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Urban High School Principals' Leadership Practices and Academic Progress for At-Risk Students

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Walden University
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Abstract

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Mary Duhart-Toppen

MEd, Lamar University, 2012

BA, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, 1998

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

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Abstract

Researchers have shown that principals are vital to improving student academic achievement. Urban principals often face significant challenges in their environments and have large populations of at-risk students. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore and describe the perceptions of urban high school principals regarding the type of leadership practices needed to support the academic progress of at-risk students. Elements from transformational leadership, transformative leadership, and effective leadership practices informed the conceptual framework. Research questions addressed how principals described and perceived the practices, processes, and procedures used to create environments that support students in urban high schools in a southcentral state in the United States. Data were collected by reviewing state accountability reports and school report cards and through semistructured individual interviews with 5 principals who led schools where consistent growth occurred over a 3-year period. A combination of in vivo and second cycle coding was used to support thematic analysis. Themes included understanding leadership styles and traits, identifying challenges and barriers, creating and implementing a vision, building relationships, and establishing a positive climate and culture. Participants indicated trusting relationships with faculty, staff, parents, students, and community stakeholders in addition to understanding the specific contexts within which their students live informed effective practices to improve student performance. Key recommendations include specific professional preparation and continued learning opportunities for urban high school principals; this will support positive social change by improving instruction and building principal and teacher capacity as they serve students in urban settings.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, the late Dennis Duhart, Jr., and my mother, Delois Duhart. Dad, I love you and will always cherish the many memories of our time together and your life-changing advice. Mom, you are the epitome of motherhood and my forever cheerleader. Thank you for your prayers and unwavering support. I love you to the moon and back. I also dedicate this dissertation to my love, my husband, Anthony. You have been my greatest champion throughout this journey. Your unwavering belief in me, your patience, and love have been constant over the last 20 years. You are my heart. Gabriel and Courtney, my two miracle babies, thank you for your love and understanding as Mommy pursued this goal. My love for you has no bounds. I also want to express my thanks to my siblings Cathy, Gwen, Denny, and Damon. Thank you for being my sounding board and cheerleaders. I love all of you!

This dissertation is also dedicated to numerous educational leaders who have influenced my life. Although there are just too many to name, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my mentor, E. Bera, who encouraged me to take this step and believed that I would succeed.

My fellow educators who are in the trenches with me—I salute you. Your examples of leadership directly impact how I lead my campus. Your dedication and commitment to students and teachers across the world have inspired me throughout my career. Thank you for continued perseverance in meeting the challenges of the ever-changing landscape of public education.

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For with God, nothing shall be impossible – Luke 1:37

All Glory, Honor, and Praise to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, for granting me the strength to attain this goal. At every stage of my life—it was You!

The journey to complete this dissertation was also guided and inspired by several individuals who provided tireless support throughout this process. I want to acknowledge my dissertation committee members, Dr. Kathleen Lynch and Dr. Felicia Blacher-Wilson. Thank you, Dr. Lynch, for providing insight and expertise about improving the development of my dissertation. Our meetings always left me feeling inspired and ready to tackle the next stage. Thank you, Dr. Blacher-Wilson, for providing expert advice on essential details to ensure my ideas were expressed clearly. I valued your words of encouragement during this process. Finally, I want to acknowledge my university reviewer, Dr. Dawson, for your insight and push for excellence. This journey would have been impossible without the guidance of all three of you.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Urban high school principals are faced with numerous challenges that include increased accountability demands going beyond the daily administrative duties of running a campus. Their responsibilities include ensuring all students show academic growth yearly and meet passing standards set by high stakes testing (VanGronigen & Meyers, 2017). Consequently, urban high school principals must possess leadership skills to create environments that support sustained academic growth. Principals in the 21st century must lead the way in establishing conditions on their campuses that are responsive to student learning and achievement (Akhavan, Emery, Shea, Taha-Resnick, 2017). The focus of this study was to explore and describe the perceptions of urban high school principals regarding the type of leadership practices needed to support the academic progress of students at risk.

Background

Principals across the United States have been tasked with meeting the goals established by federal and state educational entities for improving student progress on assessments that measure student growth in a variety of content areas (Allen, Grigsby, & Peters, 2015). In order to meet these external goals, urban high school principals must establish a school environment to address the external challenges such as poverty, crime, gangs, and violence entrenched in the communities where their students reside (Allen et al., 2015; Reed & Swaminathan, 2016). Because of these challenges, urban high school principals have found their progress toward increasing student academic progress impeded by experiences students have outside the walls of a school. These experiences

have made it difficult for students to focus on learning. However, the principal's leadership of a school community could influence school climate, teacher effectiveness, and student achievement (Liebowitz & Porter, 2019).

Researchers have shown principals, along with teachers, are a vital component to improving student academic achievement (Pietsch & Tulowitzski, 2017; Quin, Deris, Bischoff, & Johnson, 2015; Tan, 2018). Research showed a critical component of any reform is principals who can establish a sustainable environment of high expectations for academic progress (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016). Consequently, principals' leadership practices related to student academic progress have been an essential component in the "current objective of educational policy" (Hitt & Tucker, 2016, p. 531). Principals' perception of their leadership practices has determined the extent of their influence on the student progress (Urick & Bowers, 2014). Allen et al. (2015) found principals who serve as role models and behave in a manner that aligns with promoted values can positively garner commitment to campus instructional goals. Understanding their leadership practices was critical to helping urban high school principals implement viable structures and interventions to support the academic progress and achievement of students at risk (Griffin & Green, 2013; Khalifa et al., 2016; Tan, 2018). Effective leadership practices are fundamental to improving student academic progress and achievement (Hutton, 2018; Meyers & Hitt, 2017). According to Meyers and Hitt (2017), the overall leadership characteristics of principals were essential for student academic progress, second only to the instructional quality of teachers he or she hired. Urick and Bowers (2014) stated additional information is needed regarding the leadership practices

of urban principals who have increased student growth in challenging contexts. However, there was little information available about the leadership practices used by urban principals to support the academic progress of at-risk students.

Problem Statement

Research on the influence of principal leadership on student achievement has primarily focused on the perceptions of faculty and staff (Allen et al., 2015). Although some researchers have explored how student academic achievement is influenced by various leadership styles (Abdallah & Forawi, 2017; Bush & Glover, 2014; Pietsch & Tulowitzki, 2017; Quin et al., 2015; Tan, 2018; Urick & Bowers, 2014), the voice of urban high school principals was missing from the research findings. Existing studies have failed to capture the perceptions of urban high school principals regarding their leadership practices that led to sustained student academic progress. The knowledge gained through this study may enable urban high school principals to develop practices that would establish interventions and supports to facilitate academic progress for students at risk of not completing high school.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore and describe the perceptions of urban high school principals regarding the type of leadership practices needed to support the academic progress of at-risk students. Implications for positive change based on the findings of this study showed the perceptions of school principals regarding their leadership behaviors influence the academic progress of all students.

Principals' awareness of their leadership style and the culture of the correlating practices would influence the academic culture of the campus.

This research increased the knowledge and narrowed the gap in the current literature by providing information about the actions needed to create an environment to improve teaching and learning, which increases the academic performance of students at risk.

Research Questions

1. How do urban high school principals describe the practices, processes, and procedures used to create environments that support students at risk?

2. What are the perceptions of urban high school principals regarding the leadership practices that will support the academic achievement of students at risk?

Conceptual Framework

The concepts espoused in the transformational leadership theory (Bass & Riggio, 2006), the transformative leadership theory (Shields, 2010), and the effective leadership practices identified in the work of the Wallace Foundation (2013) were used to create the conceptual framework for this study. This framework supported the identification of transformational and transformative leadership practices that were critical for creating sustainable school environments to support the academic achievement of all students. The transformational leadership theory (Bass & Riggio, 2006), the transformative leadership theory (Shields, 2010), and the effective leadership practices identified in the work of the

Wallace Foundation (2013) created the lens through which participants perceived the influence of their leadership practices on students in their urban schools.

Bass and Riggio (2006) proposed the transformational approach to leadership encourages individuals to go beyond their self-interest to meet the expectations for the good of the organization. They stated transformational principals could determine a school vision, provide motivation through being a role model, support a culture that values intellectual motivation, and provide support for the development of their followers. A transformational leader possesses skills to build relationships, garner trust, create a work environment that empowers members, support the acquisition of knowledge, lead and sustain change, and balance conflicts (Bass & Riggio, 2006). These practices associated with transformational leadership motivate followers to pursue optimum performance and realize their full potential to move the organization toward growth (Sun & Henderson, 2017).

In the transformative leadership theory, Shields (2013) concluded a principal possesses the potential to meet the academic and social justice needs of their students. The process starts with acknowledging and challenging the existence of inequity and injustice residing in their contextual frameworks. Transformative leadership also requires a principal to establish systems to critically reflect and analyze existing frameworks to ensure all students are successful. Leaders who are transformative would work to create learning communities that meet academic goals and enhance conditions for equitable opportunities so students become productive citizens of society (Shields, 2010). Shields identified eight tenets of transformative leadership:

- a mandate for deep and equitable change,

- the need to deconstruct knowledge frameworks that perpetuate inequity and

  injustice and to reconstruct them in more equitable ways,

- the need to address the inequitable distribution of power,

- an emphasis on both private and public (individual and collective) good,

- a focus on emancipation, democracy, equity, and justice,

- an emphasis on interconnectedness, interdependence, and global awareness,

- the necessity of balancing critique with promise, and

- the call to exhibit moral courage.

The Wallace Foundation (2013), which spent the last decade researching and

reporting on school leadership, proposed effective principals engage in five critical

practices in their campus leadership. These fundamental practices included: (a) shaping a

vision of academic success for all students; (b) creating a climate hospitable to education;

(c) cultivating leadership in others; (d) improving education; and (e) managing people,

data, and processes to foster school improvement (Wallace Foundation). In the

challenging context of "standards-based reform and accountability," the role of the

principal must change from managers to leaders of learning to influence the academic

progress of all students (Wallace Foundation, 2013). This study specified the practices

effective urban principals should undertake to establish school environments that

supported the intellectual improvement of all students, especially students at risk.

The conceptual framework established the relationship between the two theories

and the work of the Wallace Foundation through the lens of effective school leadership in

urban settings. Figure 1 represents the conceptual framework of leadership practices that influence student academic progress in urban high school settings. The framework utilized transformational and transformative theories to understand what urban principals perceive is the practices to garner sustained academic progress.
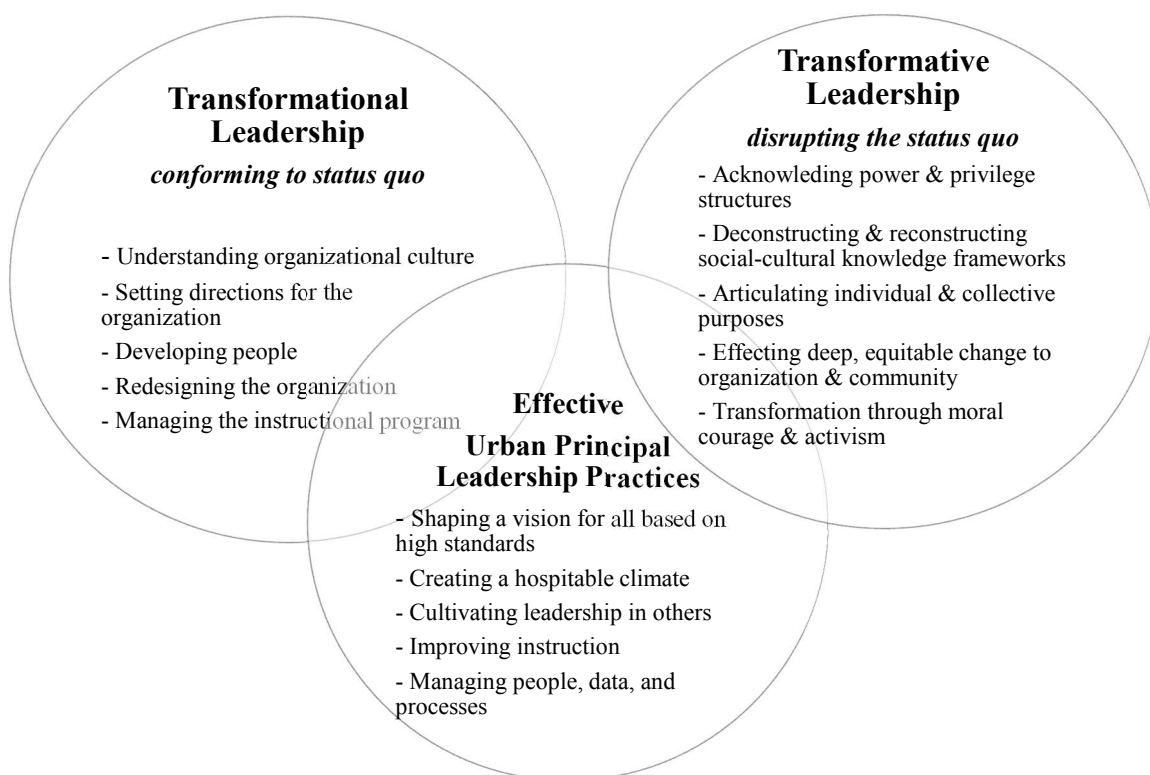
Figure 1. Conceptual framework key concepts. Effective urban principal leadership practices as understood in Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass & Riggio, 2006) and Transformative Leadership Theory (Shields, 2010), and effective urban principal leadership practices (Wallace Foundation, 2013)

The demands for higher standards and increased accountability began with the passage of No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 and were refined in the 2009 Race to the Top Initiative, which increased the standards. In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act

heightened the demands on school principals to ensure and support the academic growth of all students (Desravines & Fenton, 2015). The increased pressure of federal mandates led to rigorous and challenging standards at the state level (Allen et al., 2015; Burks & Hochbein, 2015). As a result, principals had to diversify their leadership roles to go beyond just running a smooth school. They now must ensure safety, connect with students and teachers, build community relationships, and increase academic performance (DeMatthews & Brown, 2017). Research showed creating the right conditions that lead to improved student performance depends mainly on the principal (National Association of Secondary Principals, 2013). Principals should strategically choose and implement practices to successfully address all the needs of the school.

Urban principals must lead the changes needed in their schools to bridge the academic, social, and emotional needs of their students to support academic achievement (Akhavan et al., 2017; Smylie, Murphy, & Louis, 2016). Transformational leaders, in this research, established a culture in their environments focused on change. A changing culture would create systems for providing resources to help at-risk students realize their talents and potential strengths while increasing their self-esteem. Urban principals must examine their leadership practices to determine which transformational characteristics they possess that addressed the primary needs of their students at risk. By identifying and addressing the deficiencies eroding their students' academic trajectory, urban principals would significantly improve the academic performance of the schools they lead.

The elements from the framework were reflected in interview queries and my initial coding of interview data. The first research question was designed to elicit

behaviors related to the larger school and student environments—the second question produced descriptions of actions specifically linked to enhancing student achievement.

