Also, it's the principal's job to make sure people are safe - really safe in
every way. So after completing PPP, I'm like, oh God, this is what the principal
is supposed to do? . . . This is really hard, and every decision has so much more
weight and gravity. Like, a teacher interview for example -- how do I know that
I'm getting the person that is going to truly see and know every child who comes
in their room? Because now that is more my responsibility than I ever understood
before.

Megan explained that she believes the program opened her eyes to things she had not
seen or chosen to think about. She said the program forced her to see a new reality, and
now she not only sees it, but it doesn’t terrify her in the way it might have before.

Megan: You have to act. You can't shy away from it. We have the conversations
we need to have . . . whether it’s about recess or racism, we meet it head on.
Andy – Speak No Evil

The second participant in the research study was part of the first cohort of the Principals Preparation Program and is now in his third year as a middle school principal. Also, the son of an educator, Andy remembers a few influential teachers and administrators from his early school experiences. While he did not always want to be a teacher, he knew he wanted to serve others through his work. Through participation in athletics, he developed relationships with peers from different racial backgrounds and was able to witness racism directed towards people he considered friends but does not remember ever connecting this to his professional or personal goals.

His recollection of school is a very positive experience. He remembers having a principal in elementary school that really stood out as someone who made him feel welcome at school. He felt like he had “pretty good” teachers and he thought school was “fine.” He felt that part of his memories and overall associations with school were influenced by having a parent who was an educator. Growing up in a middle income two-parent household, Andy understood he was expected to do well in school. He does not remember ever considering another option, and so he participated in school in a very “typical” way and did as well as he could, which led to an average, successful progression. A few teachers stood out for him.

Andy: I had a middle school speech and drama teacher who told every student, and I remember it vividly, “As you walk in everyday, be reminded that you are fearfully and wonderfully made, and we’re going to figure out what you can do best today.”
He later realized that she was quoting scripture, although she never told the class that. He remembers being inspired by the teacher. Andy was also heavily involved in athletics and says this was a significant part of his youth and development. He recalls several coaches who influenced him and likely turned him on to the idea of becoming an educator. As he entered college, he knew he wanted to use his talents with building relationships to enter some type of service field. As a collegiate athlete, Andy finished his degrees in history and political science with another year of eligibility on the football team. His parents advised him to make wise use of his time, and he decided to earn a teaching certificate with his final year of college.

Andy knew he wanted to be a difference maker but was not fully convinced it would be as a teacher. He describes his student teaching experience as “nothing special.” The whole experience just did not inspire him much. The university’s teacher preparation program, according to Andy, had little to no impact on him. Andy connected with an assistant principal during his training after the administrator saw him successfully handle a difficult student situation. That relationship led to a high school teaching and coaching job the following year in a freshman academy - a school within a school model. Andy enjoyed the work and was influenced by teachers he described as strong. In the freshman academy, the teachers ran an autonomous schedule, created interdisciplinary units of study, intervened on behalf of the students, and collaborated closely with one of the school’s assistant principals. He believed he was making an impact with his students, which was what he had always hoped for in a career and knew that he could enjoy a career as an educator.
Andy remembers focusing a lot in his first years on a desire to teach students the skills they would need to be successful, rather than simply focusing on the content of the social studies classes he was teaching. Teaching in a freshman academy allowed him to attend to issues of student self-management, organization, and generally help students think about the best ways in which they could approach school so that they could be successful after their first year. He remembers the school having a lot of students in poverty and thinking that education was their ticket to break the cycle, so he felt a level of urgency to equip the students to be able to navigate the school system and ultimately to graduate, starting with the skills they developed in the ninth grade. Success, according to Andy, was also found in the relationships he found through coaching several sports at the school because he was able to build connections with a lot of students, and he felt competent and confident that he was doing a good job.

Andy’s earliest memories of racial identity awareness were pretty vivid. Andy is a White male who grew up in a fairly diverse community, so it was not uncommon for his peer group to include Black friends and acquaintances. He does not recall thinking too much about it until around eighth or ninth grade. He describes playing in a school basketball game and remembers some sort of controversy in the game with a bad foul or a bad call by the referee, which prompted his father to make what Andy describes as a very inappropriate racist remark. Andy remembers being shaken by the incident.

Andy: I was always around people of other races. They were in my house some because I played basketball with them or football, and so they were my friends. So at that moment when that happened, it really kind of just shook me . . . I knew something was really wrong with that, but I just didn't totally understand
what it was all about right then. But my mom . . . oh Lord . . . Mom got really mad, so there was a lot of tension in the house for a little bit . . . not for long, but a week or so. And Dad did some things too. He came to me and apologized and said he realized what he had done and talked with me about how he was wrong . . . Now looking back, I think that’s when I really began to recognize and see some of the differences that my friends had to experience that I’d never seen before. So that’s not like this deep understanding of racial identity, but I remember it began to open my eyes a little bit.

Andy also recalls another experience involving a Black friend who was targeted on multiple occasions by racist students or even adults during or after athletic events. He remembers hearing fans verbally racially attacking his friend, an exceptional athlete which prompted extra attention from the crowd, and the emotions that he would feel during those moments. He recalls the desire to defend his friend and the anger he felt.

Andy: It wasn’t like I totally understood standing up against racism. I don't think I saw it in that way. I thought it was really just about my friends.

I asked Andy if he would have described himself as color blind or if he thinks he would have aspired toward color blindness during that part of his life.

Andy: I didn't realize even as a young person and a young teacher that there was any other way other than to treat everyone the same. I look back now at my mom and dad and sometimes, I'm like how the heck did we never talk about this stuff? I definitely think that was a part of who I was to some degree. As a young teacher, I always had a heart for individual kids, but it was still based on color blindness. I mean, let’s call it what it was.
Andy doesn’t remember thinking too much about school administration in high school or college as a career path. Even as a young teacher in the freshman academy, he envisioned himself as a really good teacher and coach. It wasn’t until he got married and moved to a new school closer to his wife’s family that his path began to shift. His father-in-law was a school principal and began to talk with Andy about his skill set and potential in school leadership. At the same time, the school administrators who worked directly with Andy began to talk with him about an administrative path. Eventually, with both the push of those around him and a new baby on the way, Andy enrolled in a master’s degree program and earned his administrative certification. As soon as he finished the program, a position opened at his school and he was hired as an assistant administrator, basically an assistant principal on an abbreviated contract, but still with teacher salary.

That structure nearly led Andy to leave school administration as he quickly found he was doing work that did not match his original goals or purpose, with extreme hours beyond the typical teacher workday, without the compensation that assistant principals were earning. His duties were primarily discipline and operational tasks. Some of the frustrations Andy felt at the time related to the irrelevance he found in this preservice training. He remembers thinking of the program as just a hoop to jump through. He was a good student and performed well in the program, but beyond writing the required papers and completing his practicum requirements, he does not think the work aligned much with what he was actually doing. He remembers coming to sort of a breaking point a few years into the job after being celebrated for the number of students
he had successfully expelled during the year. Frustrated, Andy went to his principal and asked for permission to try something new to help students who were struggling.

That turning point, along with a promotion to a full-time assistant principal role, led to Andy’s work to implement a freshman academy similar to the program at his previous school. He began to associate the work of the school administrator to a larger purpose which was to help students. When the district introduced the idea of the Principals Preparation Program, Andy felt inspired and ready to become a principal in part because he had recognized the potential of the principal’s role as impactful. He remained unclear, however, about how to put his purpose into practice consistently, and he still was not seeing clear connections to opportunities involving race and social justice.

Andy first noticed race intersecting with his work through his handling of student discipline. He remembers recognizing a disconnect between the school and the growing number of Black families moving into the school’s attendance zone based on the disproportionalities he was seeing in disciplinary incidences and the ensuing consequences for Black students. Through his conversations with his colleagues, he came to believe that many people at his school were not actively responding to the needs of their Black students and families in the same ways they served their White students. He remembers one teacher in particular telling him that he did not feel comfortable making phone calls home to some of his students, and Andy felt confident the discomfort was because the students were Black.

He tried to leverage his personal relationships and his ability to connect with people to compensate for the shortcomings of his colleagues. As he was developing a
greater awareness that his colleagues fell short in their service to students of color, he remembered feeling like he was compensating rather than acting to change the situation.

Andy: I was conscious that we just were not very good at this. So I needed my interactions to be extra good with the students and families . . . . I wanted to be good because it was like I was almost apologizing for people's actions and ignorance.

It was also around this time, approaching the beginning of the Principals Preparation Program, that Andy participated in a professional development event offered outside of the school district that addressed race and privilege more explicitly than any prior training he had received. He recalls that he had never had any training that addressed this throughout his certification programs for teaching or administration. Following that training, Andy became more interested in examining disproportionalities not only in the school’s discipline but also in academic achievement. He saw the disparities in grades and course success in the ninth-grade courses at the school. He recalls really noticing these issues for the first time, even though he was now an experienced school administrator. He remembers trying to address some of the surface level instances of disproportionality through small moves and conversations. One of his first efforts involved working with a planning team to try to increase attendance of Latinx families at an open-house parent event. He described the efforts as very “surface level” attempts to address the issue but explained that he did not have much success. He also did not spend time examining the issue beyond the most obvious and visible data points. He looked at the presenting event and tried to solve it
without examining the root causes that left the Latinx families feeling disconnected from the school community.

Andy remembers feeling excited about the opportunities to make changes for students who he saw as neglected by the system, but he did not have the right language or tools to know how to effectively create much more than incidental changes. His lack of skill or experience with the work left him insecure and paralyzed in many instances. For example, Andy remembers specifically not addressing any of the discipline or academic discrepancies he had identified between Black and White students at the school, or his suspicion that many of his colleagues were unable or unwilling to engage students of color effectively.

Andy: We just didn’t talk about it, and there were probably lots of reasons for that. I was still young, or at least younger, and learning . . . I look back and I just didn’t do the work. I wasn't comfortable, honestly, and I just kind of stayed in that learning stage for a long time . . . a really long time.

When asked to look back during that time and describe what he thought the principal’s job should be in terms of racial or social justice, Andy explained that he knew that social justice work should be part of the job in some way, but he had never seen it done. Even though he had a conceptual understanding of what it should be, he did not know how it could look or actualize. As he described that period in his professional trajectory, Andy showed visible frustration and explained that there was just no way he could have done the work or even engaged in a conversation about the work of racial justice with his team.
Andy: I was beginning to see there were these different types of leaders who were doing so much, and that wasn’t me yet. There was this recognition that there were none of those leaders with me in my school. They were my colleagues, and some were my friends, but no one was leading that way or even trying to. So there was a year or two where I really wanted to grow in that direction, but I didn’t really know how to, and I certainly didn’t know how to turn it into action, and that’s when the PPP came about.

When thinking back to the interventions used in the Principals Preparation Program, Andy remembered feeling a meaningful impact from several experiences. One of the first significant events in the program for Andy was a journey lines assignment. He recalls that having to share his own story of leadership and then listen to others in the groups discuss their journeys allowed him to know people in a deeper way. He talked about the reactions across his cohort, as several members became very emotional but did so in a really safe learning space and how this affected the credibility of the program for him. The structure of the learning felt different from other professional development he had experienced. He remembers thinking about the time and attention the program coordinators were investing into each participant’s personal growth, which gave him a little more trust to open up and become vulnerable in his own learning and participation.