Nature of the Study

Developing an understanding of how urban high school principals' perceptions of their leadership practices influenced student academic progress requires careful interpretation of the experiences of each principal in their naturalistic settings (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Qualitative researchers examine how individuals or groups perceive a phenomenon in their natural environments and make meaning through their experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Qualitative researchers view participants as experts of their own experiences and utilize data from individual perceptions to understand their relationship to the phenomena (Ravitch & Carl). The qualitative approach was appropriate in this study because the perceptions of urban high school principals regarding their leadership practices would provide an understanding of how to increase the academic progress of students at risk.

The case study design allows researchers to explore a phenomenon within its context using various data sources, which results in different facets of the phenomenon being exposed (Gustafsson, 2017). This approach allows researchers to collaborate with the participants while they share personal stories to explain their actions. The design of case study research answers the "how" and the "why" questions without manipulating the behavior of the participants so that the impact of contextual conditions is relevant to the phenomenon revealed (Yazan, 2015, p.138). The principals in this study shared perspectives of their leadership practices and their influence on student academic

progress. The case study method explores the real-life systems from the standpoint of urban high principals to gain detailed, in-depth data to develop themes related supporting the progress of students at risk (Gustafsson, 2017).

In case studies, data are collected from multiple sources to construct an explanation of a phenomenon through the examination of the real-life experiences of the participants (Yazan, 2015; Yin, 2017). For this study, data were collected through one-on-one interviews with successful urban high school principals whose leadership practices increased the academic performance of at-risk students at their site locations. These semistructured interviews gathered data on each principal's unique and specific leadership experiences in their prospective settings (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The interview guide I developed consisted of research questions, follow-up questions, and probing questions to capture the participants' perceptions as it relates to leadership skills. Data collection also included a thorough review of campus-based documents and state assessment data to discover the effectiveness of practices and procedures implemented by the principals (Gustafsson, 2017). This qualitative analysis contributed to the body of knowledge about leadership styles of urban principals by providing a deeper understanding of their perceptions of the leadership practices which supported academic progress and achievement of students at risk.

Data were collected in semistructured interviews with urban high school principals who are listed on the state accountability comparative school groups. I used NVivo management software to help me categorize and store interviews. I conducted a thorough qualitative examination of the selected schools' documents such as faculty

handbooks, master schedule, and professional development to identify trends. Additionally, a review of archival data records artifacts from selected urban high school campuses was used to ascertain the structures and systems in place that have supported at-risk students over a sustained period.

Definitions

The following terms were used in the study:

At-risk: According to the state education agency for the state in which this study took place, a student identified as at-risk of dropping out of school is one who is under age 26 and who meets one or more of the following criteria: (a) unsatisfactory performance on readiness test or assessment instrument in grades 1 – 3; (b) failure to maintain an average of 70 on scale of 100 in grades 7 – 12; (c) failure to advance from one grade level to next for one or more school years; (d) unsatisfactory performance on assessment instrument administered to student under State Education Code; (e) is pregnant or a parent; (f) has been placed in an alternative education program in the preceding or current school year; (g) has been expelled during the preceding or current school year; (h) currently on parole, probation, deferred prosecution or other conditional release; (i) dropped out of school; (j) limited English proficiency; (k) is in the custody or care of the Department of Family and Protective Services or has, during the current school year; (l) is homeless; (m) or resided in the preceding year or currently resides in a residential placement facility in the district, including a detention facility, substance abuse treatment facility, emergency shelter, psychiatric hospital, halfway house, cottage home operation, specialized child-care home, or general residential operation.

Campus comparison group: Each campus in the state is assigned to a unique comparison group comprised of schools that are most similar to it. Each campus is identified by school type then grouped with 40 other campuses from anywhere in the state that are most similar in grade levels served, size, the percentage of economically disadvantaged students, mobility rate, the percentage of English learners, the percentage of students served by special education, and the percentage of students enrolled in an early college high school program.

State assessments: Annual assessments for end-of-course for English I, English II, Algebra I, biology, and U.S. history as depicted on the state's website

Drop-out: According to the state education agency for the state in which this study took place, a dropout is a student who is enrolled in public school in Grades 7-12, does not return to public school the following fall, is not expelled, and does not: graduate, receive a GED certificate, continue school outside the public school system, begin college, or die

Urban schools: As described on the state education's website, a district is classified as major urban if: (a) it is in a county with a population of at least 960,000; (b) its enrollment is the largest in the county or at least 70% of the largest district enrollment in the county, and (c) at least 35% of enrolled students are economically disadvantaged. A student is reported as economically- disadvantaged if he or she is eligible for free or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch and Child Nutrition Program

Major suburban schools: A district is classified as major suburban if (a) it does not meet the criteria for classification as major urban; (b) it is contiguous to a major

urban district; and (c) its enrollment is at least 3% that of the largest contiguous major urban district or at least 4,500 students. A district also is classified as major suburban if (a) it does not meet the criteria for classification as major urban; (b) it is not contiguous to a major urban district; (c) it is located in the same county as a major urban district; and (d) its enrollment is at least 15% that of the largest major urban district in the county or at least 4,500 students

Assumptions

Several assumptions were made in this study. The first assumption was the participants would represent urban principals in high achieving schools in the southcentral state in the United States in which this study was conducted. This assumption was supported by a thorough examination of the accountability performance of the schools chosen for the study. The second assumption was those study participants would be honest and direct in their analysis of their leadership practices that influenced student academic progress. The final assumption was the chosen principals would delineate the practices needed to influence student academic progress and create environments with sustained results.

Scope and Delimitations

The research problem was principals' perceptions of leadership practices are not understood well enough to understand the influence on the academic progress of students at risk. The conceptual framework for this study focused on the transformational leadership theory, transformative leadership theory, and key leadership practices. The study was limited to urban high school principals in the comparative school groups

designated by the state. Schools were excluded if they are not identified as urban campuses and do not have high percentages of student populations in the following categories: minorities, economically disadvantaged, and at-risk.

Limitations

There were some limitations to this study. The first limitation was the specific criteria used to recruit participants from the lists that grouped schools based on similarities established by the state education agency. The second limitation was the small sample size decreased the generalizability of the study findings.

Significance

According to the review of the literature, principal leadership is a crucial component in school improvement and academic progress (Hutton, 2018). Principal leadership is essential in the quest to sustain the academic achievement of students at risk by creating systems that establish norms and values defining exceptional teaching and learning (Dolph, 2017; Hitt & Meyers, 2017). With the current pressures of accountability measures, urban principals need to be aware of leadership elements that would aid in successfully addressing the numerous factors impeding the academic progress of at-risk students. The lack of research relating to the impact of urban principal leadership practices on this specific student population shows a clear need for further study (Hutton, 2018; Tan, 2018). This study contributes to the body of knowledge about how principals perceive their leadership practices that support the academic performance of at-risk students.

Social Change

This study holds significance as an instrument for social change and is relevant to educational communities. Identifying the components in principals' perceptions of their leadership practices in schools that have shown sustained academic progress, as measured by the state accountability standards, provided data that may help address challenges impeding academic achievement, equity, and successful student graduates. Addressing these challenges would equip students to become productive citizens in today's global society. Additionally, the results of this study offer real-world solutions to the educational community to achieve significant school improvement.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore and describe the perceptions of urban high school principals regarding the type of leadership practices needed to support the academic progress of students at risk. Previous research studies indicated school principals are a vital part of influencing student academic progress through their leadership practices (Dolph, 2017; Griffin & Green, 2014; Holmes & Parkers, 2018; Hutton, 2018). Chapter 1 introduced the study, the statement of the problem, research questions, conceptual framework foundation, study significance, assumptions, and the study limitations. Chapter 2 reviews comprehensive research literature related to transformational leadership, transformative leadership, and effective practices of school principals. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology and provides details on the research questions, population sample, data collection methods, and data analysis of interview responses by study participants. The study findings are detailed and analyzed

in Chapter 4. Finally, Chapter 5 summarizes the research study findings and conclusions

as well as providing recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The research problem was that there exists a lack of understanding of urban high school principals' perceptions regarding the leadership behaviors necessary to influence the academic progress of students at risk. Researchers have shown principals, along with teachers, are a vital component to improving student academic achievement (Khalifa et al., 2016; Pietsch & Tulowitzski, 2017; Quin et al., 2015; Tan, 2018). However, there has been minimal research on principals' perceptions of leadership behaviors that help establish sustainable environments for academic progress. If the principals' perceptions of their actions were better understood, the relationship between these behaviors and their influence on student achievement as well as teacher effectiveness could be established. The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore and describe the perceptions of urban high school principals regarding the type of leadership practices needed to support the academic progress of students at risk.

Literature Search Strategy

The search strategy for the review of the literature involved the use of databases and education search engines, including Thoreau, Sage, and Google Scholar. Key terms used to locate literature were *academic leadership, principal leadership behaviors, principal leadership practices, transformational leadership, transformative leadership, urban schools, students at risk, student achievement, leadership competencies, school culture, school climate,* and *school leadership.*

Conceptual Framework

The foundation of the conceptual framework for this research study is derived from the work of Bass and Riggio (2006), Shields (2010), and the Wallace Foundation (2013). Characteristics of the transformational leadership theory, transformative leadership theory, and key practices of effective principal leadership to influence student academic progress were considered. Effective top leadership was described as leadership that leads or affects followers through behaviors and practices (Leithwood, 2019). To ensure sustainable change, effective principals facilitated purposeful actions to influence the academic performance of their campuses. Tan (2018) posited principals in challenging school contexts are faced with a variety of factors that impede student progress. As a result, principals, specifically in urban areas, need a range of leadership practices that enabled them to address the challenges in their schools. The practices of school leaders and how these practices influenced the student academic outcomes are critical to transforming schools (Miranda, Radliff, & Della Flora, 2018). However, minimal research existed regarding urban principal perceptions of their leadership practices to be used as a tool to influence the academic progress of at-risk students. If the perceptions of urban principals were better explored, the relationship between their perceptions, leadership practices, and at-risk student progress could benefit student achievement, the community in which the school resides, and society.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

The literature review includes discussion of the theory of transformational leadership, transformative leadership, and effective school leadership. The first section

addresses the work of Bass and Riggio as it relates to transformational leadership. In the second section, I explore Shields' transformative leadership theory. The third section is a detailed overview of the Wallace Foundation's research regarding the fundamental practices of effective school leadership. The final section examines the need for effective school leadership skills to summarize findings and recommendations for positive social action in urban schools.

Leadership Practices and Student Outcomes

According to Hitt and Tucker (2016), school leadership is significant because of the personal competencies a leader can bring to their position, enabling them to use strategic practices to transform their assigned institutions. These researchers described competencies as the distinct set of actions, behaviors, and dispositions that are the underlying characteristics of a person is demonstrated by how effective their performance in a specific role. Principals in urban settings have faced challenges with situations beyond the mandated accountability measures such as high dropout rates, low academic readiness, and problematic school climates fraught with violence (Hitt & Meyers, 2018; Sebastian, Huang, & Allensworth, 2017). Also, these schools have often been staffed with teachers who lack the cultural understanding of urban youth, hindered by low parental engagement, and confronted with negative factors of low-income communities that are racially and economically isolated from opportunities to enhance the experiences of their students (Green, 2018). Meyers and Hitt (2017), in their research on urban schools in turnaround conditions, stated school improvement of student academic performance does not happen unless there is talented leadership. Influential leadership

not only manages the school but reduces distractions and facilitates effective instructional practices to attain a transformation of a school.

School personnel who encounter persistent challenges in student achievement require leadership that have the mindset, flexibility, and ability to inspire hope (Hitt & Meyers, 2018). The administration could provide structures and pathways to establish an environment conducive for teaching and learning to meet the needs of all students, especially those identified as at-risk (Abdallah & Forawi, 2017; Sebastian et al., 2017; Hitt & Meyers, 2018). The process of teaching and learning is the heart of a school since it directly impacts how students perform.

In the last 30 years, researchers have explored the role of school leadership and the impact on the school environment (Abdallah & Forawi, 2017; Day, Gu, & Sammons, 2016). Researchers have concluded principals can influence their campuses in collaborative organizational learning, structures, cultures, development of staff, and community leadership capacity geared toward promoting student achievement (Day et al., 2016). According to Krasnoff (2015), a highly effective principal could increase student performance on standardized testing by establishing practices to address factors impeding student growth, such as attendance, discipline, and classroom performance.

In research on the urban school experience, Green (2018) discussed the reality of the impact of the societal and community struggles on the performance of students in urban schools. Green stated principals must become advocates of change within urban communities, which struggle with inequities such as poverty, housing, and health care that present barriers to student achievement. Green further explained principals need to

take an active role in building alliances with the community by establishing two-way communication with local leadership. In cultivating a presence in the community, principals strengthen school-to-home connections and garner parental support for the academic initiatives, leading to increased student performance.

At-Risk Youth in Urban Schools

Urban high schools often suffer from high percentages of at-risk students in their student enrollment. Environmental and school-related factors have impeded the academic progress of at-risk students. In their research on students at risk, Arif and Mirza (2017) discussed how these factors are distributed into two categories: environmental (individual, family, community) and school related. Environmental factors included low socioeconomic status, single parent households, low-income family relations, homelessness, foster care, limited English proficiency, and teen pregnancy (Arif & Mirza, 2017; Dupéré et al., 2018; Robison, Jaggers, Rhodes, Blackmon, & Church, 2016). School-related factors consist of the lack of academic readiness, chronic absenteeism, behavior infractions, and unsatisfactory academic progress. The conditions, situations, and circumstances related to these categories placed students at risk for school failure and dropout, which is 28.9% in the United States (McGee & Lin, 2017). School leaders must often explain school data related to dropout numbers, graduation rates, and interventions that addressed the needs of at-risk students (Cox, Hopkins, & Buckman, 2015; Hoover & Cozzens, 2016).

According to Ticher-Wagner and Allen (2016), in their research on at-risk students and school leadership, urban schools needed to be led by principals committed to

creating environments addressing the "holistic, personal development" of their students. Ticher-Wagner and Allen explored how urban principals with individual leadership styles could create caring learning environments to directly impact student academic outcomes. These principals recognized the need to establish support structures that enabled at-risk students to experience connectedness to their school environments. Due to the adverse situations these students have in their personal and academic experiences, principals must understand the need to build trusting relationships that acknowledges the circumstances and needs of student groups.

In their case study using a semistructured interview format, Sahin, Arseven, and Kihe (2016) investigated the causes of chronic student absenteeism and subsequent dropout at the primary, secondary, and high school sites. Data from interviews with 64 principals were organized into significant categories regarding absentee students and dropouts, including influences from family factors, administrator and teacher behaviors, school setting, students themselves, and environmental factors. In addition to the major categories, some themes encompassed the scope of the category, which contained the dynamics of home, school, and community. The researchers highlighted how daily attendance significantly impacted academics, test scores, graduation rates, college acceptance, and career opportunities. However, Sahin et al. concluded the schools had systems in place to successfully address this crisis.