Andy: It was powerful to get to know people in a deeper way. It allowed us to open the room, to open the space to go deeper . . . I recognized that you have to open up to really recognize people's humanity . . . and . . . yeah . . . I remember that being very impactful -- I’m not sure I had ever really done that before.
This vulnerability was also important for Andy in the personal narrative experience that participants completed. The personal narrative built on the journey lines activity for Andy in that it gave him permission and validation to be himself and share who he was and why he wanted to lead. He connected to the idea that it was okay for everyone to have their own story, including himself. He said that the activity spoke to him as a leader and changed his understanding of his role.

Andy’s personal narrative focused on the idea that every student needs a hero, and he began to speak about that concept as it related to leadership, connecting it to his own life and his daughter’s journey as a student on the autism spectrum. He talked about how he had to really fight for her and how the narrative assignment became very personal. He also thought about his hometown and the consistent theme of cyclical poverty that impacted many of his childhood friends.

Andy: I started to develop this idea of being the hero for a kid. Through that idea, I was able to communicate more of who I wanted to be as a person and a leader . . . somehow I felt like it started to give me a voice I didn't have before.

Andy also remembers very intense work in the program immersing participants in technical skill development about conversations about race. He remembers taking specific new skills and knowledge away from the learning, along with tools that he could start to apply.

Andy: I could start actually doing something. When you have that knowledge and you start being able to name the inequities, you can do something about it. And I found these issues in school that I kept coming across . . . I knew they conflicted with my beliefs, but with these new tools, once again it was like
giving you a voice to say *yeah, I know what I believe*, and you start to add all this vocabulary and a whole different knowledge base to do something about the various ‘isms’ and inequities that are part of the system.

Andy’s yearlong residency project, the capstone of the program, focused on the problem of underrepresentation of minority students in advanced placement and honors level courses at his school. He explained that while he started by focusing on that topic, the work ended up being about building the capacity of a group of adults who became committed to changing the system, to disrupting and breaking barriers for their students. He explained that to really be able to start talking about race and inequities and start to break down systems and structures, he needed the language and tools and to give himself permission to start dismantling these institutional injustices.

Andy: It began with this big surface-level problem . . . Eventually I realized that the problem just reflected all these barriers that were so much more system-level than I had understood. And as a team, we started to uncover all this stuff working against our students and our collective commitment grew to address all these things that were going on.

At this point in the conversation, I reminded Andy of his previous story about wanting to build capacity among his students in the freshman academy, the skill building he had defined as success when he started teaching. He talked about coming full circle; and while he had not considered the connection before, he saw that need to build people up and grow their capacity as a thread that has run through his beliefs about leadership.
One of the program interventions was a privilege walk. Facilitators waited until the cohort had bonded as a group and experienced very intentional learning about race and racism.

Andy: I can remember it pretty vividly actually. You know, I think of my friends -- especially the people who were so far back and I was way up front . . . and it was that the gap was so large and . . . I don't know . . . it was really tough. There were some feelings of shame that came over me. That kind of close examination of my own privilege, especially right there with these people I had grown close to -- my friends -- it was important for me to feel that. Those feelings . . . I think it gives you a sense of urgency like we just can't keep doing what we're doing, and we've got to be an agent of change in this, you know? So now you've got this knowledge. You can't go back and you can't unsee it. You've got to use it and go forward -- it's not even a choice anymore.

Andy talked more about the close relationships established through the cohort approach to the program, explaining that he looks back at his cohort as an amazing group of educators and leaders who pushed the thinking and the learning for each other. He noted that it was the consistency of being around the group under intense conditions and also hearing their ideas, their struggles, and their different experiences and perspectives. He also said they needed each other because no one else would have understood the stress involved with the experience, so they helped each other in many different ways. He said that it was not always an enjoyable experience and there are parts that he would never want to go through again, but he emphasized the growth he and others experienced, stating “We just got so much better together.”
Andy was asked how going through the Principals Preparation Program changed his understanding of the principal's responsibilities, especially regarding racial and social justice. He explained that it changed his view on what a principal should be doing and the opportunities and obligations they have. After the program, he understood that a principal has the opportunity to really impact the community when it comes to racial and social justice.

Andy: I saw how these conversations could change and move people in ways that I never saw in my work before . . . I began to see the importance of leaders in making that happen. I think it made me see just how important the principal is and that this opportunity is a big part of that role.

It also showed Andy how important it is to use the position to really do the work of racial and social justice every day. He explained that if he can see it, he does not have a choice about addressing it -- it is always part of his job. Andy explained that he sees student discipline differently and looks at data differently, perpetually examining who his school is marginalizing. He and his team probe into disparities, and they dig beyond the surface to find the root causes that they have not wanted to accept or acknowledge previously.

Andy talked about getting to know people's stories and opening eyes and hearts for all of his students, which is a different way of leading for him. He recognizes that maybe those beliefs were always a part of him but having the ability to lead based on his own beliefs and the courage to do it represents a significant transformation for him.

Andy: It's just who I am now . . . like, it’s not even optional. Now when I see these practices that are so clearly unfair or racist, I can call it out, and I can do it
in a way that my faculty actually hear and understand me. I didn’t have that skill or courage before. Now, I believe that if I’m not doing the work around race in my school, I’m not really leading.

**Chris - Hear no Evil**

Chris was part of the first cohort of the Principals Preparation Program and is in his third year as a high school principal in the district. One of the younger graduates of the program, Chris is still the youngest principal in the school district. He is the son of a minister and a teacher. Despite having a mother who was an educator, he describes his early school experiences as not especially memorable. He pointed out that he cannot remember many of his teachers’ names and does not have the same kinds of strong memories about school that other people seem to have. He remembers a high school English teacher inspiring him “some,” but others do not stand out in his memory.

According to Chris, school was just kind of a place where he had to go and while he did not have negative experiences, he also had no exceptional or overwhelmingly great experiences either. In looking back, he finds it interesting that he never took any honors or accelerated courses throughout the entirety of high school. He recalled his mother forcing him to enroll in an honors math class in middle school and describes it as “like the most miserable thing ever for me.” He said he was eager to get out of the honors program quickly and get back to his “basic” curriculum. Looking back now as a high school principal, he finds it interesting that his own path led him to college and graduate studies and wonders if it points to some of the privilege he had without recognizing it as he grew up.
In his pre-interview survey, Chris indicated he had entered college majoring in elementary education. Based on his account of his earlier school experience, I inquired as to why he had decided to become a teacher. Chris explained that the decision to major in elementary education was based mostly on a job during his junior and senior year of high school at an elementary school’s after-school program. He described the job as primarily sports or play and how through play, he found he really enjoyed interacting with the children. He liked getting to know them, adding that elementary kids “are just kind of fun to be around.” He felt like he was always able to find something within a child that made them feel special, and he liked to really elevate that for each of them. He remembers that the children would gravitate towards him just because in his words, “I kind of validated them.” He remembers trying to find something about them that made them different, that maybe made them feel a little bit self-conscious, and trying to find a way to celebrate that uniqueness in each of them.

Another formative experience came in the summer before he left for college when he took a job working with middle and high school children at a residential church camp. He remembers that experience opening his eyes to the connections that could be built with older students. It was at that camp that Chris had some opportunities to teach through a set, prescribed Bible-themed curriculum. He found ways to make the curriculum his own and enjoyed seeing his work create something meaningful for the students.

Chris remembers changing his major from elementary to secondary education after his first semester of college and points to the summer camp experience as a pivotal moment. He noted that the decision was definitely driven by the connections he could
make with the students rather than the content of what he would teach or the courses he would need to take. As a student teacher, Chris found himself with a veteran teacher who taught exclusively upper level, advanced courses, filled by what Chris described as “highly motivated” students. He remembers leaving that experience optimistically thinking that teaching high school English was a lot like teaching college literature classes, with everyone reading very intentionally selected books and coming into the classroom conversations with the same level of passion for the ideas and that the books might generate all sorts of debate and discovery. The next year, when he started his first teaching job, what he found was the opposite, with a very prescribed, traditional curricular expectation.

He remembers feeling a sort of “wake up call” about both his job responsibilities and the difficulty of making connections with his students through the material he was teaching. He describes that time as somewhat of a struggle. It was through his first years of teaching that Chris had to reconcile that although he loved literature, it was not going to necessarily give him the connections he had hoped for, the kind of relationships that had guided him toward a teaching profession. He decided that he could still find the unique qualities in his students that made them special, and he would choose to be a teacher of students before a teacher of a curriculum. In that realization, he does not remember his preservice training preparing him very well, noting that there was little attention given to the development of meaningful connections with students and even less attention given to empowering students to examine and generate their own ideas.

Chris’s first memories of race and racial identity are somewhat clearer than his early memories of school.
Chris: Around seventh grade, I remember my grandmother making a statement that just didn’t sit right with me, and it was something racial or maybe racist. It’s kind of strange that it stuck with me because it wasn't like a blatant, totally defamatory statement that she was making . . . it was just something that indicated to me that there was a difference between people based on race in her mind. I guess that I didn't really understand . . . rather than just being friends and being people and it didn't matter if they were Black or White, all of a sudden, I realized that it did matter to her and maybe that it mattered to other people.

Later in high school, Chris remembers his class working on some sort of argumentative essay and one of his friends deciding to write his essay about the justifications for flying the Confederate flag, which at the time was a controversial issue in the state. Chris remembers debating with him. He remembers realizing through the issue that he had a clear belief set about issues of race and racism and didn’t understand why some people carried these really divisive feelings when it seemed so simple to him.

Chris talked about a childhood friend who recently had reminded him of an incident that occurred when they were in high school. While Chris says he only vaguely remembers the incident, the friend remembered making an insensitive statement about race, and Chris called him out about it in a way that clearly communicated his position against racism. I probed Chris on this because he said he couldn’t remember the incident with his friend. I asked him, based on his own memory, whether he remembers himself as someone who would have just let it go.

Chris: I don't think so. I can remember when I started teaching at this rural, predominantly White school, my grandfather asking me about the racial makeup
of the school, and when I said almost none of the students are Black, he said, 

well, I know you're glad about that, or, some kind of comment suggesting that it
must be a good school because of that . . . my response was not necessarily that
of a social justice warrior in that moment to confront his bias. I think I told him
that the students that I would be teaching have a lot of the same issues that I
thought he was insinuating and that the quality of a school wasn’t really
determined by racial demographic, but that’s about all I said.

He added that he believed his response would have depended on the situation, and that
with some of his older relatives, he probably would have been more likely to walk away
or try to mitigate a situation involving racism in some less direct way than he would
have done with his own peer group.

Chris remembers his first year teaching at a rural, mostly White school at the
time President Obama was elected. He described hearing levels of racism that he did not
believe still existed in the world. He described vivid memories of the racist and vitriolic
language that was used by students and community members and feeling stunned that
those levels of racism were still real in the world. As a young teacher, he did not
remember actively trying to combat what he was witnessing, but rather observed in
disbelief.