Sahin et al. provided guidance in addressing the causes of absenteeism in all grade levels that could eventually lead to dropout before graduation from high school. In their responses to the research questions, the administrators considered all the environmental

elements impacting a student's success. Consequently, there emerged correlations in the answers that encompassed school, home, and community. Prior studies only highlighted how the student attendance and completion of school were impacted by the school, family, and the student. However, these researchers explored how relationships between school personnel and students also influenced student success.

Transformational Leadership Theory

Leadership has been defined as "the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives" (Hutton, 2018, p.245). Because of the constant challenges in societal and environmental factors, urban high school leaders continuously search for practices to influence and improve student learning to meet the requirements established by federal and state guidelines. Researchers have advocated that the methods of transformational leadership are one way to attain success in meeting those guidelines and improve student performance (Day et al., 2016; Yeigh et al., 2019).

Historical background – transforming leadership. Burns (1978) introduced the research behind transformational leadership in the work, *Leadership*. Burns focused on the relationships existing between leaders and their followers. Burns espoused leaders could transform an organization when they encouraged followers to strive for goals reflecting the wants, needs, aspirations, and expectations of both. This approach focused on motivation and values as the goal of leadership. In 2003, Burns distilled this theory in

later work titled, *Transforming Leadership*, by claiming transformation occurs when a radical change happens to a structure.

   Bass and Riggio's transformational leadership. The transformational leadership theory, as espoused by Burns (1978), had primarily been studied in business settings. However, Bass and Riggio (2006) examined the relationship between the theory and school organizations with a focus on the leadership practices that brought about positive change. These researchers established transformational leadership theory could transform organizations when school leaders embrace the four key characteristics: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. The idealized influence was imitating the leader's behavior and values by the followers who trust and respect the leadership. A principal became a role model that followers could emulate based on their perceptions of the attributes and behaviors of their leader. The daily practices of the principal garnered the admiration, respect, and trust of the followers. Even when the leaders took risks on new initiatives, their actions were aligned, both ethically and morally, with the vision shared with their teachers. Inspirational motivation depicted the behavior of the leader serving as a role model for the proposed actions while demonstrating high standards of ethical conduct, which in turn motivates and inspires the followers to embrace the vision presented by the leader. As a result, they gained the trust and respect of their followers by their willingness to put the needs of the organization first. Followers were inspired to go beyond their self-interest to reach the goals of the organization. Intellectual stimulation referred to the leader's ability to stimulate their followers to be innovative and creative by challenging assumptions,

reframing problems, and facing old situations with new solutions. Followers developed the capacity to analyze and create solutions to address challenging concerns. In doing so, the leader and followers faced their biases and assumptions regarding not only the situation but also their students. Individualized consideration denoted the ability of a leader to discern the needs of the followers to provide individualized support for growth. They acted as a mentor and coach for their followers by providing avenues through two-way communication and personalized interactions with followers. The individual differences of the followers were recognized and supported for achievement and growth. According to Bass and Riggio, these four characteristics created a culture built on core ideals that could withstand the inevitability of change. As a result, the organization established an identity based on values shared by the members of the organization, thereby ensuring followers feel ownership of the changes being proposed by leadership.

Building upon the foundational research of Bass and Riggio, Leithwood (1992) initiated a more in-depth exploration of transformational leadership concerning school settings. His work further outlined dimensions of how school leadership influenced the practice of teaching and learning. The dimensions included (a) building a school vision and establishing school goals; (b) providing intellectual stimulations; (c) offering individualized support; (d) modeling best practices and important organizational values; (e) demonstrating high performance expectations; (f) creating a productive school culture; and (g) developing structures to foster participation in school decisions (Leithwood, 1994; Leithwood & Sun, 2012). Leithwood eventually narrowed the seven dimensions into three categories that could transform a campus: (a) setting directions, (b)

developing people, and (c) redesigning the organization. Leithwood stated these practices enabled a campus leader to establish the practices and structures to transform a school environment. However, Leithwood stressed principals in the challenging contexts must possess the ability to inspire, motivate, and tap into the values of their staff to unite them in the mission to improve the performance of all students.

In agreement with Bass and Riggio, Kouzes and Posner (2017) claimed transformational leaders must be able to undertake five key practices: inspiring a shared vision, modeling the way, challenging the process, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart. A shared vision about improving student achievement with faculty and staff ensured all stakeholders made informed decisions about instruction that places a critical lens on organizational policies and policies. By modeling the way, leaders revealed their commitment to the organization by establishing a positive example and honoring established values. Then, they worked with their followers to generate new ideas and opportunities to create positive changes in the organization. This positive approach to collaboration led to followers being enabled to act and become leaders to reform the school context and improve student performance. Lastly, by using the encouragement of the heart to increase a sense of belonging, commitment, and drive, leaders helped followers enhance their performance and influenced student achievement. The transformational leader who embraced these practices would bring about positive change in challenging school settings.

Principals must cultivate relationships with the followers in the organization they lead to bring about positive change. DeWitt (2018) stated the power of the group is

needed to change the culture of an organization. By cultivating relationships with their followers, principals created a culture of collaborative support centered on improving instruction and student achievement (Fullan, 2020; Kershner & McQuillen, 2016).

Transformational leaders acknowledge an organization must establish a culture that married the stability of core ideals with the certainty change would occur.   All practices implemented need to meet the challenges of change. In a school organization where constant change is imposed by internal and external forces, the principal has to possess an array of skills and abilities to lead change while maintaining the ideals and values of the organization (Dolph, 2017; Fullan, 2020).

Quin et al. (2015) discovered school leaders could create a school culture motivating teachers to work collaboratively to improve the overall performance of the school through transformational leadership. Consequently, the inspiration and motivation of a principal developed the growth of their followers to become change agents, which in turn influenced student achievement. Although transformational leadership highlighted the need to inspire followers to increased energy and commitment, research showed creating an inspired vision and motivating others was not enough to produce results that led to increased student achievement (Hutton, 2018; Leithwood, Sun, & Pollack, 2017). Principals must establish the systems and practices needed to transform the culture, climate, and student performance of a campus.

Transformative Leadership Theory

In 2010, Shields broadened the understanding of how campus leaders transformed their schools to benefit all students in their diverse populations. This research challenged

the accepted version of Leithwood's interpretation of Bass and Riggio by stating that just

focusing on changing practices without considering the diversity of student backgrounds

and perspectives would not lead to real transformation (Shields, 2018). According to

Shields, transformative leadership enabled teachers to meet both the academic and social

justice needs in diverse educational settings. This type of leadership incorporated a

variety of strategies and practices to meet the needs of all students—especially those at

risk. Shields's (2010) research examined the work of two school leaders who created

schools that embraced inclusion, social justice, and equity. Both schools demonstrated

significant progress as measured by accountability standards. The school leaders relied on

their personal experiences with hardships to help educate and train their staff in

developing awareness of inequities in their at-risk populations. Hallinger (2018) stated

life experiences and personal resources served as a filter through which school leaders

viewed the world in which they live and work. Campus leaders who were successful in

diverse schools learned to adapt their leadership practices to service their students in the

areas of needs, opportunities, and barriers.

The basic tenets of transformative leadership (Shields, 2011) were

- acknowledging power and privilege

- articulating both individual and collective purposes

- deconstructing social-cultural knowledge frameworks that generate inequity
  and reconstructing them

- balancing critique and promise

- effecting deep and equitable change

- working towards transformation: liberation, emancipation, democracy, equity, and excellence

- demonstrating moral courage and activism.

Acknowledging power and privilege started with considering how realities and disparities of the outside world impacted the ability of an organization to meet their goals successfully or the ability of individuals within the organization to be successful. An organization used its power to build relationships with all stakeholders to work towards a collective purpose. Articulating purpose was a way to express the goals of the organization with clarity in terms of mutual benefit and societal change. They were bringing the staff together around a common goal inaugurated with the principal mobilizing the school leaders, especially teachers, who influenced the different levels of campus staff (Leithwood et al., 2017; Louis & Murphy, 2018).

Deconstructing current frameworks created new knowledge frameworks by engaging in conversations about race, social class, sexual orientation, or religious perspective (Shields, 2010). Although these topics could be difficult, Shields stressed the importance of not remaining silent to deconstruct the inappropriate attitudes and assumptions about the students on the campuses. Reform and the social transformation started with the reconstruction of the initial images of students and families. Transformative leaders led organizations in challenging their mental models regarding their perceptions of society in general, the community in which the school resides, and the students in their schools (Shields, 2018).

According to Reeves's (2016) research on the seven elements of leadership, school leaders created strategies for followers to explore their thinking and seek ways to test assumptions to improve current conditions. When leading transformative change in an organization, Reeves urged leaders to assess the organization's readiness for change by examining the level of resistance, frustration, learning, and growth. Personal change readiness and organizational change readiness should align for significant transformation to take place in any context. Dolph (2017) stated when leading change, principals must understand the history of their context before engaging in strategies to address student achievement.

A transformative leader would find ways to "enrich the learning experiences of all students" (Shields, 2010, p.8). The first step to enriching learning experiences begun with analyzing and critiquing current strategies to determine effectiveness. The belief that all students deserve the promise of an education that prepares them to become productive citizens of the world guided this analysis. Khalifa et al. (2016) stated school leaders require the ability to address the educational, social, political, and cultural needs of at-risk students. The job of the school should not only focus on just teaching the curriculum. Schools must create conditions for students to reach their potential and learn how to make a difference in the world in which they reside.

However, it was not enough to deconstruct existing frameworks and create environments to address the needs of the whole child. Profound and equitable change only happened when school leaders engaged in purposeful strategies that were explicit to reform needed to meet the needs of all students. Transforming schools started with a goal

articulated into a purpose that is delineated through a plan of strategically chosen interventions to address the needs of all students. Kershner and McQuillan (2016) explained "where an educational change begins will impact where one ends up," meaning that initial conditions had a direct influence on the course of the change. Therefore, setting a goal and delineating a purpose determines the readiness of an organization for change.

Shields's (2010) transformative leadership emphasized the demonstration of moral courage and activism as the last tenet. In the face of increasing demands for schools to improve their performance on high stakes testing and accountability measures, urban school leaders had to find ways to improve student achievement (Heysteck & Emekako, 2020; Hitt, Woodruff, Meyers, & Zhu, 2018). Leading a school in an urban context required principals to possess the courage to challenge the status quo and become a catalyst for change. Leaders examined the conditions in which their schools resided and then determined how to change them for all stakeholders in a revolutionary manner. As a result, principals became an activist calling for change. They engaged in dialogue and action that confronted the policies, inequities, and practices causing barriers in the educational lives of at-risk students in their journey toward academic excellence.

To lead the change in their urban contexts, transformative leaders must examine their own beliefs, values, attitudes, and practices to determine what motivates them, what pushes their buttons, what to avoid, and what would be considered nonnegotiables (Shields, 2011). Using self-reflection, leaders become fully aware of their own identity and the role it plays in developing their leadership style. Transformative principals use

risk-taking, courageous action, and a moral purpose while acknowledging the relationships between the school community and the world that existed outside the school.

According to Reed and Swaminathan (2016), the call to be a change agent and an activist for at-risk students required urban principals to address situations actively marginalizing students. Marginalized students comprised the categories of at-risk, minority, and economically-disadvantaged. Principals had to identify the contextual elements existing on their urban high school campuses that hindered the academic progress of vulnerable student groups. Urban school leaders must be driven by the belief all students could learn. This belief should be at the center of all campus planning, initiative implementation, structures, policies, and procedures. Transformative leadership provided all children the opportunity to experience successful academic, social, and civic outcomes on a leveled educational field.

Differences Between Transformational and Transformative Leadership

Bass, Riggio, and Shields all agreed the principal was a crucial factor in transforming schools, which have historically struggled in student academic outcomes. However, their research differed in determining the leadership practices that were effective in turning around student performance. Bass and Riggio's (2006) concept of transformational leadership highlighted the importance of principals focusing on organizational improvement by aligning practices in four dimensions: setting directions, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional program based on forging relationships with followers.

In contrast, Shields's (2010) transformative leadership theory detailed the role of the principal as the one responsible for creating conditions on their campuses that forged pathways for equity and social justice for all students. This type of leadership was guided by the circumstances and situations that existed in the school context, which were the basis of inequities in the academic progress of marginalized students. According to Shields, the primary goal of transformative leadership was to prepare students to become productive citizens who are "thoughtful, successful, caring, and engaged citizens in the global community" (p.20).

Although both theories focus on transforming a school, the practices school principals should undertake to change their environments differ as depicted in Table 1.

Table 1

Comparison of transformational and transformative leadership

Reference Point	Transformational Leadership	Transformative Leadership
Starting Point	Need for organizational change to increase efficiency	Realization of disparities outside the organization that impacts the success of individuals, groups, and the organization
Foundation	Meet the needs of complex and diverse systems	Critique of current reality and promise of change
Emphasis	Organization	Deep and equitable change in social conditions
Processes	Understanding of organizational culture; setting directions, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional program	Deconstruction and reconstruction of social/cultural knowledge frameworks that generate inequity, acknowledgement of power & privilege, dialectic between individual and social
Key values	Liberty, justice, equality	Liberation, emancipation, democracy, equity, justice
Goal	Organizational change; effectiveness	Individual, organizational, & societal transformation
Leader	Looks for motive, develops common purpose, focuses on organizational goals	Loves with tension & challenge, requires moral courage, activism

Note: Adapted from *Transformative Leadership in Education: Equitable and Socially Just Change in an Uncertain and Complex World* (p.22) by C. Shields, 2018 (2nd Edition), New York, NY: Routledge. Copyright 2018 by Taylor and Francis. Adapted with permission

Key Leadership Practices of Effective Principals

In addition to the increased challenges of teacher quality, school safety, accountability standards, and negative influences from the community, school leaders must also find ways to improve the academic progress of their students (Reed & Swaminathan, 2016). Principals positively influence the academic achievement of their students when they engage in certain practices (Hitt et al., 2018; Hitt & Meyers, 2017; Sun & Leithwood, 2015). Since 2000, the Wallace Foundation provided ongoing support for research studies on school leadership in response to the shift in the role of principals from managers to leaders of learning. As a result of their research, the Wallace Foundation (2013) determined effective principals undertake five key tasks to ensure student success: shaping a vision of academic success for all students, creating a climate hospitable to education, cultivating leadership in others, improving instruction, and managing people, data, and processes to foster improvement.

Effective principals helped shape a vision and established a schoolwide vision. This vision committed the school to high standards and academic success for all students despite their ethnic background, socioeconomic status, and lack of success in school. High expectations for all students narrowed the gap between student groups and influenced the overall academic progress of every student. Principals created a healthy instructional climate with specific instructional actions grounded in research-based strategies to address the needs of both advantaged and disadvantaged students.

Effective principals created a climate hospitable to education. Using their schoolwide vision as a guide, principals established an atmosphere defined by safety and

orderliness, where students feel they are supported at every level. Principals encouraged a collaborative environment where teachers participated in a professional learning community founded on the goals for teaching and learning by improving instructional practice. The goal was to create a culture that prioritized collaboration and encouraged trust at every level.