Chris continued to find himself dissatisfied in his teacher role and became
interested in pursuing further education. He initially thought about trying to become a
literature teacher at the college level, but discovered that good, accessible programs
were hard to find and manage while also teaching full time, so then considered school
administration. Chris admits that part of the drive was actually to distance himself from
the curriculum that he found so disempowering as a teacher. He did not connect what he was teaching with his initial purpose for becoming a teacher. He also saw a way to utilize his strengths and passion for finding those unique aspects of students that may have been missed by the school system and helping them develop those parts of themselves.

He remembers thinking school administration would provide access to resources and partners to make positive things happen for kids, and that if the discipline referrals or tough student cases were coming to his desk, he could make a difference. It was his best chance to do the work that he enjoyed the most. When Chris looks back on his certification program, he remembers viewing it as a means to an end with the desire to get finished with it as fast as possible. Looking back, he does not remember applying much of what he learned in his graduate administrative certification program once he started working as a school leader.

Chris was hired as a middle school assistant principal almost immediately after receiving his master’s degree and certification. He joined a team made up of experienced administrators, who were also experienced as a team. It was a well-structured school and Chris found his place on the team, mostly working directly with students.

Chris: It was a rotating door of kids coming in for some kind of trouble, and I spent my time trying to help them through their problems, motivating them, maybe assigning discipline or whatever. I loved it because every day was different, and I was just kind of able to go where the action was.
When asked about the first intersections between his new role and issues of race or racism, Chris explained that the school was more racially diverse than his previous schools, and that he could feel or sense a little bit of tension in a way he had not previously experienced as an educator. Chris added that he now looks back and sees that he was wearing his color blindness like a badge of honor, like it was a virtue to ascribe to, and he thinks back to how he was raised. He explained that his family had always tried to avoid seeing color, and that he was trained to see and treat everyone the same. He attributes his inability to process some of his memories about race or racism in his work to the very intentional efforts of his parents to look past race.

Looking back, he says he could sense that some of the Black students with whom he was working felt they were treated differently at school because of the color of their skin, and they felt that they were seen differently by their teachers because of their race. He said it was something he could not fully comprehend at that point. I asked Chris if he believed the students who told him about these experiences.

Chris: It's not that I didn't believe them. I think I tried to make it about something else, though. It was like okay, well, how do we get around that? Rather than facing it head on, I would ask how do I help you to work your way around that with this teacher - the teacher you feel like sees you differently because of the color of your skin or the teacher you feel like is targeting you based on your race? How do I help you to behave differently so they don’t have a reason to target you?

After two years at the middle school, Chris accepted an assistant principal position at a high school in the same district. Chris remembers feeling more racial
tension in the new role. He noticed things like a greater concentration of confederate flag paraphernalia that he would ask students to put away or not wear. He recalls having conversations with parents who did not want their daughter to date a boy who was Black, and he remembers taking the same avoidance strategy in helping Black students work around the struggles they encountered because of race. He described his approach at that point as much more focused on equality than equity. He wanted to make sure all students were getting the same, whether that was what they needed or not. Asked if he considered racial justice to be part of his role as a school leader at the time, Chris explained that he just did not understand it as being something that he should be working directly towards. He added, “Maybe I thought it would just kind of work itself out in the end.”

Chris had worked in the school district for three years as an administrator when the Principals Preparation Program was introduced as a pipeline to future principalships in the district. Chris’s initial interest was more curiosity than ambition. He remembers wanting to see where his skill set matched up across a large district and saw it as a new challenge. He was also interested in the type of feedback the program promised to provide. He admits that he did not expect to be accepted into the program with so little administrative experience and was hoping his rejection notice would provide some targeted growth areas. Chris was accepted into the first cohort of the program.

During the first weeks of the Principals Preparation Program, Chris found his performance stacking up favorably in comparison to his fellow cohort members, and he particularly excelled with assignments and activities that relied on his communication skills, both in writing and speaking even though he was admittedly one of the less vocal
members of the cohort. He recalls many of the interventions and tasks from the summer and ensuing residency. Among the first memories, he mentioned a very emotional moment between members that took place during the sharing of their personal journeys and their core values. He remembers having to really deeply and authentically reflect on his beliefs, which he then had to share openly with people he didn’t know well yet. It uncovered a lot of information for the group, both positive and negative, that allowed a collective identity to develop. Chris still believes that those early engagements brought the participants closer together which was an important part of the program design.

Chris was asked to expand on this idea, since the program was designed to result ultimately in individual leadership growth rather than collective team strength. He shared that he entered the program with preconceptions about certain colleagues, about who they were, based on how they presented themselves and where they were in their careers. He described the experience as eye opening regarding what he thought he knew about people and even what he thought he knew about leadership.

Chris: I think that it probably reinforced for me that you just don't ever know what people have gone through. You don't ever really know someone’s story . . . I think that became a big part of what I took away that impacted my own beliefs about leadership.

This initial work around core values helped Chris craft a personal narrative, framed around his core value of love, which connected back to the spiritual foundations of his entry into the education profession. For him, one of the most empowering aspects of that program was the recognition of what mattered most to him when everything else
is stripped away. It revealed for him the values from which he needed to lead, rather than trying to fit a mold that he previously felt had been prescribed for leaders.

Chris: Up to that point, I had just kind of understood leadership from the surface. I just saw the people who were school principals and it seemed like, okay, well, this is what they do, and this is what it takes to be one, and it's kind of all the same. This idea of values and purpose-driven leadership really showed me that actually, no, it can be very different.

When asked if that was a pretty significant self-discovery, Chris offered that it probably was not really a discovery, but he had never put it into words. He now says it was important for him to reflect and say it out loud, and when he did, he found that it inspired him, and he recognized that other people responded to it too. From there, it became a theme that ran throughout his work in ways that he never would have imagined before the program. According to Chris, it “sort of came to the surface and then stayed there, for good.”

Chris described the program’s emphasis on race, antiracism, and social justice as groundbreaking for him, explaining that it is the knowledge that he never had before, that could now be applied and used in his work every day. He discussed the ability to identify and describe what different types of bias really look like, and to be able to deeply understand the concept of equity versus equality.

Chris: I think those were things that were so informative for me on an academic level, but more so, as I mentioned earlier, kind of like a gut punch. I was like

*Chris, you have been sleepwalking through this fog, and now you’ve got to confront it . . . so . . . yes . . . it was very impactful.*
Chris described a moment during the privilege walk, after spending substantial time together as a group. He was standing next to a Black cohort member. They started the activity holding hands, but with each question, he was taking more steps forward. He felt the tension in his arm as he tried to hang on to this classmate who he now considered a close friend.

Chris: Listen, I had done that activity as part of another professional learning experience, but it just wasn’t in any way as impactful. It just paled in comparison because of this journey I had just gone through with this colleague . . . who I had struggled with . . . and grappled with about issues of race, racism, and privilege . . . then to have this totally palpable feeling of letting go of her hand and recognizing this is where I’m positioned . . . This is what privilege is, and my friend is behind me . . . I had never understood it that way before because it was just so real when her hand pulled away from mine.

Chris was asked to explain how his understanding of a principal’s responsibilities changed as a result of the program. As he had come into the program with less experience than the other participants and a bit younger than other participants, I was curious to know if his responses would vary significantly from other study participants. Chris explained that he had never associated the work of the principal with the work of racial or social justice. He stated that he had never thought about the responsibility inherent in the principal’s role, but after the program, that changed.

Chris: Now I know the role of the principal is to identify who this school is working for and who it’s not working for, to know which groups of students are being left out . . . and I have to be willing to call it what it is and I have to be
willing to say that we are not serving our Black students as well as we are
serving our White students. We have to ask why is that? And we need to talk
about it directly.

He explained that now he can not understand why that would not be called out. He
added that we have to keep asking why this is happening and we have to continue
confronting whatever it is that could be supporting the systemic racism that lives in our
schools.

Chris: It became so much louder for me . . . I became way less of a diplomat and
much more a change agent willing to take a hard look and have hard
conversations.

For Chris, who had interviewed and worked with many students who were telling him
about their experiences, he either could not or would not hear them, choosing instead to
help them navigate the racist system or avoid the racist structures or people in the
building. He talks about the change he experienced, in both positive and challenging
ways. He said he had new senses.

Chris: It’s hard to explain sometimes to people, but there are so many things that
I didn't think about before, but now all of a sudden they're screaming in my ears
all the time. In every conversation, whether it's about scheduling decisions for
kids or whether it's about discipline conversations or whether it's about . . . I
don't know . . . anything . . . it is just loud and clear all the time, and it never
stops. For the first time, I can hear what they're really saying . . . or maybe for
the first time, I’m choosing not to tune it out.
Chris said there are some unintended consequences of the program and the acquisition of these new heightened senses. He recognizes now the loneliness of being awakened to a new, transformed journey in a school system that is not yet transformed. While he believes in the power of the PPP, he rhetorically asked if the district is creating system transformation or setting up the participants for insanity from the noise they can no longer escape.

I asked Chris, having graduated from the program more than two years ago, whether the noise has numbed or if the screaming is still just as loud?

Chris: I think it's still screaming just as loud and now I'm more likely to scream back at it. On my school team and with my faculty, we have the conversations we need to have, so maybe we are creating change, or maybe I’m becoming the crazy one. I’ll keep pushing and the system keeps pushing back, and part of me wonders what's on the backside? What am I going to be pushed back into? Is it a better world, or is it some kind of an abyss? So I guess when you ask if I feel equipped, it’s yes and it’s no. I feel transformed, for sure, but there’s this whole other part of being able to see and hear that the program doesn’t talk about.

We determined together that the void he mentions and his remaining questions may be a ripe topic for his own valuable future research as we closed out our conversation.

**Data Analysis**

While the data provided in this chapter captures key moments from interviews, many hours of conversation were collected for the study. The interviews were conducted and recorded through teleconferencing and saved to my password-protected private drive. Upon completion of each interview, the recordings were transcribed, and I
followed a very consistent process to review the transcriptions on the same day, to add notes of clarification for dialogue that might not have been clear even a day later. Mertler (2014) guides qualitative researchers to include organization, description, and interpretation in their process and explains that categorizing data to reach themes and eventually conclusions “involves the reduction of the potentially massive amounts of narrative data in the form of interview transcripts, observational field notes, and any existing documents or records you may have collected” (p. 163).

Thinking about the organizational and descriptive process and because of the insider-insider position I hold as a researcher, there were instances where the language used might have been something we both understood in the moment for the interview, but I did not want to lose the meaning upon later review. The process of initial review included rereading the transcript, adding clarifications or questions, and highlighting responses I found that connected directly back to the research questions. For example, upon review of Megan’s first transcript, I noted how clear and unwavering she was in describing the lack of impact she remembered from her preservice administrative training. Although this did not directly relate to issues of social justice or antiracism awakening, or even the district’s principal preparation program, it spoke to the lack of preparation she felt as a transformative leader. I made a note to compare this against the experiences of the other participants.