Effective principals cultivated leadership in others. Influential leaders utilized the skills and knowledge of school faculty members to grow leaders and build capacity in their followers to assume leadership roles. By garnering the collective experience and wisdom within their school communities, school leaders created an environment encouraging stakeholders to play an active role in collective leadership that improved teacher motivation leading to improved student academic performance.

Effective principals transformed schools by acknowledging the key component of student academic progress. Quality teaching and learning was a key component in improving student academic progress. Principals developed school-wide high expectations with targeted professional development to enhance the delivery of quality instruction. The school leaders emphasized using research-based strategies to strengthen teaching through an active discussion regarding instructional practices in collaborative meetings with teachers. The instructional practices were supported and monitored through classroom observations, on-going conversations, and timely feedback.

Effective principals managed people, data, and processes. They used statistics and evidence to make decisions that impacted the overall performance of the organization. Principals posed questions about data and used collaborative inquiry with

stakeholders to determine how to best to inform change. Additionally, they adhered to personnel policies when hiring teachers and monitored the growth capacity of each team member to maintain high academic standards.

The current environment in educational policy in response to accountability measures has focused on the role of the principal in improving student academic performance. School leaders must embrace the practices of effective leadership that garnered increased student outcomes. These practices included envisioning academic success, building a climate of academics, cultivating leadership, improving instruction, and managing people, data, and school processes for improved school performance.

Summary and Conclusions

In the face of increasing demands from federal, state, and local stakeholders to improve student academic performance, urban high school principals must be aware of their leadership practices and their influence on the academic performance of the campus. Major themes identified in the literature included transformational leadership, transformative leadership, essential leadership practices, and the effect of school principals on students' academic progress. The literature and my research both supported the premise that principals influenced the overall performance of students. However, my study explored and described the perceptions of urban high school principals regarding the type of leadership practices needed to support the academic progress of students at risk.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Principal leadership plays a critical role in the daily operations of a school. As the leader of the campus, a principal is not only responsible for the administrative tasks such as budgeting and resources, but also the cultivation of teachers and the academic progress of all students, including at-risk students in danger of not meeting academic standards established by high-stakes testing. However, as demands increased for higher accountability standards, principals have become responsible for creating an educational environment to address the academic and socioemotional needs of all students. Despite the breadth of research focusing on principal leadership, questions remained regarding various leadership styles (Abdallah & Forawi, 2017; Fullan, 2020; Hugent, 2017; Robinson & Gray, 2019). In this qualitative research study, I explored and described the perceptions of urban high school principals regarding the type of leadership practices needed to support the academic progress of students at risk. Understanding these practices could help principals establish ways that would influence student achievement. A case study design was used in this research. This type of study design allowed me to explore a phenomenon in real-life settings from the perspectives of individuals intimately connected to the environment being studied to gain detailed information.

In this chapter, I address the methodology used in this study and the reasoning behind the choice. Additionally, I explain the role of the researcher, detail the methodology, describe the participant selection, the research questions, researcher-developed instrument, recruitment procedures, data collection, and data analysis. The chapter concludes by addressing trustworthiness, ethical procedures, and a summary.

Research Design and Rationale

The case study design allowed me to explore a phenomenon within its context using various data sources, which resulted in different facets of the phenomenon being exposed (see Gustafsson, 2017). Gustafsson (2017) claimed that this approach allows a researcher to collaborate with the participants while they share their stories to explain their actions. The case study research design answers the "how" and the "why" questions without manipulating the behavior of the participants so the impact of contextual conditions, which are relevant to the phenomenon, is revealed (Yazan, 2015, p.138). Qualitative researchers explore a phenomenon within its context using various data sources to show multiple facets of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore and describe the perceptions of urban high school principals regarding the type of leadership practices needed to support the academic progress of students at risk. Using a case study for this qualitative research was appropriate because little is known about the perceptions of urban principals regarding effective leadership practices to transform urban settings.

A researcher must place boundaries on a case study to prevent trying to answer questions beyond the scope of the research (Yazan, 2015). The two foundational research questions for this study were as follows:

1. How do urban high school principals describe the practices, processes, and procedures used to create environments that support students at risk?

2. What are the perceptions of urban high school principals regarding the leadership practices that will support the academic achievement of students at risk?

In a study of various qualitative research styles, Yazan (2015) provided an overview of Yin's criteria for determining the effectiveness of a case study: (a) type of research questions; (b) the control of the research over events under study; and (c) the degree of contemporary focus of the research. In this study, the research questions attempted to answer "how" and "why" a phenomenon exists without exerting control of the events surrounding it. Additionally, the leadership practices provided interventions to answer the challenges facing urban highs schools in society, made a case study the appropriate methodology. As a result, this case study research explored the perceptions of urban high school principals regarding their leadership practices and their influence on the complex conditions in which their schools resided.

There was one researcher for this study, and the sample size included five participants who reflected on their lived experiences as campus leaders in urban settings who, through their practices, influenced the academic progress of at-risk students.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in a qualitative case study is to explore through interviews the experiences of the participants from their point of view to determine universal truths (Creswell, 2014; Yazan, 2015). One of the key components of a qualitative research study is the researchers because they are the primary instrument of the process in defining the positionality and reflexivity. Positionality describes the role of

the researcher related to the contextual environment of the study. As the researcher in this study, I served as the primary instrument for data collection. I gathered both nonverbal and verbal communication during the interviews. In addition, I reviewed archival data from the schools participating in the study.

During the interviews, I shared my experiences as a principal of an urban school. I interviewed each participant in person. Since the participants and I shared the same role and school context, I was considered an "insider," which determined my positionality for the research. Consequently, I did not allow the biases of my position, perceptions, and experiences cloud the interpretation of the data gathered from the participants about their sites. A researcher needs to maintain constant and systematic awareness of both components to confront bias, underlying beliefs, and assumptions that stemmed from the researcher's own experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Reflexivity defines the researcher's self-evaluation of his or her role throughout the research study. Also, reflexivity describes the biases, experiences, and values introduced into the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Although my role as an "insider" helped provide a heightened understanding of the data gathered in the study, it also offered the potential for bias. Continual checks with participants were conducted throughout the research to ensure unbiased interpretation of data, themes, and conclusions. Participants reviewed interview questions and transcripts, then provided feedback. Understanding one's subjectivity and interpretation allows researchers to engage in reflexivity that determined how the study is constructed, designed, and portrayed (Ravitch & Carl).

Creswell and Creswell (2018) advised researchers to explicitly identify how their interpretations can cause them to predetermine themes, look for specific evidence to support self-selected themes, and make conclusions that are not delineated in the data gathered. As the researcher, I engaged in reflexive journaling to capture how my experiences as an urban principal shaped my interpretation of the data shared by the participants. The journaling allowed me to engage in a conversation with the data that reflected on what was learned and how it challenged my own biases (Deggs & Hernandez, 2018; Saldaña, 2016). Journaling helped me capture questions, ideas, and concerns in real time as I progressed through the study and interpreted the data.

Transcript review and member checking established the validity of the study. Creswell and Creswell (2018) stated member checking was one way to ensure the accuracy of the findings in the study. The participants reviewed their transcripts to confirm the accuracy of their experiences and perceptions. Although I was considered an insider in this study due to my present position as an urban principal, the use of reflexive journaling addressed any biases tied to my own experiences.

Triangulating data sources is one way to determine how the different sources inform the study (Fusch, Fusch, & Ness, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The data from the interviews were triangulated with the schools' annual performance on the state's standardized assessments and their accountability. The triangulation of the data sources in this study determined if the perceptions of the urban principals regarding their effective leadership practices influenced the academic progress of at-risk students.

Methodology

The following methodologies were considered for this study: phenomenology and case study. I deemed phenomenology inappropriate for this study because it primarily focused on the exploration and description of the lived experiences of a phenomenon. The case study approach was the best fit because it allowed for the investigation of the perceptions of current urban principals. The principals interviewed for this study have engaged in practices that have led to the consistent academic progress of at-risk students in urban contexts of the communities in which their schools reside. Additionally, I explored the phenomenon through not only the words of the participants but also specific public documents that provided increased insight into the systematic practices needed to bring about sustained change. These available documents included state accountability reports, campus improvement plans, and state school report cards.

Participant Selection

The choice of the participants and sites for a case study was essential for the research and critical to meeting the purpose of the study. The target population for this study was urban high school principals in a southcentral state in the United States. These principals were chosen from the comparative school lists released yearly and ranked schools in groups based on their accountability performance ratings. The state created school groups in sets of 40 based on their campus type, grade levels served, percentage of economically disadvantaged students, mobility rate, percentage of English learners, percentage of students served by special education, and the percentage of students enrolled in an early college program. I targeted these groups because they consisted of

schools with the appropriate backgrounds for the study. As participants in this study, urban high school principals provided specific answers to the research questions based on their experiences, knowledge of the phenomenon under review, and the context in which their schools reside. In the case of this study, I chose purposeful sampling because it provided "context-rich and detailed accounts of specific populations and locations" (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 128).

Additionally, purposeful sampling allows a researcher to discover, understand, and gain insight from the participants from whom extensive knowledge can be gathered (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Thus, the criteria for participant selection in this study included principals of urban high schools with a large population of economically - disadvantaged students, a large community of at-risk students, and a high percentage of minority students. The schools selected showed consistent growth over 3 years based on the state's accountability ratings. The student population at each school included many at-risk students, and the campuses faced significant challenges in their urban environments. Criteria for exclusion in the study contained high school principals who lead schools that do not meet the state's definition of an urban school. Participants who satisfied the inclusion criteria and did not have any traits of the exclusion criterion were considered for the study.

A common practice in case study research included selecting a certain number of participants to achieve data saturation (Creswell, 2018). Using the state's comparison group list, I contacted the campus principals whose schools had the targeted population via email to introduce the research study and invite them to participate in a leader

interview. The intended sample for this study consisted of twenty urban high school principals from different cities on the state's accountability comparison group; however, they shared characteristics usually associated with urban campuses: socioeconomic status, student demographics, and location of the school. According to Yin (2014), case studies used purposeful sampling that do not require a specific formula to determine the sample size. However, the researcher must select the appropriate sample size that represented the knowledge, skills, and expertise to address the research questions. Yazan (2015) stated choosing multiple sites creates a more substantial base for generalization to distill universal truths.

Instrumentation

Upon determining the purposeful sampling for the study, I contacted the participants who have expressed an interest in participating in the study. Data collection for this case study involved a 45-minute interview conducted in-person using an interview protocol instrument that I created. The conceptual framework and literature were used to develop the interview questions. My decision to use an interview protocol was based on the need to gather information about the perceptions of urban high school principals regarding leadership practices needed to support the academic progress of students at risk. The first set of questions in the interview protocol focused on the participants' educational background, leadership philosophy, and description of their chosen leadership style. The second set addressed the context of the participant's urban school site. The third set of interview questions concentrated on the participant's reflection of the leadership practices, processes, and procedures that influenced the

academic progress of the at-risk student population at their present school site. These interviews were conducted in-person in a semistructured format. Each participant received a transcript for review to verify their content was captured accurately. A summary provided participants the opportunity to review my interpretations of their perceptions and experiences shared in the interview.

Additionally, data collection included a review of state accountability data for each campus site. This data provided an accurate depiction of the academic progress of student populations in three years in the following categories: economically-disadvantaged, minority, and at-risk.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Before recruiting participants, I contacted the superintendents of ten urban school districts with high schools that met the criteria chosen for the study. The Partner Organization Agreement permitted me to conduct the study with the principals selected for the study. To recruit the principals, I contacted each one via email to ascertain their interest in participating in the study. The email contained the information regarding the nature, purpose, criteria, and possible implications of the research. Five interested principals responded with the words, "I Consent" to indicate their intent to participate in the study.

Each participant was interviewed with an interview protocol with three parts. The interviews took place in-person during a time established with the participant to ensure full engagement. Part 1 focused on the participant's background and philosophy regarding leadership. Part 2 garnered the description of the contextual elements of the

school site, which is currently under the supervision of the participant. Part 3 addressed the perceptions of their practices, processes, and procedures the participant feels are essential to ensure a sustainable academic process. After the interview, each participant received an email containing the interview transcript and a summary to review for accuracy. The participants and I discussed any changes that needed to be made to the transcripts and summaries. Each urban high school principal was assigned a pseudonym to mask their identity and maintain confidentiality.

Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis in qualitative research involved the "intentional, systematic scrutiny of data at various stages and moments" during the process, which included "data organization, data management, immersive engagement with data, and writing and representation" (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 217). It was also ongoing and recursive so that the analysis is not summative at the time it is gathered. The analysis could directly affect the study findings, research design, literature review, and the reporting of results to the targeted audience (Ravitch & Carl).

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) emphasized the importance of organizing materials to analyze the data gained from the interview transcripts, field notes, reports, records, and reflective memos. The organization of materials provided a structured avenue to conduct a "within-case analysis" and a "cross-case analysis to build generalizations that fit all the cases" (Merriam & Tisdell, p. 234).

At this point in the research study, I reviewed the process of manual coding described in *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (Saldaña, 2016). In

qualitative data analysis, "code is a researcher-generated construct that symbolizes or translates data" to provide meaning (Saldaña, 2016, p. 4). Saldaña s work described the use of the first cycle and second cycle coding to distill themes or categories from the data using significant statements and phrases from each transcript. These codes could be used to create an initial list of codes with the potential to become themes. At this point, themes correlated with the research questions and represented meaning across the data. The link to the research questions led to the development of interpretations and conclusions regarding the research findings.

I found several types of management software available for qualitative research. One with true potential was NVivo which offered transcription and the ability to create spreadsheets with responses (Maher, Hadfield, Hutchings, & deEyto, 2018). The software also provided the ability to export PDF files of a variety of data reports. In the end, this software was used to manage the data generated by the interview transcripts, field notes, reflexive journal, and school performance data.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, the credibility and trustworthiness of the researcher are essential to the research study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). Trustworthiness was the way the researchers remained true to the participants' experiences, which lead to the quality and rigor of a study (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The researchers' extensive attention to the feelings and emotions of the participant being studied to provide depth while maintaining an awareness of their own biases. Another way to ensure the integrity of qualitative research was to establish the credibility of the

data through the choice of research design and instruments (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Researchers demonstrated the credibility of the data by checking triangulation,

transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These components helped the research

study stay grounded in the context of the study. The consistent checking of the data to the

proposed argument and acknowledging biases that could impact the interpretation of

findings were needed to ensure credibility.

Credibility

The use of reflexive journaling during interviewing and data analysis safeguarded

the credibility of the research. Patton (2015) described reflexivity as the attempt of the

researchers to examine their thinking and feelings during the various phases of the

research study. Additionally, the researchers recorded and explored reactions, emotions,

and predispositions during data collections to avoid influencing data analysis with their

own biases. This research study included member checks of the interview transcripts to

ensure accurate interpretation of data analysis.