This process continued throughout the three-part interview series. Each three-part series was completed before starting with a new participant, which also included member checking through follow up Zoom calls to review my notes and confirm some of the inferences I had made in organization and analyzing the transcripts. I shared the
data I had identified as directly responding to the research questions with the participants to confirm that I had interpreted this information correctly. I recall having a specific conversation with Andy about color-blindness and discussing that it was important that I not put words in his mouth. I needed to confirm that this was how he identified his approach to race in his early life. These follow up conversations were necessary to strengthen the study’s validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Megan’s interviews were the first conducted. When I started to study her transcripts, I began to see how Megan’s responses related to the research questions, and more importantly, I could see her story develop. I tried to capture the power of her experience by sharing the narrative in both her own words and through my own summaries, intertwined to reflect the interplay and dialogue. Through her testimony, I came to better appreciate the importance of the qualitative research process and the value of the human stories that can provide answers to educational research questions. It became clear that to understand the ways in which people grow, learn, and transform, we must be willing to ask about their experiences (Efron & Ravid, 2013; Herr & Anderson, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

With each new interview, I followed the same process of first recording my own immediate reactions and questions, then closely reading the transcript, noting questions, clarifying any points of potential future confusion, and highlighting the moments in the interview that provided the most significant connections to the research questions. With Andy’s interview, I also began to highlight dialogue that aligned with Megan’s experiences. In doing so, I was beginning to see at least similarities, if not yet patterns. This required a side-by-side comparison, which was conducted meticulously.
and slowly, section by section, with color coding representing the individual responses that connected to the first research question, along with a growing list of notes and questions in a research journal.

Because each interview started with the same questions, coding could progress through a logical sequence with each transcript side-by-side. Following the same questions and interview structure also helped me check against researcher bias in subsequent interviews. I was deliberate and cautious about consistency in conducting interviews to ask the same questions and not lead participants in the process. Although I knew what the previous participant had shared about their experiences, I was careful not to allow that information to steer the next participant’s interview in any way. This helped confirm that the consistencies I was finding between participants stemmed from their own testimony rather than any research errors (Mertler, 2014).

By the third participant, Chris, I knew more about my own analysis process and coding became more natural. The same process allowed me to document my own understanding and clarifications from the interview transcripts, and then compare the codes about the first research question to the other participants. This process of overlaying new participant stories using the same research questions and interview questions helped preserve the individual value of each principal’s journey while also making similarities and overlaps easily identifiable. The findings are a combination of conclusions about the research questions, along with personal narratives from three unique school leaders whose journeys each provide important insights about leadership and learning.
Findings

The time spent with Megan, Andy, and Chris provided a documentation of three unique journeys into both teaching and school administration, which alone would be worthwhile to capture. Examining where these individual stories overlap adds a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of the professional development program they completed. Through the analysis of the individual stories and the identification of themes common across the participants, valuable insights about principal preparation could be recognized.

Five major themes emerged from the interview series. These themes surfaced consistently and with substantial clarity through the coding of data. Importantly, the themes also overlapped with each other, similar to a braid where individual strands continue to return and touch upon one another. The themes included an identification of the shortcomings of traditional leadership preparation programs; the importance of a cohort structure; the value of explicit and intentional training on social justice literacy; and the significance of opportunities for deep introspection and personal reflection. Finally, and most significant to the research questions, the fifth theme was that conscientization, the awakening described by Freire (2018), is a very real and deeply personal experience. Most importantly, this awakening can occur at least in part because of interventions included in a structured professional development program. Conscientization provided the participants a new set of senses.

The first two interviews provided context to understand where participants entered the work. The intent of these interviews was to determine if their decisions to become educators and education leaders were driven or shaped by their beliefs about
racial or social justice, and then to examine any change in their leadership orientation after program participation. The third interview focused on the interventions they experienced and their responses. The interwoven themes rose to the surface throughout the interview series.

**Shortcomings of Traditional Preparation**

A common theme across participants was the lack of impact from their traditional university or internship-based preparation experiences. Data from the first two interviews with each participant showed similarities in their pre-service experiences, in that the university certification programs including internships or practicums neither inspired or applied to transformative work involving topics of racism or social justice for marginalized students. Each described the experience mostly as a series of courses or tasks that had to be completed to earn certification and advance in their jobs. There was no emphasis on experiences that would result in any form of conscientization and no recollection of connections made to social justice or antiracism. This is consistent with research about the need to strengthen and adapt principal preparation programs (Jean-Marie et al., 2009).

Even as they entered the Principals Preparation Program, though all entered education and school leadership in different ways, none of the participants recognized racial or social justice as part of the job responsibility of the school principal. This reinforces the idea that school leaders are not sufficiently prepared through traditional methods to address the inequity resulting from our current school model (Keleher et al., 2010). When faced with issues of racism, either systemic or individual cases, none of the participants felt equipped to recognize or address the issues, based on any of their
early preparation experiences, much less mobilize a faculty against injustice. Evidence suggests that both universities and school districts are recognizing these deficiencies and working to improve preparation efforts for transformative leadership (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007).

Cohort Structures

Each participant named the value in the development of meaningful relationships between participants. Participants were not specifically aware of the intentional use of this strategy by the district’s program designers who collaborated with the New York City Leadership Academy (NYCLA) in building the program. NYCLA (2017) articulates that one of their essential beliefs about adult learners is that learning must be a social process, stating:

These interactions can foster the collaborative construction of meanings far more nuanced and complex than those single learners could generate alone .... In addition, adults who are able to listen to and engage with colleagues who provide contrasting experiences are more likely first to recognize and then to understand their own personal meaning-making processes, deepen discovery and inquiry, develop critical perspectives, and thus perceive shifts in their thinking more readily over the course of a learning experience.

The school district designed the professional learning to consistently require collaborative interaction around program topics, content, and tasks. Megan, Andy, and Chris consistently described how their own understanding and construction of new knowledge was shaped by their discussions and discoveries with their fellow program participants.
The power of the cohort grouping surfaced as the participants had to apply new
skills around racial literacy and antiracist practices in several simulations or rigorous,
time sensitive tasks while collaborating with their colleagues. The privilege walk, which
forced participants to join hands and advance by stepping forward or backward based on
responses to questions that focused on the impact of race on one’s own life, led cohort
members to break away from their colleagues when they were no longer within reach,
and as all three White subjects named, face their own privilege.

Doing this within the cohort that had struggled and grown together became an
emotional event for the participants as they confronted their own place in an inequitable
system. All three participants reacted to this engagement, not only because of the
construction of the activity but because of the personal connections of the people with
whom they participated. The common response was not only in their emotional
reactions after participating, but also in a consistent call to action to carry out the work
of racial equity and social justice in their jobs as school administrators. The cohort
structure overlapped with intentional training around antiracist leadership, which was the
third theme.

*Training for Antiracism and Social Justice*

Intense training provided on race literacy and antiracism practices, which then
served as a lens to view all potentially marginalized students in the school, was an
emotional “punch” for all three participants. Despite the fact that each entered the work
with their own unique experiences, they all talked extensively about the impact of the
technical training around race, including common language, history, data analysis
training, and the unpacking of bias in the school setting, which had not been a part of any of their preservice training experiences.

Each came to understand that they had been living with their own version of color blindness, which was expressed in part through the “see no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil” metaphor that accompanied each of their stories. This has been the position of critical race theorists throughout their efforts at reform. Researchers like Boutte (2016), DiAngelo (2018), Fergus (2017), Howard (2010), Kendi (2019), Ladson-Billings (1994, 1995), Singleton (2015), and Tatum (2017) have long tried to provide the technical training needed to support the work of racial justice in school systems and greater society. This body of research supports the notion that it is not sufficient to change only the hearts of school leaders, but also there must be knowledge and tools to support the identification and dismantling of socially unjust school practices.

**Opportunities for Personal Reflection and Self-Examination**

Megan, Andy, and Chris each discussed the importance of reflecting more honestly on their own personal beliefs, which resulted as an outcome of the cohort structure and the structured lessons on race. Andy talked specifically about the openness of the room which helped him to become a more reflective, vulnerable learner and leader. Chris discussed the importance of seeing how different paths had defined the unique journeys and beliefs of leaders, which helped him understand that leading from his own experiences and beliefs was a strength. Megan echoed this as she described coming to terms with the idea of leading from her core values. When leadership became associated with her faith, Megan gained confidence in who she was as a leader, along
with the recognition that not everyone leads from the same place or from the same values.

The journey lines and core values exercises were identified by Megan, Andy, and Chris as significant in their experience. It was the combination of discovery, vulnerability, and comradery that the participants recognized as critical to an awakening towards more transformative leadership. Shields (2011) states that a truly transformative leader must demonstrate “a clear sense of the values and beliefs that undergird his or her own identity, be willing to take stands that may require moral courage, to live with tension, and, to some degree, to engage in activism and advocacy” (p. 4). Ultimately, connecting their own leadership practices with their core beliefs allowed these participants to make connections between their work and their own beliefs about race, racism, and their responsibilities as school leaders. These reflective opportunities were embedded throughout the preparation program.

**Conscientization**

Through an examination of each participant’s narrative, an important theme was the understanding that each participant traveled a unique and personal journey toward his or her own conscientization to a different understanding of leadership as a transformative responsibility. While Freire’s (2018) definition of conscientization, or awakening, can be applied broadly, the close examination of each participant’s path demonstrated that arrival at that awakening was driven uniquely by their experiences and continuously evolving construction of meaning. This aligns with a constructivist epistemological framework and provides an important connection to the research questions. Each of the participants shared extensively about moments during the
program when they made connections from their own past experiences that were prompted by program interventions in a close cohort structure that resulted in a change in their understanding of either leadership, their own belief systems, or a transformative concept like privilege. Conscientization, although a common outcome across participants, was a unique and personal experience for Megan, Andy, and Chris.

These themes provide answers to the original research questions. In considering how professional development influences participants’ beliefs about the transformative responsibilities of school leaders, each participant described experiencing a level of transformation through the program. A close examination revealed that these shifts were highly individualized and best represented by the three monkeys metaphor.

Megan talked about never seeing the racism or the barriers faced by her students of color and then described how participation in the program allowed her to see what was taking place in the school system. Andy talked about lacking the words or language to speak and call out racism or social injustice, and the program equipped him with a voice, so that he is now continuously engaged in these conversations. Chris either could not or would not hear the racist undertones in school policies or among school staff, but now he is tuned in to leadership for racial and social justice in a very different way, such that he describes the sound as “screaming” in his ears.

In summary, the research study yielded useful answers to the original questions that are important to the broader question of what our schools need to be and what our school leaders must be ready to do. At the onset of the research, two questions directed the inquiry. First, how would professional learning interventions from a bound system (the Principals Preparation Program) influence the participants’ beliefs about the
transformative responsibilities of school leaders. The second question asked how the participants shared common experiences as they experienced levels of conscientization regarding issues of racial or social justice.

The answers to these questions lived in the narratives provided by the three participants. The collection and analysis of participants’ stories provides insight into the first-hand accounts of those who experienced the PPP and how they changed as a result of the professional learning program. The participants changed because of the professional development in their own individual awakening to a different understanding of their roles and responsibilities as school leaders. They changed in their ability to see, hear, and speak to systemic racism in traditional school structures; and they awakened to a completely different understanding of why they lead. These changes took place at an individual, personal level for the participants and connected directly to their own abilities to construct meaning based on their own personal histories, experiences, and values. The professional learning experiences activated those beliefs and through connections to new knowledge and challenges, created new meaning for each of them.

The second question focused on the commonalities between their experiences. Although each journey was unique, the participants shared common stories of the emotional reactions to discovering more about themselves, for example, in the recognition of their own privilege in a more profound way. The emotional journey, described in terms such as “coming out of a fog” or the “screaming” in their ears, resulted from the braiding of common experiences -- collaboration through the cohort model; intense technical training around race and racism; and opportunities for deep, personal reflection. They also shared a common shift from a transactional orientation on
leadership to a more transformative position, equating their work directly to social justice (Shields, 2018).

It was important to me that their voices be heard and a larger narrative told through their stories. Each of the participants found his or her way into school leadership through a unique journey and each experienced a personal transformation as a result of their participation in the Principals Preparation Program. Prior to the program, all three participants could not articulate a connection between the job of the school principal and racial justice, nor did they possess a high degree of efficacy around their abilities or impact to address these difficult challenges. Their voices add value to the body of knowledge about adult learning and transformative leadership.

Following participation in the program, all three connected this work to the daily functioning and the broader vision of the school principal position. Each of them had significantly changed their beliefs about what the job entailed and increased their own efficacy about confronting racism and social injustice in their school system. The participants, each of whom described their preservice preparation as insufficient, experienced a sense of belonging among a genuinely close, caring, and diverse community of learners. They benefited from tactical and emotional training regarding racial identity and racism, and they participated in deep introspective examination of personal beliefs related to value-laden leadership. The cumulative effect of the program was a new level of conscientization among each participant. The professional learning interventions employed by the Principals Preparation Program, had, in fact, fundamentally altered the way each participant came to understand his or her responsibilities regarding transformative leadership as a school principal.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

Overview of the Study

At the onset of this study, there were growing calls for a new function for schools that included a much more proactive approach to acknowledging and addressing the consistent gaps in opportunities and experiences for children of color. A progressive shift drew support from those who recognized the moral imperative to do better as well as the economic disadvantages of a system that was only successfully preparing a portion of the future workforce. Simultaneously as the research continued, our nation experienced significant historic events like the murder of George Floyd, a nationalist invasion of the Capitol Building, and broader recognition of the Black Lives Matter movement, which sparked dramatic changes in the national dialogue about racism, systemic oppression and violence, and our raised awareness about our responsibilities to identify and disrupt inequity. The problem of practice that led to this research is more visible and riper for discussion than at any other point in our history. Our school leaders, if prepared to do the work that is necessary in our schools, can be part of a solution to a true social pandemic that plagues significant portions of our population.

Current public school structures perpetuate the marginalization of portions of society, most significantly impacting students of color. Few school leaders are sufficiently prepared to identify and address the systemic barriers that impact their students. With growing interest in designing appropriate school leadership preparation
pathways, it is important to understand how specific interventions or professional learning approaches could impact the adult learners who will likely be responsible for reshaping our schools on the front lines for the current and next generation of students. This research study set out to answer two relevant questions:

- How will professional learning interventions influence participants’ beliefs regarding the transformative responsibilities of a school leader?
- What common experiences occur between participants who experienced levels of conscientization around issues of social justice?

To address these questions, a narrative case study provided firsthand accounts of aspiring school leaders who participated in one district’s approach to transformative principal preparation. Through their own words, the participants described their backgrounds and motivation to lead before the preparation program, their experiences during the program, and the impact they felt the program had on their understanding of the work.

Through the analysis of the individual stories and the identification of themes common across the participants, valuable insights about principal preparation could be recognized. Among those themes, there was a recognition of the shortcomings of traditional leadership preparation programs, the importance of a true cohort structure, the value of very explicit and intentional training on social justice literacy, and the significance of opportunities for true introspection and personal reflection. The narratives also revealed that conscientization was a very real and deeply personal experience for each of the participants. Most importantly, this awakening can occur at least in part as a result of the interventions included in a structured professional
development program, as demonstrated through the context of the local district hosting the research.

This final chapter, in addition to the previously stated problem of practice and research questions, will provide several important sections. The research questions represent an attempt to advance an existing body of knowledge established through extensive research on several topics including leadership theory, transformative leadership theory, critical race theory, adult learning theory, and critical action research. The findings of the study will be examined within the context of the body of research that provided the foundation for truly understanding the problem of practice.

The chapter will include specific recommendations for the host site of the research as well as the broader educational community and those interested in advancing both leadership and social justice efforts through school systems. While not entirely generalizable, the findings provide implications for decision makers in school systems, designers of professional learning, participants in similar programs, and action researchers interested in using narrative approaches to better understand or interpret the complexities of school leadership preparation or conscientization. Also included are my intentions as a researcher to share and apply the findings of the research with the local school district and partners to ensure that new knowledge can be useful for the school system and for the future school leaders tasked with reshaping our policies and practices for more socially just schools.

Reflections on the research process are included, detailing discoveries made throughout the lengthy and personally meaningful journey. As with all research, there are certain limits to the impact of the research conclusions, which will be included in
this final chapter. It is my hope that this research project not only provides some answers, but also sparks many questions that future researchers can pursue as we work toward an ever-increasing understanding of the role of our school leaders. I have included some of the questions that I believe rise out of the research. Finally, this closing chapter will restate what I believe are the most significant and useful conclusions about the research questions with the hope that they will provide a genuine advancement in the fields of leadership development, transformative leadership, and adult learning for the benefit of all students who currently face marginalization as a result of inequitable practices and systems.

**Connections to Existing Literature**

Through the case studies examining the experiences of Megan, Andy, and Chris in the principal preparation program, themes emerged that provide answers to the original research questions. The participants named the deficiencies of their own traditional preparation programs in preparing them for transformative work. Each discussed the benefits of a cohort structure that created an alliance of partners during the intense district preparation program, especially helpful in their ability to see beyond the limits of their own experiences. It was through the acquisition of specific antiracism tools that the aspiring principals gained the skills and confidence to grow in transformative leadership. Opportunities for individual reflection on core values and beliefs resulted in heightened awareness and greater willingness on the part of the participants to see, hear, and speak differently. Finally, each participant shared stories that showcased the uniquely personal and individual journey that they experienced as part of their conscientization journey. The themes can be examined and supported
through their connections to existing research in the fields of critical race theory, andragogy, and transformative leadership theory.

One of the most important findings from the narratives was the lack of experience or preparation for transformative leadership. Each participant specifically cited the void in preparation through their initial certification programs in school administration and explicitly stated that preservice training through their university programs and internal school district professional development prior to the principal preparation program had minimal impact on their ability to confront or even identify racial injustice in the school setting. Jean-Marie et al. (2009) state, “Social justice issues are often marginalized within educational leadership degree and certification programs, as such an orientation is considered ‘soft’ in comparison to more traditional topics such as organizational theory, principalship, school law, and finance” (p.1). This shortcoming of traditional preparation programs is documented by Darling-Hammond et al. (2007), Keleher et al. (2010), and Shields (2018), to name just a few.

The study participants from two different cohorts highlighted the significance of the group dynamic of the principal preparation program. The New York City Leadership Academy (NYCLA) asserts that the creation of knowledge is inherently a social endeavor, generative and optimized by the interactions between learners, thought partners, or even adversarial points of view. In their organizational belief statement about learning, they state:

Adults who are able to listen to and engage with colleagues who provide contrasting experiences are more likely first to recognize and then to understand their own personal meaning-making processes, deepen discovery and inquiry,
develop critical perspectives, and thus perceive shifts in their thinking more readily over the course of a learning experience (NYCLA, 2017, p. 1).

Each participant discussed the change they experienced alongside their colleagues. Chris recalled the impact of the privilege walk exercise after building relationships with his program colleagues. He described how he felt as he pulled away from other colleagues to the more advantaged position in the activity: “This is really what privilege is, and my friend is behind me, and I had never understood it that way before because it was just so real when her hand pulled away from mine.”

The cohort structure was intentionally designed to put participants in the position to struggle alongside people who had different experiences, knowledge, and talents. In working under pressure with their colleagues, participants gained experience in interdependence and reciprocal accountability, valuing the collective needs of the group above the individual. To grow the skills of working together, especially regarding issues of social justice, is instantly applicable to the work of transformative school leaders (NYCLA, 2017). Megan, Andy, and Chris gave their most emotional testimony when talking about the discoveries they made as a direct result of their close relationships with fellow cohort members whose backgrounds were different from their own. Espinoza et al. (2017) identify learning through a cohort process as a key practice recommended for developing principal effectiveness in their policy brief regarding leadership development.

Through the PPP, participants received very intentional training on the history, language, resources, and methods needed to confront racism and social injustice that was essential according to all three of the study’s participants. This aligns with existing
research that documents disparities in the educational system and the need to name and recognize these truths about schools. Keleher et al (2010) state, “Failing to pay attention to structural racism in leadership development programs and nonprofit leadership leaves unchallenged several issues that undermine the effectiveness and sustainability of community-based organizations and racial justice work” (p. 3). Likewise, in describing the lack of competence to address issues of race by White administrators, Davis (2017) states, “Most school administrators are not prepared to take on a role of racial advisor. In fact, the role is unexamined in school leadership research and unexplored in educational administration preparation coursework” (p. 63).

Research confirms that students of color face barriers in the school system, while an equally wide body of research supports the fact that the requisite skills or knowledge to address the barriers continues to be excluded from school leader preparation (Boutte, 2016, Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Fergus, 2017; Howard, 2010; Kendi, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995; Singleton, 2015; Tatum, 2013, 2017). Ladson-Billings (1994) noted more than twenty years ago that she was met not only with challenges, but outright hostility when she wanted to discuss issues of race in education. The participants in this research study, each of whom has been trained and hired as a school principal within the past five years, corroborated that prior to the principal preparation program, this important topic had not been part of their professional development journey. Likewise, each identified that the inclusion of very intentional and explicit training on racial literacy, history, and strategies was a key factor in changing their understanding of their jobs.
Andy reiterated that when he did not have the knowledge base, it was impossible to name the offenses he witnessed and consequently almost insurmountable to address them. He described frequently feeling conflicted about the practices he observed in schools but felt that he had no voice to confront or disrupt the practices. New tools gave Andy a voice to not only name his own beliefs, but also to name the biases, oppressions, or racist practices against students that were in place in his school. Andy’s experience aligns with Singleton’s (2015) calls for courageous conversations about race that include first acknowledging that there is a knowledge gap that prevents us from advancing the work of racial healing. In introducing Singleton’s work, Ladson-Billings states, “I also believe that most educators do not know enough about how race and culture impact everyone’s lives” (p. xv). Kendi (2019) supports this important notion in saying, “If we don’t do the basic work of defining the kind of people we want to be in language that is stable and consistent, we can’t work toward stable, consistent goals” (p. 17).