Transferability

In the case of study research, transferability referred to how the research findings

applied to other contexts (Yin, 2017). The researcher facilitated the transfer of results by

providing rich details about the data, including the contextual setting, sample size,

socioeconomic characteristics, and demographics (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). In this

research study, the leadership practices of the urban high school principals proved useful

for principals in similar settings who are trying to improve student achievement in their

schools.

Dependability

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) declared the strength of qualitative case study research was internal validity. The interview questions in this case study were reviewed by committee members and other school administrators to gather feedback and input. Additionally, I used a reflexive journal to record my reflections during the data collection and analysis. All interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder and were transcribed. Yin (2017) emphasized the importance of providing all participants with the opportunity to review their interview transcripts for accuracy.

Confirmability

Confirmability in case study research defined the degree to which other researchers can confirm the research findings. All research data analysis must be free from the researcher's biased interpretations. One way to address this challenge was to triangulate data by confirming results from multiple sources in data (Yin, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Ethical Procedures

As a researcher, it was essential to be aware of the preconceived ideas and personal experiences that interfered with the findings of my research study. Researchers also need to heed the ethical implications that arose during the data collection process. Ethical guidelines referenced the importance of maintaining the confidentiality of the identities of the participants and ensuring the integrity of the study. Subsequently, all names of the school sites and the participants were kept confidential to protect their

privacy. Interview transcripts were reviewed to confirm personal experiences did not yield biased coding that interfered with the study findings.

Summary

In Chapter 3, I provided information regarding the process to gather and analyze data for this study. The case study design was the appropriate methodology to address each of the research questions. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) asserted a case study is a way to "investigate a contemporary phenomenon (the case) within its real-life context" (p.37). The researcher sought to understand the "why" behind behaviors exhibited by study participants.

Urban principals needed to find ways to meet the demands of the high-stakes environment that exists in their schools. Successfully implementing practices, processes, and practices could potentially influence academic outcomes in schools located in communities rife with poverty and underperforming students.

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore and describe the perceptions of urban high school principals regarding the type of leadership practices needed to support the academic progress of students at risk. A case study design allowed me to explore and describe the phenomenon within its context, using data collected from various data resources (Gustafsson, 2017). Additionally, the study aimed to address the gap in the literature that failed to describe the influence on student academic progress by campus leadership. At this time, little is known about the perceptions of urban high school principals regarding "how" their leadership practices influence the academic progress of their students. According to Yazan (2015), qualitative researchers address the how and why of a phenomenon in contextual conditions. In this study, I endeavored to add to the literature regarding the leadership practices of urban high school principals in schools with consistent academic progress with their at-risk student population. Two research questions guided this qualitative case study:

- RQ1: How do urban high school principals describe the practices, processes, and procedures used to create environments that support students at risk?

- RQ2: What are the perceptions of urban high school principals regarding the leadership practices that will support the academic achievement of students at risk?

In this chapter, I present the findings of the data collection in this qualitative case study as well as a description of the methods I used for collecting, recording, and analyzing data. This chapter begins with a review of the setting, a review of data

collection methods, participant demographics, and an examination of data analysis strategies. The chapter concludes with the results of the study as they relate to the conceptual framework composed of the transformational leadership theory, transformative leadership theory, and the Wallace Foundation's analysis on effective school leadership. The study's results could demonstrate to other school leaders that effective leadership practices implemented at their schools could lead to growth in academic progress.

Setting

This qualitative case study was conducted through in-person interviews in the participants' school environment. The study took place in four urban school districts in a state in the southcentral United States. These school districts had several high schools that met the study's participant criteria. All districts and high schools met the criteria of having (a) a population of economically disadvantaged students; (b) a population of at-risk students; and (c) minority students who have shown consistent growth over 3 years based on the state's accountability rating system. Before the interviews, I conducted a thorough review of the district and school websites to obtain contact information for the urban high school principals within the district. I recorded this information on a chart created in Microsoft Word for easy reference when contacting potential school administrators. The evaluation of each school's website yielded information regarding its mission statement, vision, demographics, recent academic performance on standardized assessments, and educational initiatives. The data gathered from the website helped identify the campuses that could yield rich content for the study.

Data Collection

After the Walden University Institutional Review Board (Approval no. 09-20-19-0748986), and the district superintendents approved my research, the search for the target population began with identifying potential participants for the study. I collected archival data made publicly available through the state accountability archives to build the participant pool for this research study.

Archival Data

Archival data from the state's public site were used to find the targeted population for the study. I created a list of potential participants using the state's yearly accountability comparative schools list, state academic performance reports for each school, and the annual state report card. The yearly accountability comparative schools list placed schools in a group of 40. The groups were based on similarities in grade levels, size, percentage of economically - disadvantaged students, mobility rate, percentage of English learners, percentage of students served by special education, and students enrolled in an early college high school program. Each school's academic performance report listed performance results by grade, subject, and performance level for students in the accountability subset, academic growth progress measure, overall rates of attendance, graduation, and dropouts, postsecondary readiness, and staff demographics. The annual state report card provided a broad view of a school's characteristics and academic performance.

Using the archival data, I identified a diverse and ample pool of potential candidates who met the criteria for the research study. The eight targeted school districts

yielded 20 urban high school principals who could participate in the study. After creating

a list of potential participants from the archival data, I sent invitations to participate in the

study to eight urban school superintendents via personal email. The private email sent to

the superintendents contained a brief biographical introduction, an overview of the

research study, and a request to contact campus principals to participate in the study. I

attached the Partner Organization Agreement form to the email. Two of the districts,

District A and District C, required additional documentation from any researcher seeking

to collect data for a study. This documentation included acknowledging the Family

Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), description of the level of participant

involvement, description of data to be collected, how to mask the identity of participants,

risks, and how the study benefits schools and districts. Four of the eight superintendents

agreed to participate in the research and permitted me to contact the urban high school

principals in their district.

Principal Interviews

The second type of data collected was principal interviews. All 20 urban high

school principals across the four districts whose schools met the criteria received an

invitation email. Of the 20 principals contacted for the study, only five principals agreed

to become participants. For confidentiality, I used an alphanumeric coding system of P1

to P5 for principals and the alpha coding system of District A to District D for districts.

Those five principals received a copy of the informed consent documents via

email. These documents provided the five principals with the following details regarding

the study:

- interview procedures, which included an explanation of how the audio-recorded interview was transcribed for their review,

- reiteration of the voluntary nature of the study,

- risks and benefits of the study, and

- a university contact who can discuss their rights as a participant in the study.

All principals were then directed to reply to the invitation email with the words "I consent" to indicate their willingness to participate in the study. The school district of one principal, District A, first contacted their high school principals to ascertain their willingness to participate before permitting me to email the principal directly. Another district, District C, required me and the principal to submit a district-created Statement of Consent form before any interview data collection. As a group, the principals had 50 years of administrative experience. Their collective years of service would yield rich information regarding their personal experiences in leading an urban high school. Table 1 depicts principals who agreed to participate in the study regarding years of administrative experience, district of employment, and the school data that qualified them for the study.

Table 2

Administrator Experience, District, and School Data of Participants

Principal number	Total administrator experience	District	Criteria: urban student populations
P1	7 years	District A	75% Economically - disadvantaged 59% At risk 91% Minority
P2	17 years	District B	85% Economically - disadvantaged 72% At risk 98% Minority
P3	4 years	District C	26% Economically - disadvantaged 52% At risk 72% Minority
P4	7 years	District D	47% Economically - disadvantaged 75% At risk 77% Minority
P5	15 years	District D	62% Economically - disadvantaged 86% At risk 83% Minority

The interviews of the five principals took place over 50 days due to schedule constraints. The semistructured interview at their school site used an interview guide with open-ended questions categorized into three sections (see Appendix A). In one section, I asked the participant to focus on their background and leadership philosophy. Another section of the interview required the principal participants to describe the context of their current school site. The last section of the interview questions solicited the perceptions of the established practices, processes, and procedures essential in sustaining academic progress. I used the same open-ended question structure for each interview to ensure validity and reliability during the data collection process. These questions allowed me to compare data on the perceptions of the participants concerning their leadership and its impact on student academic progress. Before each interview, I completed another review

of the current School Report Card, state assessment results, and state accountability report for each campus. All interviews were audio-recorded using a Sony PX370 Mono digital recorder and ranged 45–55 minutes in length. At the beginning of each interview, I reviewed the research purpose, their voluntary status, their ability to end the interview at any time, and the need to audio record the interview with each principal. After reading the interview questions aloud, I recorded highlights from each response to the questions in my field notes.

In their responses to the first section of interview questions, all principals provided background information of their administrative and leadership experiences that helped shape their leadership philosophy. All five principals had a minimum of 5 years of administrator experience.

P1 served in this location for 3 years. He was employed by the same district 23 years ago at the campus where he is now principal. His leadership experience included opening a magnet science academy geared toward serving minority and at-risk students. When discussing his leadership philosophy, he shared principals should not "make the mistake of trying to make kids fit into a system instead of trying to make the system work for the kids." P1's priority as a leader was to lead the efforts in creating a student-centered culture.

P2 had led his high school for 4 years and had been with his district for 14 years. Over the past 25 years in education, he served as department chair, special education facilitator, and an assistant principal at the secondary level. P2 asserted a critical influence on his development as a leader was his experience as an assistant principal on a

team that facilitated the turnaround of a low-performing high school. According to him, this experience solidified his "philosophy and belief systems about education." He stressed "the right leadership and direction can make an underperforming campus a high performing one."

The campus led by P3 was opened 5 years ago, and he was assistant principal at the time. He functioned in the principal role for the past 2 years. During his 13 years in education, he served as a core teacher and a head coach. He stated coaching a sport and leading a campus share some characteristics. A coach must be consistent in finding ways to inspire their players to excel in their sport. On the same note, he explained principals "have to ignite the passion for teaching and learning within their staff so that they can, in turn, ignite the passion for education in their students."

P4 has been with his district for 14 years and principal at his current campus for two years. His 7 years in administration placed him at campuses with a high population of minority and at-risk students. During his 14 years in education, he had served as a core department chair, an at-risk coordinator, and an evening high school coordinator. According to P4, these various roles helped to provide a foundational set of skills that have proved invaluable in his administrative role.

Lastly, P5 has been the principal of his current campus for the past 10 years and employed in his district for 14 years. During his 20 years in education, he has served as an academic dean, dean of instruction, and deputy principal. He developed his leadership skills in rural, urban, and alternative school settings at all three levels: elementary, middle, and high school. P5 explained his leadership philosophy by stating that leading a

campus is not about "focusing on himself" but "being the leader that my people need me to be in order for my kids to get what they need."

Field Notes and Reflexive Journaling

During each face-to-face interview, I used field notes to capture the participants' verbal and non-verbal responses to each question. I recorded key phrases from the oral responses were recorded in the field notes for later reference in the reflexive journal. Upon completing each interview, I transcribed the digital recording using TEMI, downloaded it into a Microsoft Word document, and printed it. While reading the printed transcription, I captured notes in the margins around critical phrases and compared them to the field notes. Using both the field notes and the transcription, I wrote an entry into my journal to record initial interpretations of each interview question. According to Phillippi and Lauderdale (2018), researchers who engaged in deep reflection after interviews were able to evaluate their "performance, biases, and feelings" in light of the data gathered in the interview (p. 386). The use of field notes refined research questions and interview techniques to yield rich descriptions of the data (Deggs & Hernandez, 2018; Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). I used my field notes to refresh my memory of the key points and provide insight into each participant's response to the interview questions. The field notes also enabled me to continue to evolve as a researcher as I interacted with each principal.

The reflexive journaling used during the data collection stage of my research journey proved invaluable. In the early stages, the journal served to document the obstructions encountered trying to secure a viable participant pool to begin the data

collection process. As a current high school principal, I fully understood how the daily

demands of the job impacted the schedules of my peers. Still, I was occasionally

frustrated with how those schedules impacted my deadlines. However, persistence and

patience prevailed.

At the end of each interview, audio recordings were quickly transcribed to

produce a hard copy of the interview. After thoroughly reading the transcript, I used the

reflexive journal to capture initial impressions of the interviews, to make inferences about

meanings in responses, and to conduct an initial analysis of answers as it relates to the

conceptual framework (Deggs & Hernandez, 2018). Entries in the journal explored my

positionality. I also wrote about follow-up questions, my opinions, and connections to my

experiences. The journal documented the analysis process from initial interpretations of

ideas and the early connections between the interviewees (Berger, 2015; Orange, 2016).

Data Analysis

Qualitative case studies with multiple data sources required triangulation for

contribution to the "reliability of results and saturation of data" (Fusch et al., 2018, p.20).

I utilized three data sources for this study: publicly available archival data, participant

interviews, and a reflexive journal with field notes from interviews. Data gained from the

participant interviews provided insight into how the experiences and philosophies of each

principal helped shaped the leadership of their respective campuses. The state assessment

and accountability data were analyzed to establish a concrete understanding of

perceptions regarding procedures, policies, and practices utilized by the five principals

that influenced student academic progress. All data were subjected to two cycles of coding to refine the analysis.

First Cycle

After each interview, the audio recording was transferred onto my computer and then uploaded into the TEMI transcription application with an alphanumeric code to mask the identity of the participant. After downloading the hard copies of the interview transcripts, I then reviewed each TEMI transcript for accuracy using the audio files and my notes. Upon completing the verbatim transcription, each participant was emailed a copy of their transcript in a Microsoft Word document to review for accuracy and approval. Participants were allowed to make changes to their initial responses for clarification and fresh perspectives. Once each participant reviewed their transcript and was satisfied, I invited them to send an email indicating their approval. All participants sent emails stating no changes needed to be made in their typed transcripts.

Upon receiving approval from each participant, I re-read each transcript and jotted down short phrases in the margins that highlighted responses by the participant (Saldaña, 2016). This type of coding, in vivo strategy, captured the actual terminology used by the participants in their answers to the research questions (Saldaña, 2016). I repeated this process with each transcript to capture the essence of each participant's responses. I also referred to the field notes and my reflexive journal to grasp critical concepts that coincided with the responses given by the participants. Each interview provided insight into the participants' perceptions of their leadership practices at each of their campus

sites. This first cycle of coding yielded a list of key concepts found across all interview

transcripts.