This recognition of the importance of language and articulation of the specific problems, well established in the body of research on critical race theory, is summarized by Delgado et al. (2013):

> Our social world, with its rules, practices, and assignments of prestige and power, is not fixed; rather, we construct it with words, stories and silence. But we need not acquiesce in arrangements that are unfair and one-sided. By writing and speaking against them, we may hope to contribute to a better, fairer world” (p. 3).
The research participants consistently emphasized that they grew towards transformative practices through professional development that gave them a new toolbox to see, hear, and speak against social injustice and racism.

Brown et al. (2018) recognize that adult learning is personal and will vary based on the needs and experiences of each learner. They assert that if leadership is in fact value-laden, then leadership development programs must put aspiring transformative leaders in the position to have their beliefs challenged and to recognize where they philosophically and morally stand in comparison to others. This speaks to the value of deep reflection and introspective opportunities, especially within a cohort model.

Megan talked about the impact of the learning being amplified as a result of her reflections throughout the intensive professional development experience, which ultimately led to an emotional shift about her role as a leader. Andy and Chris both discussed the importance of their new ability to look more deeply into their own personal beliefs about leadership, privilege, and social justice. Through their interactions with others and their own deep reflection, the participants became more acutely aware of their own beliefs and shortcomings in the difficult work of social justice. The district’s position, constructed from the body of research on adult learning, was that leadership and learning are social but also constructed from the experiences each learner brings to the learning. Aguilar (2016) offered that adults are not “empty vessels,” and each comes with a valuable and important knowledge base that adds value to learning with others (p. 190). The program, through activities like the core values exercise, journey lines, and their personal vision statement, forced the participants to look inward and grapple with who they were as individuals and who they would be as
leaders. Opportunities for reflection and validation of participants’ experiences align with research on constructivist approaches to adult learning (Aguilar, 2016; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The idea that the path to conscientization is an intensely personal experience was the final and most significant theme from each of the participants. Their testimony connects to a large body of research around constructivist epistemology. Megan, Andy, and Chris each provided a story of transformation that aligned with an awakening, much like the acquisition of new senses - the abilities to see, hear, and speak. Beneath the awakening, they each experienced the preparation program and the interventions in their own unique and personal way. Common recognition of deficiencies in their previous training, the value they placed in the cohort model, their appreciation of explicit training for racial and social justice, and the opportunities for continuous personal reflection, were all important elements in the construction of a highly personalized evolution for each participant. These themes paved the way for conscientization.

This theme is supported heavily in what we know about social constructivism, which describes the process of learning as a generation of new meaning (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The participants shared during their interviews that the interventions led to a transformation in their own knowledge and beliefs about leadership, supporting a body of research about constructivist theories of learning. The transformative worldview connects constructivist theory to the belief that through our work we can develop the skills to improve conditions for those who have been marginalized or oppressed (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). As noted in the literature review, the constructivist transformative position recognized by the study’s participants has been
well established through scholarly research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Furthermore, Knowles (2012) proposed that constructivist approaches are essential in adult learning.

The notion of conscientization, the awakening to new senses by our participants, stems from Freire (2018) and is extended by Shields (2009, 2011, 2016, 2018). Each of the participants explained that their understanding of their work, their role as a school principal, changed because of their participation in the district’s preparation program. Megan talked about the person she is now and the conversations she has related to racial injustice that would have never occurred prior to completing the program, because often she did not even see it. This level of conscientization is described by Shields (2009): “Critical awareness becomes the basis for critical reflection, for critical analysis, and finally for activism or critical action against injustices of which one has become aware” (p. 5). Building on Shields’ work, Barrett (2012) adds, “The awareness component of transformative leadership theory requires that a school leader work toward recognition—both for her/himself, and for society at large” (p. 48). Through their narratives, this notion of awakening to a more critical consciousness came to life and validated a body of research about leadership, constructivism, adult learning, and transformative leadership.

In summary, existing literature and the data generated from this study support several findings. Critical race theorists have long contended that antiracist leaders must be better equipped if they are to successfully lead efforts for reform (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995; Singleton, 2016; Tatum, 2012). This theme emerged from the participants and made a significant change in their ability to see, hear, and speak to racism and social
injustice in their work. These new skills must be introduced in ways that acknowledge the deficiencies of transactional rational-structural approaches to leadership preparation, value cohort design, offer relevant and explicit social justice training, and emphasize authentic personal reflection. Through these approaches, each supported by a wide body of research, aspiring school leaders may be more likely to awaken to the new senses needed to transform schools (Aguilar, 2013, 2016; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Keleher et al., 2010; Knowles, 2012, Shields, 2011).

Finally, conscientization is a deeply personal and individual experience that will take place in alignment with each leader’s unique experiences, best understood through a constructivist, transformative epistemological orientation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Schiro, 2013). The research questions sought to understand the experiences of individual participants in a school district’s principal preparation program, both individually and in common. The ensuing recommendations live comfortably within substantial supporting research, while also expanding our understanding through a firsthand account of their lived experiences.

**Recommendations**

For a variety of reasons, an increasing number of school districts are planning or implementing principal professional development programs and recognizing the importance of leadership development. For those who are considering the resource implications of investing in principal preparation, it is important to know the details about what the endeavor will require and what will be gained from the work. For those charged with designing or selecting a leadership development curriculum, it is helpful to consider what the school district hopes to achieve through its efforts. As part of a local
district’s effort to develop and implement a principal preparation program, I have seen firsthand the supply-side growth of vendors or partner agencies willing to provide school district leaders with ready-made products that can be quickly adapted to the district’s needs. In some cases, this may in fact meet the needs of the district, but decision makers and designers cannot know what they need until they take the time to dig into the root issues they are hoping to address.

Conducting a case study on the backside of a district’s efforts provided a lens to examine the measures of success in a different way from the existing body of research. Conducting the interview series with the study’s participants allowed their stories to be part of the ongoing pursuit of improved knowledge about school leadership and the role of school leaders in combating social injustice. The research also adds depth to the understanding of how individuals grow and evolve in response to professional development efforts, which was at the heart of the research questions. The findings from this action research study support several specific recommendations for school districts and designers of professional development for aspiring leaders. I have drawn four specific recommendations from the research.

Recommendation 1) Collect and apply qualitative data, specifically the voices of learners, in the design and evaluation of professional learning for transformative leadership development.

A well-constructed plan for system-level change will consider the end goals of the school district and should focus on student outcomes. This does not mean, however, that quantitative achievement scores or discipline percentages are the only indicators of growth from a district’s endeavors. If the goal of professional development is to prepare
the hearts and minds of adults in the system to address injustice differently, the best way to measure success may be to ask those who are involved in the plan before, during, and after the program to share their experiences and stories.

Continuously circling back to the individual testimonies of the participants can profoundly shape the outcomes of the programmatic efforts of a district. Ivankova (2015) discusses reflection as an important part of improvement efforts: “Reflection is a deliberate process in which the participants who want to transform their practices engage by going through a spiral of cycles of critical and self-critical action and reflection” (pp. 33-34). In the case study for this research, the school district had underutilized qualitative reflective tools, instead relying on rubrics or performance assessments to determine if the participants were meeting program goals. The results of this research study will provide district leaders with an enhanced understanding of the experiences of their aspiring leaders, which can help system-level leaders and designers of professional learning better understand the impact of their interventions, as well as provide a mirror with which to critically examine their own practices and system goals.

**Recommendation 2) Utilize cohort grouping to amplify the impact of professional learning with aspiring leaders.**

Megan, Andy, and Chris each independently offered that they would not have grown in the ways they believe they had without the group structure provided by the program. Additionally, the diversity of the group in experiences, age, race, ethnicity, gender, learning styles, to name a few, created the discourse that allowed participants to not only grow in appreciation for colleagues who were different, but grow in their appreciation for the value of heterogeneity in general. Each of the participants spoke
about this, specifically citing the impact of the journey lines and privilege walk exercises. The journey lines activity which required participants to draw and share their own personal and professional pathways that led them to the principal preparation program were noted by the participants as a significant point in the program when they began to simultaneously look both inward and outward -- meaning they were seeing that the goal was not to all become the same kind of leader, but rather utilize their own journey to grow stronger for the diverse organization. In their *Essential Beliefs about Adult Learners*, The New York City Leadership Academy (2017) offers, “Learning is also optimal when it takes place through social interaction; indeed, these interactions can foster the collaborative construction of meanings far more nuanced and complex than those single learners could generate alone” (p. 2). While each program will have different goals, the cases studied for this research strongly support the cohort design as an effective method for moving individuals towards professional learning goals, which in this case involved conscientization.

**Recommendation 3) It is a mistake to assume that leadership development must address solely adaptive processes - Provide intentional, contextually appropriate, technical preparation of leaders.**

The vast body of research on leadership theory and leadership development can be overwhelming. The existing body of knowledge helps build a foundation to understand leadership, recognizing that there are approaches to leadership that favor management theory and the rational-structural paradigm of leadership and those that move leaders to a more adaptive, and then transformational leadership style (Bass, 1994, Burns, 1978, Evan, 1996, Brooks et al., 2009). Heifetz (1994, 2009) elevated leadership
theory to clarify differences between technical and adaptive, and the transactional or transformational types of leaders. Leadership theorists like Shields (2012, 2015, 2016, 2017) push to move leadership more permanently to the transformative, reconstructionist approaches that would be favored by scholars like Freire (2018). It would be easy to consider these approaches to leadership from an evolutionary timeline perspective, with more technical aspects being left behind as antiquated. However, one of the most clear and obvious common experiences from the interviews in this case study was the value of technical training in the language and literacy of transformative, antiracist approaches to leadership, especially in the context of their own district and schools.

Each interview subject offered that they could either not see, hear, or speak to the institutional injustices they were expected to address until after they received very explicit and technical training around the topic of social and racial injustice. A strong recommendation for school districts hoping to empower leaders to do this courageous work would be to invest the time and resources to build the leaders’ toolboxes. Specific tools that were helpful to the participants in this case study included resources by Fergus (2017), Singleton (2015), Tatum (2013, 2017). Additional resources that I found helpful in developing the foundation for understanding the district’s efforts and working with the study’s participants included Boutte (2016), DiAngelo (2018), Howard (2010), Kendi (2019), and Kirylo (2013), among others. It would be a worthwhile investment to focus not only on the hearts of future leaders, but also on the head and hands, equipping them with the new tools they need to address the challenges of racial and social injustice.
Recommendation 4) Include the personal experiences, journeys, personalities, and core beliefs of aspiring leaders as integral in their journey toward transformative awakening.

It could seem daunting at the onset of a program design to determine that some of the program’s direction will be fluid and adaptable depending on the personalities and the needs of the participants. However, to plan a program that is too rigid would diminish the potential power of the constructivist approaches that were identified as significant in this case study. The construction of new meaning around the content of the program or curriculum will happen most effectively when it is integrated with the individual strengths and experiences of the leaders. Efron and Ravid (2013) state, “Schools are complex, socially constructed institutions that comprise multiple realities. The meaning assigned to school experience is varied, shaped by individuals’ subjective interpretations, and influenced by their personal cultural, and historical background” (p. 40). This becomes even more important when the programmatic goals are inherently tied to personal conscientization or a critical awakening to the realities of racial and social injustice in the school system.

Taylor (1998) offers that individuals can create meaning that fundamentally changes the way they perceive and respond to the world when learning occurs through a constructivist approach, relying heavily on their own personal interpretations of both their past experiences and the relationships their learning will have to their own future. Both the testimony of the interview subjects and the body of research about Freire’s notion of conscientization support a constructivist approach to adult learning that allows for individualistic, ongoing personal development. Furthermore, Freire’s
concept of a critical awakening is not intended to be a final destination for anyone, but rather the beginning of an ongoing personal journey, as explained by Dawson (2018): “Emancipatory transformation is not an event or classroom project but a sustainable way of being supported by a community of people who are motivated and committed by their own need for conscientization enlightenment” (p. 121). After asking the study’s subjects to richly describe the type of transformation they experienced because of the program, it was clear that each of them arrived at a more awakened understanding of their leadership responsibilities not only because they better understood the external expectations of leadership, but equally because they better understood themselves as individuals and leaders. This introspective journey was integral to their experience.

Implementation Plan

Efron and Ravid (2013) state, “One of the greatest contributions of action research is that it encourages educators to learn from each other by sharing and advancing their experience-based knowledge (p. 234). As a researcher, I was positioned as an “insider in collaboration with other insiders” (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 40). Having been on the original design team for a district level principal preparation program and then on the initial faculty, I maintain relationships with those who will continue the program in the future. While I have shifted away from the direct role of curriculum design and instructor, my colleagues are aware of and interested in my research and the findings. I continue to serve in an advisory role for the Principal Preparation Program and collaborate closely with the program director for ongoing program improvements.
There are several aspects of the research that will be most useful to the school district. First the literature review assembled as part of the study will be available to current and future designers of the program to help them make sound decisions and consider various perspectives. The literature review will only be helpful, however, if they continue to target specific goals and questions. The research questions for this study are ongoing and can be used repeatedly with future cohorts, along with the structures used to respond to the questions. The four recommendations provided previously in this chapter will be shared with the design team and the senior leadership team of the district, along with a description of the research methods used.

The three-part interview series is a tool that can be applied in leadership development efforts in multiple ways for the district moving forward, as it allows an examination of individual’s backgrounds; their current levels of knowledge, skills, and aptitudes; and a means through which to assess the impact of the district’s interventions. Additionally, because of this research study, the capacity to collect and analyze data from qualitative sources can potentially grow and add a different perspective by which the district measures its own progress and growth areas. A summary and action plan to accompany the research study will be developed for distribution to school district leaders.

Additionally, the summary of findings and related recommendations will provide a foundation for presentations that I can offer in a variety of professional settings to audiences interested in leadership development, continuous improvement efforts in education, racial and social justice, and qualitative research methods. It is my intention
to apply to present my findings at future professional conferences outside of the host school district.

**Reflection on Action Research and Methodology**

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) assert that the types of data collected for research should be determined by the specific research questions and which data are most likely to align with the goals of the work. They offer that in qualitative studies the questions will guide the researcher to the research methods. Interviews, for example, are a preferred method of data collection when the researcher needs to understand the behaviors, memories, experiences, or interpretations of their participants that cannot otherwise be observed. As qualitative data is built on constructivist principles, the interview is a window into the perceptions that make up a participant’s reality. “A central characteristic of all qualitative research is that individuals construct reality in interaction with their social worlds. Constructivism thus underlies what we are calling a basic qualitative study” (Merriam & Tisdell, p. 24).

From the onset of the process, I was highly motivated to use qualitative methods to pursue answers to the research questions. With an orientation toward constructivism and a transformative worldview, I wanted to demonstrate the power that exists in the individual stories of school leaders. Particularly regarding an issue like racial justice, I did not want to diminish the layers of experiences and complexities that make up someone’s emotions or beliefs. Bogden et al. (2016) offer, “When we reduce people’s words and acts to statistical equations, we can lose sight of the human side of social life. When we study people qualitatively, we get to know them personally and experience what they experience in their daily struggles in society” (p. 9). Simply put, pre- and
post-surveys or scores from ratings scales seemed to dehumanize what I was hoping to discover. Cresswell and Plano Clark (2018) explain that “transformative research provides a voice for these participants, raising their consciousness or advancing an agenda for change to improve their lives. It becomes a united voice for reform and change” (p. 39). In examining literature about the problem of practice, there seemed to be an absence of the voices of the leaders that so many sought to prepare for a different kind of leadership.

I found through the interview series with each candidate that my role as insider allowed for a degree of comfort and security with the subjects. They knew that I had insider knowledge of the program and the interventions they experienced which allowed us to engage in some degree of common language and shared memories. The conversations had a level of raw honesty that might not have occurred if a preexisting relationship had not been in place. I recall occasions during each interview when the participants struggled emotionally to explain the leadership stance they had entering the program and how after the program, it is very hard for them to look back at some of their own beliefs or actions as leaders regarding racial justice. It was as if through the interviews they were given permission to talk about their own transformation in a setting that was designed to provide them a safe space to say certain things out loud. An example of this was when Megan talked about her inability to see race and racism in her work. She grappled with the words to explain why she missed certain things, saying “I just don’t know, I just … don’t know,” but quickly followed with excitement that she feels like she has this new vision in her work that allows her to see, which is now an inseparable part of the way she defines leadership.
One aspect of the research that was, and remains challenging, is the ability to zoom in to the experience of a small sample of the program’s participants and find peace that it is sufficiently valuable to tell one story at a time. Recommendations for future research will be included later in this chapter as the vast opportunities with the line of questioning, the topics, and the number of participants in the program made it difficult to narrow the focus of the research. As a researcher, I had the nagging feeling that the answers to understand how to train all school principals to eliminate racial and social justice in the world should be uncovered through the research. While I always understood that outcome would not be accomplished through this research project, it was nevertheless difficult to reign in the broad spectrum of possibilities. I find comfort in the selected research methods, despite the limitations, through my belief that each individual participant’s story has value and deserves to be told. Although the sample size was small, there are significant themes that advance knowledge and provided answers to the research questions. As a researcher, I can reconcile my need to know and do more research with the recognition that through individual stories, a greater tapestry of truth is woven one story at a time.

Regarding the validity and reliability of the findings, I followed several measures to consistently check against my own bias or misinterpretations. In determining the structure of the research process, it was necessary to research best practices for interviewing, data collection, data analysis, and reporting. Prior to the interviews taking place, the COVID-19 pandemic changed the way schools operated but also introduced most educators to teleconferencing as part of our daily routines. This proved valuable as recordings of long conversations over Zoom might have previously been awkward or
presented technical challenges for both interviewer and interviewee, but now seemed like a normal daily practice. The teleconferences were uploaded to a reliable transcription service which made data analysis, coding, and member checking fairly easy compared to what I had expected at the beginning of the journey.

Efron and Ravid (2013) describe numerous methods to increase the trustworthiness of a study including triangulation, disciplined subjectivity, member checking, and data audits. Consistently referring to these strategies to ensure continuous scrutiny allowed me to feel comfortable with my methods and conclusions. Most importantly, the use of thick description, interweaving direct quotes, paraphrasing, and my own interpretations, allowed me to continuously monitor my efforts to accurately tell the stories of the participants. Breaking the interviews into a series that looked chronologically at the progression of the participants’ paths toward leadership and conscientization was useful to confirm, challenge, and validate the information they shared along the way.

As a researcher, I confirmed that I appreciate and value the qualitative approach to research, at least as it applies to educational action research. Fassinger and Morrow (2013) point out that it is more likely in qualitative research to lift the voices of the members of a community as equally valuable to the existing scholarly literature and move between both sources to develop or improve knowledge. The answers to the research questions for this study required both the examination of scholarly literature and the firsthand accounts of the aspiring school leaders who have participated in a preparation program with a clear social justice intent.
Limitations and Recommendations for future research

The intent of a qualitative case study is rarely to generalize or provide positivist theory about the subject. It is to provide a greater understanding of the experiences, beliefs, and reality as understood by the individuals who participated in the research, whether they were part of a bound case or unique phenomenon (Bogden, 2016). While there is great value in documenting the experiences and perceptions of program participants, I have not attempted to present more than it is - the experiences of several members of one district’s attempts at a principal preparation program. Through the research process, it became evident that there was a shortage of participant voice in the body of knowledge, and this study sought to add the voices of at least a small sample of aspiring principals. Obvious limitations exist by nature of the design of the study. There are many aspects of principal preparation that continue to need exploration, through both qualitative, quantitative and mixed-methods research. This study provides one snapshot of what happened in one district’s attempts and should not be read as a generalizable statement on the impact of similar pipeline efforts.

Another limitation of this study is that it provides the views only from the participant’s perspective. A principal’s work, as with any leader’s role, does not exist in isolation. To lead, one must have interactions and relationships with those who will be led. In a school, the impact of a principal’s leadership lands on teachers, the supporting staff, parents, and community partners, and most importantly, the students. This qualitative review of the experiences of program participants does not include confirming or disconfirming data from those who have been impacted by the new principal’s leadership. Efron and Ravid (2013) explain that a case study seeks to
understand a specific phenomenon by focusing on an example of that phenomenon: “To shed light on the larger phenomenon, the researcher explores in depth the selected entity, actions, and the reasons for these actions” (p. 41). The study did not attempt to examine the decisions and actions of the leaders after the program. The purpose was to focus very specifically on their own experiences as part of a very clearly defined case study - the principal preparation program as a professional development event.

Looking at the experience of aspiring principals during their pre-service preparation is only one way to examine the potential for disrupting racial inequity and social injustice in the school system. There is a wide body of research, and equally wide opportunity for research, on the impact of professional development for teachers or district level administrators as transformative leaders. Shields (2017) provided the opinion that as school leaders ascend to roles with broader scope in school districts such as assistant superintendent positions or superintendencies, a focus on transformative impact remains possible and identifies several patterns among district level efforts to enact change. My own research is not designed to provide a picture of anything other than the principals’ experiences. It would be valuable to consider how educators in different positions become effectively transformed, trained, or prepared to lead socially, critically conscious work for marginalized student populations.

Additionally, it would be valuable to examine the system wide changes that stem from school-based leaders committed to social change, particularly those who have participated in preparation programs with social justice or racial justice objectives. There is value in understanding the transformative experiences of individuals who participate in preparation programs, but there is a follow up story that
needs to be told about their next steps as school leaders. Knowing how a level of conscientization actualizes in practice would be a logical follow up to this research. For example, the participants in this study have testified to the new senses they acquired as a result of their experiences in the program, but not how Megan, Andy, and Chris are enacting transformative leadership in their policy decisions, their approaches to family engagement, curricular leadership, and their hiring and staff development decisions. While it is important to know that the interventions of the program resulted in the changed hearts and minds of the participants, it is equally important to consider if the work results in impact for students and families. Likewise, examining the impact at a system level can offer a balcony level view of the transformative possibilities across a district when multiple principals with common training experiences take the realm at a district’s schools.