Table 3

Common Codes

Interview questions	Common in vivo codes
1	School program leader. Core subject teacher. Athletic coach. Department Chair. Academic Dean. Dean of Instruction
2	Team approach. Being a positive influence. Reignite the passion for teaching and learning. Produce solid members of society. Challenge the status quo. Bring family concept. Going the extra mile. Building relationships and partnerships. Serve as a resource.
3	Distributive leadership. Collaborative Leadership. Servant Leadership. Disciplinarian. Transformational leadership. Laissez-faire leadership.
4	Staff's need for continuity. Lack of identity. Complacency of staff. Lack of trust in school leadership and teachers. Negative image in the community. Low expectations for students. No student ownership. High turnover. Lack of school pride. Acceptance of status quo. Demographic changes. Lack of urgency.
5	Low expectations from parents and students. Increase of charter schools in neighborhood. Inability of students to envision their future. Fixed mindset. Staff dynamics. Finding and retaining talented staff. Outside influences from home and community. Trying to change an established system.
6	Classroom observations of teaching and learning. Data analysis. Building relationships with staff and students. Listening to community stakeholders. Professional book studies. Ongoing meetings with teachers, students, parents, and community stakeholders. Honesty. Family nights.
7	Presenting change as a way to achieve goals. Creating a culture that believes in all students. Building strong relationships with teachers, students, and parents. Establishing mentoring program for all grades. Broadening reach of counseling department. Emphasizing literacy across all content and elective classes. Implementing a co-teach model for inclusion classes. Using data to guide instruction and create interventions. Creating common assessments in all core classes. Establishing site-based committees that are active. Launching job-embedded professional development. Developing partnerships with higher education institutions for vertical alignment.
8	Mindset of parents, students, and teachers. Low attendance at informational meetings to share campus interventions. Parents and students feeling like they have no voice. Low enrollment in advanced courses. Willingness to physically engage with community. Lack of systems to address student gaps in curriculum. Consistent communication with stakeholders. Understanding of professional learning communities. Options for all students.
9	Visibility in classrooms, hallways, events, and cafeteria. Be human with staff. Connect with staff. Be positive even in the face of challenges. Open door of communication. Highlight success at all levels. Constant communication of vision and goals. Building relationships through actions and not just words. Form a system of trust. Family concept with trust. Risk-free environment. Ideas welcomed and encouraged. Keeper of processes. Recognizing need and responding to it. Collaborative decision-making. Campus leadership team.
10	Must be willing to meet the challenge of changing hearts and minds. See students and not numbers. Love people; especially young people. Believe that at-risk students can be successful. Belief that change can happen. Make decisions in the best interest of students. Love what you do. Experienced past success—be proven. Discipline with love. Hold people accountable. Communicate through actions and words. No one size fits all mentality. Know your audience. Be driven and determined. Have thick skin. Show that you care. Know how to celebrate the small things, too. Care for the community. Bravery. Collaborator.

Second Cycle

The second cycle of coding included reviewing the transcripts to determine the connections, commonalities, and differences between the perspectives of the five principals. During this cycle, I checked the data gathered through in vivo codes by combining the participant responses and creating a descriptive code to represent the commonalities in their answers. Descriptive coding recapitulated the data using a short phrase that identifies a topic for the data (Saldaña, 2016). This type of coding answered the question of study focus and concepts in the study by establishing categories to capture the essence of the main topics in the responses to the interview questions. Descriptive coding summarized the data and provided a foundation for articulating the meaning of the phenomenon through the lens of the research questions (Elliot, 2018). The second cycle codes depicted in Table 4 aligned with the research focus on the perceptions of urban high school principals.

Using the second cycle codes, I then reviewed the entries made in my reflexive journal about each principal's interview transcript to ensure alignment between research questions and the data generated.

Table 4

Second Cycle Coding

In vivo codes	2nd Cycle code
Distributive leadership. Collaborative leadership. Servant leadership. Disciplinarian. Transformational Leadership. Laissez-faire leadership.	Leadership styles
Low expectations. High turnover of staff. Finding and retaining talented staff. Outside influences that impact campus. Lack of trust. Poorly maintained facilities. Lack school culture and climate. Student demographics. Complacency with status quo.	Campus challenges
Frequent classroom observations. Data analysis on multiple levels. Listening to community stakeholders. Honest conversations about challenges. Seeking guidance from professional books on leadership and transforming schools.	Needed school changes
Open Door policy. Visibility. Building avenues of communication and partnerships. Common assessments. Data-drive instruction. Co-teach model for inclusion classes. Professional learning communities. Student mentoring. Job-embedded professional development.	Campus transformation implementation
Love students and community. Believe that all students can. Communicate through actions and words. Driven and deter-mind to succeed. Appreciate and celebrate. Clear vision based on needs of students. Decisions in best interest of students. Solution-orientated. Customer service.	Leader skill set
Positive climate. Family concept. Building relationships and partnerships. Reignite passion for teaching and learning. Value all stakeholders. Frequent interactions to stay in touch. Systems for success. Teacher buy-in.	Positive culture and climate
Team approach. Collaborative teams. Working in within system. Leadership team. Teacher leaders. Buy-in from team.	Team concept

I then used the software management program, NVivo, to store and manage the data. I created a new project in NVivo that included the descriptive coding created in the second round of coding. These codes generated in the second cycle were as follows: Leadership Styles, Campus Challenges, School Changes, Campus Turnaround, Leader Skill Set, Positive Culture, and Climate and Concept of Team. These codes were utilized

to create nodes in NVivo that would tabulate the number of times a reference to a specific code occurred in the interview transcripts and journal entries. I depicted the tabulation of references in Table 5.

Table 5

NVivo References

Reference	Number of appearances
1. Leadership	39
2. Campus Challenges	27
3. Needed School Changes	27
4. Campus Transformation Implementation	27
5. Leader Skill Set	37
6. Positive Climate and Culture	27

NVivo not only denoted the number of references but also provided the text from the data sources that were coded to each of the seven references. Each text entry was assessed to determine how it aligned with the corresponding research questions. I then examined the NVivo reports through the lens of the conceptual framework based on Bass and Riggio's Transformational Leadership, Shields' Transformative Leadership, and the Wallace Foundation's Effective Urban Principal Leadership Practices. The conceptual framework and the data generated from three cycles led to the emergence of themes that identified the participants' perceptions of their leadership.

Results

This qualitative case study was conducted to explore and describe the perceptions of urban high school principals regarding the type of leadership practices needed to

support the academic progress of at-risk students. I used the campus performance on standardized assessments over three years to identify schools that have shown academic improvement compared with schools in their group. The results and findings of this study were based on my analysis of the data collected from five principal interviews.

The research questions guided this study: (a) How do urban high school principals describe the practices, processes, and procedures used to create environments that support students at risk? (b) What are the perceptions of urban high school principals regarding the leadership practices that will support the academic achievement of students at risk? Based on the participant responses, the following five overarching themes emerged: leadership styles and traits, identify challenges and barriers, create, and implement a vision, build relationships, and positive climate and culture.

Theme 1: Leadership Style and Traits

This study indicated urban high school principals must clearly understand their leadership style and traits to exhibit authenticity while leading their respective campuses. The principals in the study agreed to be aware of their leadership style and characteristics were necessary for leading successful schools. Although the five participants labeled their style differently, their styles shared some commonalities.

P1 described his style as distributive leadership because he recognized that as principal, he did not "have strengths in every area" to meet the challenges on his campus. Instead, P1 stated he aimed to "hire good people, trust them, and help them think" about better ways to serve their student populations on multiple. Modeste, Hornskov, Bjerg, and Kelley (2020) described distributive leadership as "tasks or practices that occur within a

given context or situation and require the work of a leader and a follower to carry it out"
(p. 328).

Additionally, P3 shared he embraced sharing leadership with his faculty members
but identified himself as a collaborative leader. DeWitt (2018) explained collaborative
leadership was about working with campus stakeholders to establish campus goals to
provide them with voice. P3 attributed his leadership style to his years as a baseball
coach, emphasizing the importance of playing as a team. This collaborative leader
described how working in this fashion allowed both administration and teacher leaders to
engage in dialogue and "generate ideas" that initiated avenues to "solve problems" facing
the campus and their students. Both principals agreed creating an environment where
voices of teachers are valued and appreciated has been instrumental in influencing
campus outcomes.

In contrast, P2 described his leadership style as a servant leader. He claimed this
style was "founded on the belief that educators are the greatest influencer on student
success" and that principals should be servant-leaders. According to his description,
servant leaders "must be sensitive to the needs of their staff to maintain a unified vision
for the campus." Being sensitive to the needs of his staff enabled the "staff to be sensitive
to the needs of their students." Al-Mahdy, Emam, and Hallinger (2018) described
principals who exhibit servant leadership as individuals who prioritized the needs of their
followers over their needs. P2 stated early in his career, he realized that there was only so
much he could do by himself to make significant changes at the school; however, being a
servant leader could make change happen simultaneously on multiple levels. Principals

who led as servant-leaders empowered their teachers to use their talents to reach their potential as individuals. Building teacher capacity and working with teachers on campus goals would facilitate implementing the shared vision to improve student performance (Al-Mahday et al., 2018; Tai & Kareem, 2018).

P4 described his leadership style as family-orientated and was deliberate about not labeling himself with one of many "buzzwords about principal leadership." He explained he has focused on "building the family, building trust, and building relationships with other administrators, teachers, students, downright to the custodial staff." He summed up his leadership philosophy as "win them as a family and then do great things after" together as a team.

Although P5 described himself as believing in the campus staff and cultivating their leadership capacity, the leadership style he named was laissez-faire. He shared that the old New England Patriots mantra of "do your job" guided his leadership philosophy. When asked to explain, P5 elaborated he believed that if "everybody just takes care of their job, knows their job, and executes it properly, then things get done." Jaarsveld, Mentz, and Ellis (2018), in research on principal leadership styles, claimed laissez-faire leaders with their let-go behavior allowed their followers to operate freely and make decisions.

All principals agreed that an essential part of their leadership styles included making themselves accessible to their staff to ensure two-way communication. They explained communicating and listening to their team was key to maintaining progress toward academic goals. Open dialogue about campus solutions with input from various

levels of stakeholders enabled all perspectives to be considered when looking for ways to serve their student populations.

Theme 2: Identifying Challenges and Barriers

Urban high schools faced numerous challenges and barriers that directly impacted the academic progress of their students. During the interview process, I asked each principal to share their first impressions of their assigned campuses. I needed to gather data regarding challenges and barriers evident in the faculty, staff, students, and community during their leadership. All participants agreed this factor played a prominent role in their early agendas as newly assigned leaders who were trying to change the trajectory of student performance.

One challenge shared by the participants was the culture of low academic expectations found on their campuses. Low academic expectations influenced how students perceived themselves, how parents viewed their children's ability to reach their goals, and how school staff perceived post-secondaries readiness of the students they educated. For example, P1 recalled his first day as a teacher on his campus 23 years earlier when a veteran teacher described the school as a "tough place" with "hard students." He believed this description was frequently echoed by individuals who failed to understand that "most of our kids come in with a negative self-image about themselves, about their family, about the community, about everything." He continued sometimes "our people [community and teachers], don't believe in our kids…that they can be doctors, lawyers, business owners, and just good husbands and wives, or good brothers and sisters". In sharing his experiences, P2 also detailed how during that first

year as principal, he "immediately sensed that people felt the campus was performing at a level that was acceptable because we were serving urban students…at-risk students". Also, most parents in the community felt preparing their children for high school graduation should be the primary goal of his school. Their vision did not include "five years down the road" with options such as college, technical school, military, or careers with viable income. Both principals shared incorporating systems focused on post-secondary readiness with on-going support for students and their parents has proven instrumental in meeting this challenge. Understanding the challenges brought about by societal inequities experienced by urban students and their families equipped schools to meet their needs (Liou & Rotheram-Fuller, 2019).

The next challenge faced by my participants revolved around the ever-changing teaching demographics and contextual needs on their campuses. For example, P3 described how his campus opened with a "melting pot of teachers" pulled from various campuses from around the district. Teachers within this group had different expectations of leadership, pedagogy, and student performance. Nonetheless, the teachers were "thrown all together in one place with high expectations" for student performance. P4 encountered this same situation when he began his leadership at his current school. Over a 3-year period, the school had three principals. He described how the "parents were frustrated by so much change and the lack of identity of the school." This situation created an environment rife with a "lack of consistency" and no clear understanding of campus expectations for teachers, parents, and students. Similarly, P5 also led a school with leadership turnover in quick successions before his tenure.

Additionally, the campus experienced a major demographic shift in its student population with "outward mobility of the community… families moved out of the area and went over to the surrounding communities". This shift caused "an increase in minorities, an increase in low socioeconomic, and an increase in at-risk students" with little change in the teacher demographics. The changing demographics brought about situations that were new to the campus. The disparity between teacher and student demographics created a need for professional development in culturally relevant teaching to meet this challenge. All participants agreed successful identification of the unique challenges and barriers faced by their teacher and students was crucial to establishing systems to meet the meet this challenge.

Theme 3: Create a Vision and Implement it

All five participants had a vision for consistent academic success for all student populations. However, they realized acknowledging the challenges and barriers on the campus was only one part of the process. Each principal needed to cultivate and implement a plan so the vision could become a reality. For example, P1 stated the plan must be grounded in "systems-thinking" that had "frameworks that can pivot" to meet the needs of the campus. Establishing viable professional learning communities was an integral part of the system he wanted to create on the campus. He started with an innovation team that focused on implementing high-quality instruction, feedback, and assessment through professional learning communities. The professional learning communities' sessions included an emphasis on common assessments and data analysis to inform instructional effectiveness. He referenced the book, *Four Disciplines of*

Execution, which the campus used in a book study to provide a foundation for system building (McChesney, Covey, & Huling, 2016). P1 pointed out how the authors articulated a productivity system for improving organizational performance by focusing on increasing accountability to achieve a goal with a team approach (McChesney et al., 2016). He explained how this systematic approach enabled the campus to set critical short and long-term goals for academic performance that were tracked on a visual scoreboard during their weekly team meetings. The campus-wide focus on goals and measures to impact student academic growth resulted in a "shift in the teachers' thinking" regarding instructional practice while working as a team because "they see value in it."

P2 stated his vision of student academic success began with establishing ways for staff to show their commitment and belief to students, parents, and community stakeholders. The campus embarked on a plan to increase the enrollment of at-risk students in advanced placement courses and dual credit classes to better prepare them for postsecondary rigor. However, enrollment in these courses continued to lag. Working in collaboration with campus teachers, counselors, and academic deans, he established a system to educate parents and students about the benefits of taking these rigorous courses. The campus team quickly discovered that their students had goals of becoming doctors, lawyers, and engineers. However, they did not understand how enrolling in advanced courses equipped them with the skills to make those aspirations a reality. Malin & Hackmann (2017) emphasized principals were "uniquely positioned" to implement reforms that benefited students.

P3 shared his campus established systems that focused on teaching and learning with an emphasis on coaching to meet the academic needs of their students. This decision was mainly due to the high number of new teachers on the campus. The systems that were implemented aligned with the work of Bambrick-Santoyo in the book, *Get Better Faster* (2016). The author highlighted the importance of providing quality guidance to help develop teachers because it was critical to the academic success of the students in every classroom. Although the author created the book as a 90-day guide for new teachers, P3 felt it contained good practices that would benefit all teachers. Those practices extended to the operational guidelines in professional learning communities where student work and data are paramount. In addition, the book had a strong foundation in a coaching model aligned with P3's belief that one of the principal's critical roles included providing authentic feedback and modeling for teachers to improve practice that would influence student performance.

As with the other participants, P4 established his systems in teaching and learning to determine the campus vision. He started by establishing a dedicated time to teaching and learning through professional learning teams. The school's instructional team, along with district specialists, provided professional development for teachers on reading standards, creating aligned lesson plans, and using student performance data to address learning gaps. On-going coaching sessions and instructional rounds followed the professional development sessions.

In contrast, P5 started his vision for academic success with school's counseling department. He shared that a dynamic counseling department was vital to connecting

students with programs to ensure their success. He also stated a campus required transparent systems in place to meet the needs of their students. Principals, in his words, were "the keepers of processes" to ensure situations are anticipated with the proper interventions.

Theme 4: Build Relationships

P1, P2, P3, and P4 emphasized the importance of building strong relationships with staff, students, families, and community stakeholders. P1 shared how he committed campus budget every year to the program, *Capturing Kids' Hearts* (Flippen Group, 2016), to ensure building relationships with students remained at the forefront of the campus vision. The program, *Capturing Kids' Hearts* (Flippen Group, 2016), endeavored to help teachers create safe and effective learning environments through team building. As a result, he stated the culture of healthy relationships became the "strongest asset" the campus has developed. P3 also shared how much this program has impacted his campus and the established "open lines of communication and transparency" enabled campus stakeholders to feel valued. P2 stressed it is essential to "empower and value" teachers, students, and families in ways to show how much the campus appreciated their voice. P4 agreed having the family-orientated approach has established mutual trust among all stakeholders.

All participants agreed that their schools continued to find ways to engage their parents and community stakeholders in the educational lives of their students. Schools could consistently meet the needs of the whole child by building a bridge or partnership between home and school.

Theme 5: Positive Climate and Culture

Numerous factors shaped the climate and culture of a campus. P1 asserted the words and actions of the adults on the campus directly impacted how students perceived the climate and culture. He described how the words "I love you, and I want the best for you" became a game-changer for a student. He shared how the sincerity of his words were supported by interacting with the students in the hallways, classrooms, and being visible at their extracurricular events.

The physical appearance of a campus impacted the climate and culture (Dolph, 2017; Griffen, 2019). Dolph (2017) described how urban schools were located in the old buildings with poor lighting, acoustics, inadequate cooling and heating systems, and outdated technology found in urban schools. This was supported by the description provided by P2 who shared in detail how the neglect of his campus impacted the climate and culture. He described dead grass, neglected exteriors, and classrooms with stained ceiling tiles. However, once these campus needs were addressed, he stated the changes "spoke volumes to the staff and our students that things will change …physically and things were going to change in our belief systems".

In addition to changing the tangible, P3, P4, and P5 emphasized the climate of the campus had to be addressed. They shared parents, students, and community stakeholders had to receive the message that they were an integral part of the school family. For example, P3 described how customer service became a key component of their campus professional development sessions to ensure that the message of "you matter to us" is clear to their school community. In addition, P4 and P5 emphasized the importance of

exemplifying this message with staff and students by establishing a system to celebrate their accomplishments. This system could establish a foundation for a positive climate and culture on the campus.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

This qualitative case study established trustworthiness through credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Trustworthiness in a research study determined how true the researcher stated the participants' experiences as told through their responses (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I evaluated my positionality and reflexivity during the data collection to establish trustworthiness (Berger, 2015; Patton, 2015).

Credibility

I used a semistructured interview protocol, interview transcripts, and member checks to establish credibility. Each principal received a copy of his interview transcript for member checking to validate the accuracy of responses. Participants were given a week to review their transcripts and provide changes. There were no changes to be made, as indicated by principals through email. A reflexive journal explored my reactions and predispositions to the data gathered through the interviews to avoid unintentional bias. Reflexivity ensured that my experiences did not influence data as an urban high school principal (Patton, 2015).

Dependability

Dependability was ascertained initially by reviewing the interview questions with my committee chairs and high school principals not involved in the study for feedback. I

enhanced internal validity through member checking conducted by the urban principals to ensure the dependability of the data results (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Transferability

Ravitch and Carl (2016) described the applicability of a study to broader contexts as transferability. The selection of the participants and the interview protocol used for data collection provided rich details of the participants, study sample size, and demographics that could transfer to new contexts. I recruited principals through district and campus websites, which yielded an adequate number of participants. Trustworthiness of a study data could be established through transferability, which provided external validity to their study.

Confirmability

Confirmability was verified through the detailed field notes, interview data, and entries in my reflexive journal. I also created a graphic with the conceptual framework, research questions, and themes to organize the data as my work progressed (see Appendix B). The reflexive journal allowed me to examine my assumptions regarding the experiences and practices shared by the participants in the study.

Summary

The problem addressed in this research study was little is known about the perceptions of urban high school principals regarding how their leadership practices influenced the academic progress of their at-risk students. The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the perceptions of high school principals of the type of leadership practices needed to support the academic progress of students at risk. All five principals

shared their perceptions of their leadership practices, processes, and procedures used to create campus environments that influenced academic progress. Although their description of their leadership style varied, each principal identified a style that incorporated the team concept needed to lead urban high school. Additionally, each principal identified common challenges in their high schools that caused barriers to student success. They all had envisioned how student academic success would look like on their campus but acknowledged work was needed to make their vision a reality. The implementation of the systems begun with the establishment of professional learning communities that stressed the need for collaboration and a team concept.

All principals emphasized the importance of building relationships with staff, students, and parents to ensure student academic success. These relationships included open communication and transparency with all parties. Lastly, the principals explained how campuses needed a positive culture and climate for an urban high school to meet the high expectations for student academic performance.

In Chapter 5, I discuss the interpretation of the study findings, the limitations of the study, recommendations, and conclusions.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

In this qualitative case study, I explored and described the perceptions of urban high school principals regarding their perceptions of how leadership practices influence the academic progress of at-risk students on their respective campuses. I conducted semistructured interviews with five high school principals to gather data on the practices, processes, and procedures implemented on their campuses to enhance student performance. The state accountability reports and the school report card for each campus in my research study were analyzed. In this chapter, I provide a concise review of the research study and interpreted the findings. I also address the research questions concerning the conceptual framework. Lastly, I explain the limitations of the study, provide recommendations for further research, and present implications for positive social change.

The research questions in this study were considered within the context of the conceptual framework, which unified the theories of transformational leadership as defined by Bass and Riggio (2006) and transformative leadership as delineated by Shields (2010), along with the effective leadership practices explained in the Wallace Foundation's (2013) work on principals (see Figure 1 in Chapter 1).

This conceptual framework served to identify the leadership practices that prior research delineated as critical to leading successful schools in challenging contexts (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2019). With the focus on urban high schools located in communities with factors that hinder student progress, my research study needed to view the data through effective leadership in such environments. However, there was limited

research that offered insight into the perceptions of successful urban high school principals regarding their effective leadership practices. My research study focused on the following central questions to explore this phenomenon:

- RQ1: How do urban high school principals describe the practices, processes, and procedures used to create environments that support students at risk?

- RQ2: What are the perceptions of urban high school principals regarding the leadership practices that will support the academic achievement of students at risk?

Each guiding research question and the correlating sub-questions were designed to gather data regarding principals' perceptions of their practices that positively influenced student academic progress. Prior research showed principal leadership was crucial to a school's transformational reform and student academic progress (Green, 2018; Lunenburg & Irby, 2014; Green, 2018; Wallace Foundation, 2013). Current research supported the findings in the prior research that principal leadership practices can influence the outcomes of student academic performance because of the relationship between leadership and learning (DeMatthews & Brown, 2019; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2020). My research study focused on leadership practices of urban high school principals with sustained academic success for students at risk.

Interpretation of the Findings

Bass and Riggio's (2006) transformational leadership theory and Shields's (2010) transformative leadership theory informed the conceptual framework for this study and were integrated with the effective principal leadership practices delineated by the

Wallace Foundation (2013) to form a lens to view the data to determine the type of leadership needed in urban high schools. Five core themes concerning the leadership styles and practices emerged from this study based on the principals' interview responses. The themes revealed successful urban high school principals (a) understand their leadership styles and traits, (b) identify the challenges and barriers facing their campuses, (c) create a vision and implement it, (d) build relationships, and (e) establish a positive climate and culture. The conceptual framework and data supported the five practices deemed essential for sustained student academic progress in urban high schools. Understanding how urban high school principals viewed their leadership style and methods augmented the conceptual framework in that it supported the interrelatedness of effective practices to lead urban high schools. In the next section, I describe the themes and how they compared with the interpretation of the study's findings.

Leadership Styles and Traits

The theme of leadership styles and traits was explored primarily in the research question, "What are the perceptions of urban high school principals regarding the leadership practices that will support the academic achievement of students at risk?" The principals' perceptions of their leadership style aligned with the research literature discussed in Chapter 2 and the conceptual framework. According to Mungal and Sorenson (2020), principals must recognize who they are and the skills they possess to help them lead their campus toward success. Campus principals who failed to understand their leadership style and the aligned traits were in danger of becoming ineffective leaders (Hitt & Player, 2019; Leithwood, 2019). In their research, Leithwood et al. (2019)

posited principals bring their personal qualities, beliefs, and values to the leadership role. These attributes determined how they respond to the leading others in a challenging context and building an educational environment dedicated to providing the best for all students. The principal participants in this study displayed self-awareness of their leadership style with their correlating traits. They provided descriptions of how their leadership style impacted decisions regarding the practices implemented on their campuses. All participants interviewed agreed being aware of how they led helped guide interactions with faculty, staff, and community stakeholders.

Although the conceptual framework was built on the transformational and transformative theories, current studies established that one leadership style or theory did not define effective school leadership (Makgato & Mudzanani, 2019; Yeigh et al., 2019). This research contrasted with the responses of the principals interviewed in the study because each of them identified an individual leadership style that grounded the practices on their respective campuses. Although the principals did not describe their style of leadership as transformational or transformative, their practices reflected the traits found in both. The amalgamation of leadership styles and intimate knowledge of the contextual factors of the school environment provided administrators with insight into how to adapt to change. Principals must take the sum of their backgrounds, experiences, and beliefs to implement school practices to address demands to increase student performance (Brennan, 2019; Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2019).

Identifying Challenges and Barriers

The theme of identifying challenges and barriers emerged from the research question, "How do urban high school principals describe the practices, processes, and procedures used to create environments that support students at risk?" Urban high school principals faced significant challenges and barriers in their school settings. These challenges and barriers originated from several factors—internally and externally (Brennan & Ruirac, 2019; DeMatthews, 2020; DeMatthews & Brown, 2019; Dolph, 2017; Milner, Murray, Farinde, & Delale-O'Connor, 2015; Parr & Bonitz, 2015). Dolph (2017) described how urban schools were often located in areas plagued by unemployment, crime, generational poverty, and family instability, to name a few. According to DeMatthews and Brown (2019), principals must see themselves as community leaders who addressed factors impacting student learning. The principals' awareness of contextual factors inhibiting student academic progress helped develop interventions and support to address failed performance. Findings from this study indicated that the principal participants were mindful of the barriers and challenges facing the students enrolled at their respective schools.

Principals served as the visionaries in establishing organizational practices and systems to address inequities that led to student groups' marginalization. Shields (2010) delineated the effectiveness of transforming schools by the equitable change in the organization and the surrounding community. Changes in student performance started with the deconstruction of social-cultural barriers within an organization. The principals' responsibility required them to lead the crucial conversations regarding equity,

marginalization, and campus growth needs. Principals triggered the changes in their school systems with a sense of urgency aimed at disrupting the status quo for the sake of all students (Blitz, Yull, & Clauchs, 2020; Wilson, 2016; Woulfin & Weiner, 2019).

Principals, as community leaders, developed ways to engage the parents and community stakeholders in conversations regarding how external factors impede student learning (DeMatthews, 2020; Moral, Higueras-Rodríguez, Martín-Romera, Martínez-Valdivia, & Morales-Ocaña, 2020; Reid, 2020). Green (2018) stated principals who established intentional partnerships within their communities ensured conditions would improve both within and without the school. The principals developed relationships with businesses and organizations to improve the detrimental external conditions that impacted students. These partnerships led to opening avenues for students to obtain real-world experiences that could change their lives and break the cycle of poverty prevalent in urban communities.

The challenges and barriers to student academic success in urban high schools are often viewed as impossible due to factors outside the school's influence. However, previous research indicated urban principals who were dedicated to sharing their vision with community stakeholders found ways to intertwine the school vision with the community initiatives, which turned barriers into opportunities for success (Burks & Hochbein, 2015; Cook et al., 2017; Green, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2019). Principals must abandon the complacency of the four walls of their campuses and courageously embrace their communities.

The study participants all shared how low parental and community involvement constituted a critical barrier to student academic progress on their campuses. In their research on improving relationships between schools and families, Lusse, Notten, and Engbersen (2019) highlighted the need for innovation in overcoming these obstacles to cultivate partnerships with parents. In response to this barrier, the principals shared the innovative practices implemented to address the challenges. One method implemented is the expansion of the use of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, in addition to the weekly newsletter, to communicate and interact with their communities. Another practice included reaching out to local churches in the community to host parent forums on academic topics such as graduation requirements, postsecondary readiness, state assessments, educational support systems, and attendance. One participant shared how they have worked with the apartment complex in their community to have a place to meet with parents outside the school. Another participant stated their school district took principals, assistant principals, teachers, and central office staff into communities to talk to parents at their homes. These practices highlighted how to build a bridge between schools and the communities in which students resided to dismantle barriers (Leo, Wilcox, & Lawson, 2019; Medina, Grim, Cosby, & Brodnax, 2020).

Create a Vision and Implement

The theme of creating and implementing a vision was developed from analysis of the data related to the research question, "How do urban high school principals describe the practices, processes, and procedures used to create environments that support students at risk?" Once urban principals determined their leadership style and identified the

challenges of their context, the next logical step included the assessment actions used to address the challenges of the campus. Establishing a vision for the campus outlined the school's objectives for ensuring all students succeed. The Wallace Foundation's (2013) study on effective leadership practices stressed the importance of shaping a vision based on high standards.

Bass and Riggio (2006) stated leaders setting the campus direction initiated the transformation process. However, principals must engage the campus community in the process of creating a vision. In previous research, developing a vision in isolation led to the lack of buy-in from faculty and staff (Ansley et al., 2019; Howard, O'Brien, Kay, & O'Rouke, 2019; Mombourquette, 2017). Collaborating with campus personnel to create a shared vision and goals garnered grassroots support for campus transformation and reform (Woulfin & Weiner, 2019). This collaboration yielded different perceptions of the obstacles the campus faced to improve the academic performance of all students. All principals in my study shared that discussions with faculty and staff provided insight into teachers' needs to better serve the student population. As a result, their campus improvement plans included goals to build teacher capacity in teaching and learning. Camacho and Parham (2019) supported the use of job-imbedded professional development for teachers in urban schools to equip them with the necessary skills to create optimal learning environments. On-going professional development of teachers was critical to the vision's implementation to ensure all students succeed academically (Desravines, Aquino, & Fenton, 2016; Desravines & Fenton, 2015).

Build Relationships

Another theme derived from the data related to the research question regarding

the practices, processes, and procedures of urban high school principals is building

relationships. Developing a shared vision was only the beginning of establishing systems

to ensure improved student academic process. The results of my study revealed that

principals need to build relationships with their teachers. According to Simmons (2020),

principals must possess strong skills and knowledge about best practices to build strong

relationships with their teachers so a collaborative environment could be established.