Summary

Our school systems create measurable gaps in opportunities, achievement, and experiences for students of color and other marginalized groups. This is not a failure in implementation but a product of the design of the system. Whether motivated by progressive educational goals, economic interests, or social justice, scholars examining the outcomes that result from our current model consistently agree that it is outdated and ineffective (Kay, 2013; Senge, 2012; Wagner, 2006). Efforts at reform are implemented in almost all school systems in the nation to address disparities in student outcomes but attempts to improve the existing system have yet to move the needle in meaningful ways. School reform will require significant and intentional disruption of the systems and structures that favor those with advantage and power.
For school systems that recognize this need, there is an opportunity for courageous redesign that would put equity at the center of their efforts. Unfortunately, these efforts require courageous, equipped leaders who can recognize and seize the opportunities to change systems, hearts, and minds on behalf of their students. There are pockets of success throughout the country and school leaders who commit to the work daily, but there are not enough of them to steer each school and district toward a new future of educational possibilities. This was the problem found by our fictional superintendent, Dr. Bradley, in the introduction to this study. As a new leader committed to addressing the very real challenges for her district, she could not find the leaders who were equipped or committed to a new vision for schools that disrupted practices of racism and oppression. They could neither see, hear, nor speak to the challenges of racism in the district’s schools. For Dr. Bradley, the answer was to create the leaders she needed.

This problem is real and pervasive, as evidenced by a growing body of research and a growing supply of providers of curriculum or facilitation for principal pipelines. The literature review conducted at the onset of this research project provided a foundation of knowledge about our educational system, including the origins and evolutions since the flawed implementation of The Committee of Ten’s recommendations (Senge, 2012). Leadership theory, including the research of Bass (1994), Burns (1978), Heifetz (1994, 2009), and Shields (2009, 2011, 2016, 2017, 2018), provided structures to better understand the motivations and potential held by school leaders, specifically principals. Freire’s (2018) concept of conscientization, or an awakening to critical consciousness, was essential to understanding the leadership
orientation or readiness of school leaders to carry out the needed work in schools. Knowles’ (2012) research on andragogy helped create understanding about the adult learning process, which informs a deeper understanding of the research questions focusing on the impact of professional development. Finally, numerous scholars built a strong foundation of knowledge about racial identity, racism, and critical race theory that made it possible to better understand both the problems and potential solutions that must be confronted in our schools (Bouette, 2016; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Fergus, 2017; Howard, 2010; Kendi, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995; Singleton, 2015; Tatum, 2013, 2017).

This action research study sought to better understand how aspiring school leaders become transformed or awakened because of a school district’s intentional efforts. Building on existing research, the case study of one district’s efforts looked closely at what happened to three of their aspiring leaders when they experienced a set of interventions designed to awaken their critical consciousness about their social and racial justice responsibilities as school leaders. Specifically, I wanted to know how the professional development made them feel, how they changed, and the impact the program had on their beliefs about their roles. I also wanted to examine the commonalities between their experiences to better understand the patterns that emerged from this district’s efforts. To awaken to a new understanding of leadership is a significant change for an adult learner and probing into these individuals’ personal stories felt important and missing from existing research. It is my hope that their firsthand accounts provide a new dimension to the existing knowledge in this arena that expands efforts to grow the leaders that our schools and students need.
The stories told by the participants led to several important findings from this specific case study. First, the individualistic paths each of the participants had experienced on their journey to administrative certification had not resulted in any consideration of their responsibilities as leaders of racial or social justice, nor had any of their professional development experiences as teachers or assistant principals. Interestingly, while the deficits and inefficiencies in producing equitable outcomes for all students has been well documented and supported by substantial research, efforts to address these challenges in traditional principal preparation were almost nonexistent for these participants. Years of traditional preparation for these school leaders, identified among the best in their district, still left them unable to see, hear, or speak to racial injustice in their work. The experience created by their school district, a principal pipeline with structured professional learning experiences, changed the way they understood racial injustice in their schools, their own lives, and in the responsibilities they assumed in their roles as school leaders. Encouragingly, evidence suggests that more and more preparation programs are making the needed shifts (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007).

There were several powerful themes that emerged in response to the research questions. First, it was well established that each participant was under-prepared for transformative work upon entry into the district’s program. Through their stories, they each shared that the cohort design of the program resulted in vastly different outcomes than the individual degree paths that had characterized their prior experiences. All the participants benefited from very intentional and explicit technical training on issues of social justice and antiracism that included applicable tools, the language to name the
injustices they would find in the school system, and strategies to combat racist structures. It was not enough to simply inspire the participants. They shared that they had to be equipped and prepared. The program encouraged participants to challenge their own thinking, resulting in emotional deep dives about their own values and beliefs. Finally, each of the participants talked about a very real change they experienced as intensely personal and individualistic. Each participant’s awakening was unique and shaped by their own personal schema, which ties back to research about constructivist approaches to adult learning.

Our nation’s schools, as represented in the experiences of the host school district for this study, have a well-documented problem of practice. We need to disrupt and redesign the systems and structure of schools to break the practices that privilege some and oppress others. This was true before the profound events that rocked our national consciousness in 2020. Now is the time to seize our opportunities for reform before the window closes. To enact change, we need school leaders who understand their responsibilities and have the tools, courage, and urgency to lead transformative change for all students. If we want to better understand how to prepare these leaders, we need to talk to them. We need to understand how and why they have developed a new, transformative, critical, and activist orientation to their work, and what experiences helped them in their journey.

None of the participants in this study identified a mission of social justice as their motivation to enter the education field or become school leaders. Intentional professional learning experiences awakened a realization for each of them that true leadership is best found through an examination and acceptance of core values and
beliefs. Furthermore, by bringing issues of race and social justice to the forefront of their learning experiences, in the context of very raw and real introspective reflection, they found an awakening and empowerment. They were able to see it, to speak to it, and to hear it consistently, and could abandon the wise-monkey approach that best characterized their prior experiences. The orientation of leadership as value-centered fundamentally altered the way they understood both leadership and the principalship. They understood that education is never neutral. Their stories can help guide our path toward preparing the leaders our students need.
REFERENCES


Counts, G. (1932). *Dare the school build a new social order?* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.


Gorski, P. (2019). *Avoiding racial equity detours: Students experiencing racism can’t wait for schools to move at their own pace and comfort level*. Educational Leadership.


ToolsHero: https://www.toolshero.com/leadership/adaptive-leadership/


https://www.nycleadershipacademy.org/about-us/


https://projects.propublica.org/miseducation/district/4502700


Shoho, Alan. (2006). *Dare professors of educational administration build a new social order: Social justice within an American perspective*. Journal of Educational Administration. 44.


Southern Regional Education Board. (2007). *Good principals aren’t born—they’re mentored: Are we investing enough to get the school leaders we need?* Atlanta.


APPENDIX A

PRE-INTERVIEW ONLINE PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE

June 2020 - Google Form

In 100 words or less:

1) Describe your early experiences with school as either positive, negative, or somewhere in between. Provide a very brief explanation for your response.

2) Recall when you determined that you wanted to become an educator and briefly explain how you came to that decision.

3) Recall when you decided to move into education leadership and briefly explain how you came to that decision.

4) Share your first memory of race and awareness of race as part of one’s identity. If not already included in your response, share your first memory of witnessing or experiencing racism and how you responded.

5) Summarize your personal leadership narrative that was developed during the Aspiring Principals Academy experience.
APPENDIX B
THREE-PART INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview 1: Early Experiences - life, profession, racial identity, social activism
(July 2020)

Part 1:

- Describe again in more detail, when and why did you decide to become an educator?
- Tell me about your preservice preparation to become a teacher including your student teaching experience?
- Did it match the reasons you described as your motivation to become a teacher?
- Tell me about your first teaching job.
- What were your goals as a beginning teacher? How did you define success? How did you measure success?


- Think back to the first time you realized you had a racial identity. Describe as much of that experience as you can. Describe the specific feelings you have as you remember that experience.
- Describe the first time you saw racism happening (could be the same). Were you the target of the racism, did you enact the racism, or did you witness the racism? Describe your thoughts and feelings at the time.
• If you are White, describe a time when you demonstrated “color-blindness”. If you are a person of color, describe how you coped with realizing that racism was a real thing that you needed to think about a lot. Describe how your were feeling and thinking during this time.

• Has there been a time when you intentionally built or belonged to a diverse racial community that made members feel positive about their racial identity? Describe your feelings about that community.

• Are there other periods of your racial identity development that don’t really fit into our discussion so far, that seem important to have a fuller picture of how you came to know yourself as a racial being?

Interview 2: The aspiring school leader (July 2020)

Part 1

• Describe in detail why you originally decided to pursue school leadership? Were you encouraged? Financially motivated? Inspired by another leader? What was your ultimate goal?

• Tell me about your preservice preparation to become certified to become a school administrator including a description of the school administrator you worked under?

• Tell me about your first administrative job. What were your main responsibilities? What was the school like? How did the work experience feel in comparison to your reason for wanting to become an administrator?

• What were your goals as an assistant principal? How did you define success? How did you measure success?
Prior to applying for the district’s Principals Preparation Program, you were given a description of the prerequisites and the expectation that you would be ready to serve at any school within a year. Why did you feel you were ready to apply? Why did you want to apply?


- Think back to the first time your responsibilities as a school administrator directly intersected with issues of race. Describe as much of that experience as you can. Describe the specific feelings you have as you remember that experience.

- What educational or professional training did you receive in your traditional school administration pre-service program. How was this training delivered? What was your response or reaction?

- Describe a time as an assistant principal when you recognized inequity or social injustice in your work? What were you thinking or feeling during this time?

- As an assistant principal, prior to your participation in the district’s Principals Preparation Program, how would you have described a principal’s responsibilities regarding racial or social justice?

- Are there racial or social justice experiences from your time as an assistant principal or teacher that impacted why you wanted to be a principal that haven’t come up in our discussion so far, that seem important to have a fuller picture of why you decided to become a school principal?
Interview 3: The Principals Preparation Program and Entering the Principals
Role - beliefs, expectations, and priorities before APA and after APA (August 2020)

- Describe the first feelings or memories that come to mind from the following interventions that were used during the Principals Preparation Program summer intensive and residency:
  - Journey Lines
  - The Purpose of Public Education
  - Personal Narrative
  - Mental Models/Bias/ladder of inference
  - The Fog We Live In/
  - Singleton’s Courageous Conversations about Race, common language, Fergus’ Bias-based beliefs
  - School Residency Equity Audit
  - Privilege Walk
  - Root Cause Analysis/The Iceberg
  - Standards-Based coaching and feedback

- Which three of these experiences or interventions had the greatest impact on your own beliefs about the responsibilities of the principal? Explain what you mean and why you believe this?

- Which three of these experiences or interventions had the greatest impact on your beliefs about race, racism, or social justice? Explain what you mean and why you believe this?
• What responsibility do you believe school principals have regarding racial and social justice? What are some examples from your work or your professional goals that demonstrate this aspect of your work?

• Would you describe your leadership efforts for social or racial justice as “helper, advocate, organizer, or rebel” or all of the above? Explain.

• How would you have described your own level of commitment or activism to racial and/or social justice prior to participating in the Principals Preparation Program? How has your approach to the principalship changed in this regard?

• Did the Principals Preparation Program have an “awakening” effect for you that changed your understanding of what it means to be a principal? Explain.