Building collaborative relationships based on trust is key to ensuring the development of

teachers' capacity in teaching and learning. The principals interviewed in my study

shared that establishing practices such as professional learning communities and campus

leadership teams enabled them to cultivate relationships with their teachers. Park, Lee,

and Cooc (2019) noted principals could impact student academic performance through

professional learning communities, which helps establish collective responsibility.

Urban principals must also cultivate relationships with their parents. The

traditional avenues of engaging parents were not always successful in urban schools due

to barriers related to several factors such as work demands, language barriers, and

feelings of marginalization (Griffen, 2019; Leo et al., 2019; Prevo, Kremers, & Jansen,

2020). For positive relationships with parents to occur, principals must establish

innovative processes and procedures geared toward engaging them beyond the annual

"state of the union" meeting at the beginning of each school year. Prior research on the

importance of principal leadership practices emphasized the parents' role in ensuring

student academic success (Cook, Shah, Brodsky, & Morizio, 2017; Keetanjaly, Abdul

Kadir, Su Luan, & Abdullah, 2019; Lusse et al., 2019). Principals who established a

bridge between school and home eradicated the barriers to building strong relationships

with their parents.

Positive Climate and Culture

The last theme explored was positive climate and culture in response to the

research question, "How do urban high school principals describe the practices,

processes, and procedures used to create environments that support students at risk?". My

study findings highlighted the need for urban principals to increase student achievement

by improving school climate. According to Eugene (2020), leadership practices that

established a positive school climate directly impacted student-teacher relationships and

student academic performance in education. Students who felt safe in school and

experienced supportive relationships with adults on campus, especially their teachers,

would thrive academically.

School culture was described as the beliefs, values, and assumptions shared by the

school personnel. The findings of this study indicated that effective leadership practices

led to a positive culture. This finding was supported by the work of Ozgenel (2020), who

stated school principals must define, shape, and develop the culture of their campuses.

The leadership practices undertaken to improve the culture included collaboration from

campus personnel so transformation could occur. Urban high school principals must

provide professional development in positive culture and climate that addressed the needs

of the student body. Blitz et al. (2020) stated this training must also include culturally

responsive and trauma-informed practices enabling the campus to identify school policies

and procedures impeding the establishment of a culture that embraced and supported all

students.

Revised Conceptual Framework

The theories of transformational and transformative leadership related to effective

practices in urban schools founded the original conceptual framework for this study**.**

However**,** my research findings described the importance of urban high school principals

exhibiting authenticity in their leadership style, implementing effective leadership

practices, and understanding the context of their schools. The revised conceptual

framework depicted in Figure 2 displayed how the range of effectiveness in urban school

leadership is found in the intersection between individual leadership style, authenticity in

behaviors, and contextual awareness.
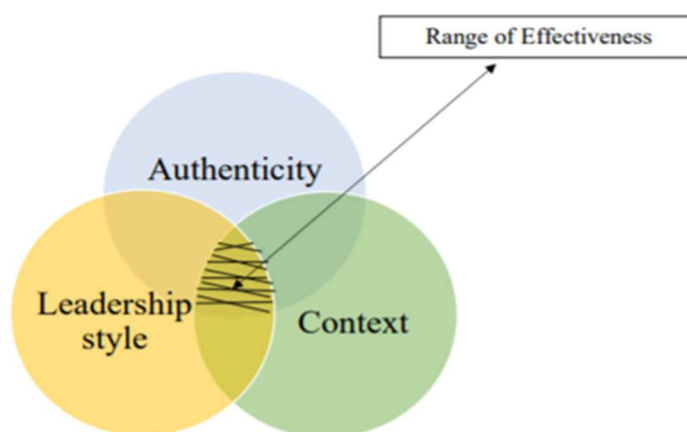
Figure 2. Revised conceptual framework based on study findings regarding the
leadership of urban high school principals.

The type of leadership style demonstrated by principals embodies their personal

beliefs, values, and attitude, as displayed in their interactions with school stakeholders.

Leithwood et al. (2020) stated the values and personality traits of leaders influenced how they lead as well as the success of that leadership. To display authenticity in leadership, principals reflected on their own biases and assumptions related to the parents, students, and communities of their schools. Not only must they engage in self-reflection as a leader, but principals should lead faculty and staff in identifying biases and inequities that cause barriers in the path to student success. Additionally, implementing effective practices included seeking out perspectives and experiences from parents, students, and community stakeholders to gain insight into the current challenges that needed addressing within the school (Preston, Goldring, Gutherie, Ramsey, & Huff, 2017). This constant self-reflection, contextual analysis, and two-way communication enabled principals to lead with authenticity while implementing effective practices to address the contextual challenges in their schools. Subsequently, influencing student academic achievement in urban schools should begin with principals embracing the authentic traits of their leadership style, establishing systems to address the barriers to student success, and fully understanding the contextual environment of the school.

Limitations of the Study

According to Yin (2017), the transferability of a research study could apply to another setting. However, my study had limitations that affected transferability. I interviewed all five urban high school principals using a semistructured format. The small number of participants limited the scope of perceptions regarding principal practices. Another limitation of the study was the student demographics, which included significant numbers of minority students categorized as low socioeconomic status,

English learners, and at risk for dropout. The study's findings might not apply to school administrators who did not share the same student populations. Another limitation was the study might not be relevant to elementary or middle schools since it focused on the experiences of urban high school principals. These limitations are attributed to the differences between the study findings and prior research on urban high school leadership.

Recommendations

Prior research indicated principal leadership played a significant role in influencing student academic performance in teaching and learning (Allen et al., 2015; Day et al., 2016; Huff et al., 2018). The research studies explored in the literature review focused on the perceptions of teachers regarding the leadership styles and practices of principals in urban school settings. Although these studies pointed to the principal as being critical to student academic performance, there was limited research that articulated the perceptions of urban high school principals regarding their leadership styles, traits, and practices that led to the sustained academic progress of students (Dolph, 2017; Green, 2018).

This research study contributes to the body of existing literature on the leadership practices of urban high school principals. My study presented five themes found in the data that highlighted the practices for principals leading urban high schools where students are at risk have shown academic progress. I recommend the professional development is centered around the five themes delineated in the study, which are:

- Understanding leadership styles and traits

- Identifying the challenges and barriers facing their campuses

- Creating a vision and implementing it

- Building relationships

- Establishing a positive climate and culture

The principals in the study also identified several leadership practices that led to improved student academic progress. For example, all the study participants identified positive school culture and climate as crucial to implementing methods that directly influenced student performance. However, some of the principals indicated their campuses were still in the process of establishing these practices. It is recommended that school districts examine the themes explored in this study to create professional development opportunities for urban campus leaders to hone skills in culturally responsive practices and leading change.

Secondly, participants described how the lack of preparation in their formal schooling to address the ever-changing accountability demands and the significant challenges of urban environments often impeded their implementation of practices to address the contextual needs of their campuses. School districts should focus on consistent training for principals regarding developing targeted improvement practices to improve teaching practices to improve student performance.

Finally, the focus of this study was urban high school principals already leading campuses in challenging contexts. However, school districts could use the study findings to assist in identifying principals with the leadership style and practices to take the reins of urban high schools with a large percentage of minority students in low socioeconomic

students that are at risk of not graduating on time. Further research in different school settings (elementary, middle, rural) could contribute to the field of study about effective leadership practices.

Implications

My study presents implications for positive social change that may influence students' educational outcomes on urban high school campuses. At-risk students enrolled at urban high school campuses consistently perform significantly lower than their peers who attend schools in less challenging contexts (Burks & Hochbein, 2015; DeMatthews & Brown, 2019; Dolph, 2017; Hitt & Player, 2019). In response to this challenge, schools tend to adopt the latest educational fad or product that promises to impact student academic performance significantly. However, research has consistently indicated effective leadership practices influence student academic progress and reduces the risk of failure to graduate (Green, 2018; Hitt et al., 2018; Leithwood et al., 2020; Liebowitz & Porter, 2019; Louis & Murphy, 2018; Nadelson et al., 2019). Leadership practices presented in my study can be applied in urban high schools to improve students' academic progress and, therefore, influence society by producing students who can positively enhance their communities.

This study also included leadership practices for creating a positive school climate and culture that would help students view their schools as a safe place where school personnel builds authentic relationships (Griffen, 2019; Robinson, Leeb, Merrick, & Forbes, 2016). Building relationships with parents and engaging them through various avenues that go beyond the walls of the school would increase parental involvement in

the academic pursuits of urban students. Transforming the school climate through parental engagement increased their involvement in the academic endeavors of their students. Understanding the leadership practices of urban high school principals that have influenced student academic progress may inform the practices of other school leaders operating in similar challenging contexts.

Conclusion

Principal leadership is critical to improving student academic progress in urban high schools (Liebowitz & Porter, 2019; Sebastian et al., 2019; Tan, 2018). My research study explored the perceptions of five urban high school principals regarding their leadership styles and effective practices that influenced student academic progress in their challenging contexts. Bass and Riggio (2006) stated effective leadership begin with focusing on organizational improvement by aligning practices. Shields (2013) concluded effective leadership has the moral courage to analyze existing frameworks within context to bring about deep and equitable change that addresses the academic as well as social justice needs of individuals the organization serves. The Wallace Foundation's (2013) study on key leadership practices of effective principals included creating a hospitable environment dedicated to academic success for all students through improving instruction and building teacher capacity.

At the center of this study was the conceptual framework which focused on leadership styles and how that style influenced the essential practices implemented by leaders to change an organization's performance. The findings highlighted individual leadership styles and effective practices that participants believed were crucial for student

academic progress. Each principal identified their leadership style and the traits they exhibited in leading their school community. They provided insight into how their self-awareness of their leadership style, coupled with their knowledge of the contextual conditions of the school's community, helped create systematic practices.

Principals must be authentic in their leadership. Authentic leadership enabled principals to build trusting relationships with faculty, staff, parents, students, and community stakeholders. The relationships allowed all stakeholders to engage in discussions about equity, social justice, and collective purpose to disrupt systematic practices that marginalize students at risk.

The perceptions of urban high school principals provided insight into the importance of effective leadership in schools faced with challenges that impede academic success. School districts must develop strategic training to ensure principals can meet the ever-changing demands of public education. Principal leadership of urban high schools must be genuine with a keen focus on effective practices; principals must be uniquely aware of the contextual needs of the communities in which they serve.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

PART 1: BACKGROUND AND LEADERSHIP STYLE

In today's high stakes environment, educational leaders are facing challenging times.

However, according to the state's annual school report card and accountability report,

your school has achieved sustained growth in student performance in the last few years. I

am interested in understanding the type of leadership practices that are needed to support

the academic progress of students at risk in this school community.

Research Question 2: What are the perceptions of urban high school principals regarding

the leadership practices that will support the academic achievement of students at risk?

1. Tell me briefly about your experience and background as a school leader.

2. As a principal, what is your philosophy of leadership?

3. Describe your leadership style.

PART 2: DETAILS OF CURRENT SCHOOL CONTEXT

Research Question 2: What are the perceptions of urban high school principals regarding

the leadership practices that will support the academic achievement of students at risk?

4. How long have you been at this school? Describe your first impressions of this

    school at the start of your leadership—community, faculty, staff, students.

5. Describe the challenges facing your urban school in the area of student academic

    performance.

6. How did you identify the changes that needed to be addressed in order to promote student academic progress?

PART 3: REFLECTIONS on PRACTICES, PROCESSES, and PROCEDURES

Research Question 1: How do urban high school principals describe the practices, processes, and procedures used to create environments that support students at risk?

Research Question 2: What are the perceptions of urban high school principals regarding the leadership practices that will support the academic achievement of students at risk?

7. Describe the practices, processes, and procedures that you feel have led to creating an environment that successfully supports at-risk students in your urban high school. Provide examples from your current school community.

8. Describe the barriers that had to be addressed in order to implement these practices, processes, and procedures. Provide specific examples of how they were identified and addressed.

9. Describe how your leadership style enhanced the changes needed to influence the school's academic progress.

10. Based on your experience, describe the qualities and/or skills must urban high school principals have that will enable them to lead sustainable academic progress in their school community?

Appendix B: Research Study Graphic

Conceptual Framework, Research Questions, and Themes

Transformational Leadership
conforming to status quo

- Understanding organizational culture
- Setting directions for the organization
- Developing people
- Redesigning the organization
- Managing the instructional program

Transformative Leadership
disrupting the status quo
- Acknowleding power & privilege structures
- Deconstructing & reconstructing social-cultural knowledge frameworks
- Articulating individual & collective purposes
- Effecting deep, equitable change to organization & community
- Transformation through moral courage & activism

Effective Urban Principal Leadership Practices
- Shaping a vision for all based on high standards
- Creating a hospitable climate
- Cultivating leadership in others
- Improving instruction
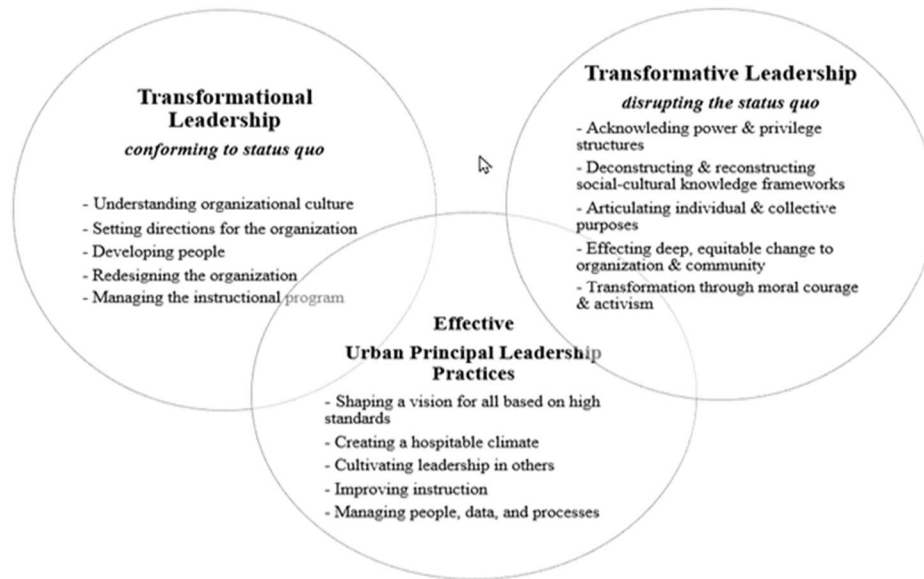- Managing people, data, and processes

Research Questions

1. How do urban high school principals describe the practices, processes, and procedures used to create environments that support students at risk?

2. What are the perceptions of urban high school principals regarding the leadership practices that will support the academic achievement of students at risk?

Themes

- Theme 1: Leadership style and traits

- Theme 2: Identifying challenges and barriers

- Theme 3: Create a vision and implement

- Theme 4: Build relationships

- Theme 5: Positive Climate and Culture

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